

YLE / sound art

SOUNDS FROM A DISTANCE

the audio tapes of david wojnarowicz
(1954-1992)

by

jean-claude kuner

with:

david wojnarowicz

julie hair

kikki smith

tommy turner

marion scemama

and

wendy olsoff

thanks to: the fales library new york, the estate of david wojnarowicz
and sylvère lotringer

berlin, 2019

1 being through writing

music: 3 teens kill 4

david wojnarowicz:

Sitting there thinking that the fact I am 26 and it could be quite possible that I can die soon, for a moment I felt a relief. It is not so much that I want to die, but the next thought was, if I knew how and when I was gonna die, if I knew that my life would end at some very near future point, somehow I think that would totally relax me. I would stop seeing my life as endless. Somehow that would be an enormous inspiration to do exactly what I was what I wanna to do.

music: 3 teens kill 4

.... ready? one, two

david wojnarowicz:

Journal, December 3rd

It was a grey afternoon I walked among the tomb silent buildings, marble structures pushing up from the ground. But glass squares holding sections against the winter sky. Rusty cans and newspapers drifted across dirt locks and the surfaces of

Yes ... writing through a typewriter or talking to a machine ... you know through your fingers ... removes what I always felt about people, my communication with people, which suppresses whatever language I have through fear or through alienation or whatever.

music/sound

david wojnarowicz:

Going through a machine or typewriter it opens the gates of language. And I am not intimidated.

music/sound

david wojnarowicz:

Or through fear of judgement.

music/sound

interview marion scemama:

marion:

He had two faces. One that was very very generous, very supportive, listening a lot,

david wojnarowicz:

.... make people love me, and I get so afraid that they are not gonna love me.

marion:

sharing things with you,

david wojnarowicz:

.... I get so afraid that things I do, I get so afraid in attempting to do things ...

Marion:

getting excited by things. And on the second part he was somebody who had a lot of problems trusting somebody.

david wojnarowicz:

I am afraid that people will reject me, I am afraid of rejection.

marion:

... afraid of being rejected. It was very difficult to give his love to somebody.

david wojnarowicz:

Rejection is like one of my single most fears.

marion:

My name is Marion Scemama, I'm a photographer and film maker.

music: 3 teens kill 4

david wojnarowicz:

I'm sitting here in this room and it's around dusk. There's no light, just these traces of blue in the sky and far over the edges of the tenements. If I look down the street at this angle, it looks like something out of a de Chirico. There are these white clouds that are so faint, so grey, and this strong moon.

music: 3 teens kill 4

David Wojnarowicz:

Wondering a great deal of things, I try to figure out what it is that my life is and where I'd be going. And thinking about myself and my values, my actions and what my life seems to be composed of in this moment. In time ... the fact that I am 26 and that I am doing what I am doing I wonder if it is meaningful or it is futile.

sounds

David Wojnarowicz:

I always found a reason to live by making things on some level, ever since I was a kid. And that is the only thing I remained constant, or the only thing which made sense, or gave proof to me that I was here, because I felt so completely alien, or with some form of expression, or some form of communication with people. That is one of the reasons why I began writing in my late teens, you know, seriously or constantly, because I couldn't speak to people. I felt I am carrying all these thoughts and experiences, and mostly experiences of death, or experiences coming close to death.

music: 3 teens kill 4

David Wojnarowicz:

I really don't know what I am afraid of. Maybe it is because of my past. The sense of myself getting older and older. And yet I am 28. And 28 seems like it is somewhere in this range of age that at some point, if I don't accomplish certain things, I will enter middle age and then old age and be at the mercy of all things which terrify me. Things like being a dishwasher at age 40. I don't allow myself to feel happiness. I don't believe that people understand me so I remain mute and quiet and retreat into myself and make myself feel terrible.

music: 3 teens kill 4

David Wojnarowicz:

Sometimes I feel like everything is taken away from me.

Sometimes I feel I am being punished for things like if I am enjoying myself or feeling happy

I suddenly think thoughts of fear

Or suddenly think thoughts

that the happiness will be short lived.

Somehow somehow that something is going back at me that in feeling happy and fearless.

that I am myself up to something in the whole universe or in the world or in my life is coming whipping back at me and knock me down.

I don't know what these feelings are.

2 travel america

on the road / freight trains

david wojnarowicz:

Ok, we are at I-90 right no. What time is it?

10 minutes to one.

Ok, we are heading towards Albany. Hopefully reaching Albany by some time this evening or afternoon.

Trying to hitchhike for half an hour and had absolutely no luck!

We tried old tricks like rolling the sign in a circular motion but Hold on.
(car)

That was the sound of one of the many speeding trucks that we passed or who passed us

What I really wanna do is to live some life style of relative comfort, someone who gives me sun in the winter time, someone who keeps me warm and fearless. And something that allows me the room to express certain things like making art, or writing or music ...

Ok, we caught a ride down Milford Road to the Highway.

There is something so wonderful about a lover or potential lover or someone you feel close to bringing a pineapple and sitting in solitude or silence eating of it.

You see a little rat running around.

I have been having tons and tons of dreams about America ... just running around America and hitchhiking through America.

Way off in a distance there is a green tower and some smaller towers in a crossway where cars go into town ... and that is where the trains from West

approach from. Occasionally you hear a train whistle miles away ... but the trains never seem to get here.

So far we have been sighted several times by train crews or neighbours but nobody seems to care. I can understand why this place is so dead.

(train sounds, whispering)

Watch out for rats!

We're on. Place chucked up full of wood chips.

As long as we don't get kicked out, or that the train suddenly decides not to go anywhere, we will be ok.

3 3 teens kill 4

(train sounds, laughter/N.Y.sirens, music)

interview tommy turner:

tommy turner:

David .. he was a busboy at the Peppermint Lounge. I was bartending there. We got to know each other there. We became friends and started hanging out a lot and doing stuff after work. We got off at 4 o'clock, we go to a coffee shop and then we go out and take pictures ... this neighbourhood was very different back then. It was all abandoned buildings everywhere. We would break in and take pictures

One of his first shows was at Public Illumination Gallery. He interviewed all these bums in the Bowery and ask them what they thought about the world situation. It's on the Bowery .. the sirens go on, people screaming and fights break out in the background. So when you went in he had these paintings on the wall of the gallery and he had four different cassette players with a little speaker hooked up in each corner. So when you walked in, there was all this noise, people raving and the sirens ... but when you went over and put your ear next to the speaker, you could hear this person ranting and raving about how fucked up the world is and nobody cared about them.

music: 3 teens kill 4 + text

interview julie hair:

julie hair:

1980 .. I was at the Peppermint Lounge. My boyfriend was working there. I met him through a friend of a friend. Jesse Hultberg who was also in 3 Teens

Kill 4. I wasn't playing music at all. I came sort of from an art school background and have never picked up an instrument in my life. So .. Jesse and David were both busboys. I think there was a kind of show at the Peppermint Lounge, with different people who worked there, like displaying there various artistic skills or whatever. So just for this one shot thing they put together 3 Teens Kill 4. Like at our first show I was just standing there pushing buttons. David mostly dealt with tapes and that was really important. More spoken words type stuff. Like David kind of stuff. I remember when we went to record, he just grabbed something of the radio on the way there and stuck it in .. it was about abortion rights or something ... It was like total anarchy. It was like everybody do what you want.

statements cardinal o'connor:

The church will be teaching, that abortion is the killing of human beings, until the end of time. So that is not going to change.

The church will be teaching, that homo-sexual activities is sinful, until the end of time. That will not change.

4 street kid

david wojnarowicz:

I've been working on some New Wave lyrics on Luis Bunuel. I haven't figured out the music to it. It is called *Wind up clock*.

I hear the man whisper
I see the man twisting
Through my ears to the cell bars
See if I can listen
It's Luis with his camera
His razor on someone's eye
The movement of his soft hand
watch a vision multiply
....

I grew up as a hustler.

I grew up hustling in Times Square and all sorts of places all around New York. All sort of scenes and selling my body and my time.

I kept it hidden and I didn't particularly feel guilt about being queer but I felt guilt about not being able to tell people.

I grew up in a society that basically wanted to kill me. Every sign that I saw as a kid growing up, whether it was in the structure of my household or in the structure of schools or in the structure of the world at large, everything was aimed at extermination in some way, and especially from age of eight and having my first homosexual experience with a 30 year old guy I knew ... I knew what my family would do to me, I knew what people beyond my family, whether it is police or whether it was hospitals, I knew on some level that they would try to destroy this when they found out.

music: 3 teens kill 4

David Wojnarowicz:

I could say that from by growing up and from my father and all those seasons and all those times and all those hours in Jersey and through all those times I've gotten beaten, my father would throw me around and beat me in the cellar, and would do the same to my sister and my brother, he would beat us until we couldn't move. And my stepmother would beat us until we couldn't move. We would be locked into the house for days and for weeks. Everything was a constant series of punishments. And when love was there for shown it was shown in sparing us pain. And that was what love was, when the beating stopped.

David Wojnarowicz:

Hustling on the streets that was a big adventure for me. Eventually it became desperate. But it was much more exciting than what I've learned in school. And much more exciting than what I felt within the place of my family. I was bored to tears in my family.

statements:

Homosexuality is a sin!

David Wojnarowicz:

We went upstairs into his apartment

He took me into a room and proceeded to rape me

5 multi media

music: bob ostertag

david wojnarowicz:

I like to subvert the intended use of printed materials. Same thing with the supermarket posters, with the map with money ... whatever is printed in the street I like to work with because there is a variety of meanings, by putting any image on top of that. It's like a few years ago, I made a recording where I took the sound of children at play in a school yard. It must have been maybe a hundred and fifty children yelling and screaming and laughing. And I took the recording of the children and placed it on a series of tracks of sound in a studio. Where they would talk about an airliner that was bombed by terrorists. And by pairing the information, the sounds of their pleasure became sounds of terror. I liked that things carry the possibility for unlimited interpretations of information.

interview marion scemama:

marion:

David uses images as words. He created a vocabulary of words that were images like the house blowing up, the sex series with the negative images that are in circles, planes falling from the sky, men falling, symbols of something he felt inside. And he would use them on different supports. I mean for me he has always been a multi-media artist. When he had something in mind, any support could be used to express what he had to express. He could use photography, he could use painting, he could use sound, he could use performance, he could use videos, he could use drawings. That's why for me he is a multi-media artist.

music: 3 teens kill 4

david wojnarowicz:

I did this painting recently called *My Father was a Sailor, My Father was this century*. Not just that he was a sailor but it was about transportation, about moving out. Where a century ago most people wouldn't know what is behind the bend in the road outside their door. And now you turn on the tv and you're in China or thousand feet beneath the ocean looking at things which exist there. The painting touched on that, but also personally because my father was a psychotic, and to me it is a world which is extremely dangerous and extremely death oriented and destruction oriented.

My mother when I was fourteen told me that she has just prayed that I would die when I was in her belly, that I would just be still-born when I arrived, because of everything what she felt about my father when he was constantly beating her, threatening her life or taking guns out or whatever. When I was born I had the umbilical cord rafted around my throat where I was almost strangled.

music bob ostertag / voice of america

interview wendy olsoff:

wendy:

I am Wendy Olsoff and I am the co-owner of PPOW gallery. We opened the gallery in the East Village in 1983. It was a small scene. It was kind of amazing how he was able to channel what was going on in the eighties, with strong parallels to what is going on now. And we are looking for voices, voices of hope, fighting, clarity and what he said, as all great writers, is pertinent now. And I think what makes him so special than anyone else is his writing. Even though his paintings are fantastic, and his performances, and his films, and his photographs are amazing, the written word and his memoirs on the writing of his art make it undeniable his message. There is no subjectivity about what he is saying in his art because his written words, he is very clear and it is very important to him that he is very clear. In a very short time he has to enunciate, get his message out. From 78 to 92. That was it. That was all the work which was made between those years.
Short time!

6 tape journal

david wojnarowicz:

I am in Peter's loft. He is somewhere upstate for the weekend. I haven't talked into a tape for awhile. Sometimes I am very self-conscious talking into a little machine hold in my hand. Something that is possible that someday somebody else will hear after I die or before I die or whatever and listen to these words ... I really don't give a shit. I don't care if maybe someone hears this. This is really meant for me.
So I am lying on this bed trying to get comfortable so I can talk for awhile and close my eyes and rest or dream anything what comes my way. Sounds of kids outside, no light, the room assumes to color grey, various degrees of grey. All these little sounds in the room. Little things ticking.

Sometimes I just walk around in the streets. Sometimes it is really ... there is like a sense that so many things I pick up, a bad air or the scenes or situations or people, just images of human life that make me happy.

sound/music

david wojnarowicz:

When I came back to New York I started living more like I wanted to live ... I don't know my whole life I just made love mostly nothing but strangers. Some of them would last up to months, and others would last to a couple of weeks. But it was never seen as a relationship. It wasn't like where two people sit down and say: ok, this is it. We're gonna live together. With Jean-Pierre I guess after living with him that is what I did. I remember towards the end of the six to eight months I was living with him I grew very weary of it. I can't spend a time in a relationship like that. Sleeping with strangers ... I mean ... it is always very quick, very fast. Usually in a public place like along the docks or the dark yards. I think I never wanted to lose the ability to have any kind of relationship with people. But I drifted away from it more and more.

sound/music

david wojnarowicz:

March 25th.

I mean I have the attraction of documenting things because I saw with Peter, how little was documented with him. Other than at the end after he died, doing a Super 8 of his body as soon as I could get everybody out of the room I shot a Super 8 of his body for maybe a minute and a half. Then took a number of pictures of him which for me is like a modern death mask the photograph. I like the existence after death in the form of objects. I mean I have a pair of Peter's glasses and they are the saddest things I have ever seen in my life.

interview marion scemama:

marion:

David before he died he put everything in boxes. All the negatives were in envelopes with notes. He was archiving all his life. Recording his voice, recording his dreams. It is like saying: ok, here I leave you the material to make a myth from myself.

sound counting/music

7 on the move

interview kikki smith:

kikki:

He had always been this sort of wonderboy. Yeah he had tons of secrets about everything. He was totally in love with the romance at being a wild boy. Just like endless adventures. One part of it being total trauma and the other part being immense freedom.

He had this necessity to walk all the time. Like he would otherwise explode or something. I mean he just walked all over the place all the time. Be out on the street. Kind of looking at things. I don't know what he was doing. He just had to walk.

sounds/music

interview kikki smith:

kikki:

He was this amazing person in the sense that he was equipped verbally and mentally. His impact as an artist in relationship to the society to me in a way too is his strongest work. That he could articulate so clearly and had such a strong sense of justice. His life was tremendously useful to thousands and thousands and thousands of people in this country.

sound counting/music

david wojnarowicz:

I don't know what the hell that was. This came across the radio somewhere outside of Gallup, New Mexiko.

7 art

david wojnarowicz:

Hi Marion,
This is David.

OK, if I start out with the idea that we're born into a completely pre-invented existence, where everything is regulated— all movements regulated by people who exert control, whether that's stopping at a

traffic light and not crossing the street when the light is red, or it's going into an army to fight a war My feelings about what I make in my work is to reflect my sense of quote, unquote history, or to reinvent history or to rewrite history.

What I do is I play with time. I compress time. This is an important thing in my work that I cut right through time the same way I cut through borders when I rip up a map. When I paint on maps usually they're ripped up. My reason for ripping them up are to remove borders.

The imagination is the key to breaking through pre-invented existence: that with imagination, we can break the images of borders—we can break through the borders of countries, we can break through existing structures of government.

So I play with the compression of time. In other words, I don't pay attention to, or I ignore, the borders of time in my work.

Time is a continuous element.

david wojnarowicz:

There is something quiet that happens in making a piece. There is a certain gesture of freedom in it that is totally unconscious that's wonderful. But it is also a big struggle to make things. I hate most things I have done. Because I can see all the limitations. All the lack of education if it is self taught or otherwise that I don't really paint that well. That's what I both love and hate about my work. I love the rawness. And I intentionally kept it raw by not learning the technical things.

interview marion scemama:

marion:

David was radical and political before the AIDS crisis. And that was why I was attracted to him, as an European person coming from the seventies. He was so radical about the way he would look at politics. Reagan and Bush. He had x-rays in his eyes when he was watching the structure of civilisation and what supports what. ITSOFOMO is about that. If you really look at ITSOFOMO, the performance he did with Ben Neill, all is in it.

ITSOFOMO

We are born into a pre-invented existence within a tribal nation of zombies
(cont.) ... tribe.

david wojnarowicz:

I loved animals all my life from my early experience what my family was. I would spend all my time in the forest and look at animals. Catch animals. Read about animals. I always loved animals more than I loved people. Always trusted animals more than I trusted people. But over the last year or so I realized something about animals that if I really had known as much about animals I wouldn't trust them anymore than I would trust people. I bought a bunch of crickets to feed a scorpion I bought to use in a film. And the crickets started eating each other up. In 24 hours 2 of them killed all the other crickets. I couldn't understand what was going on. I didn't know they were canibals. Then I fed them to the scorpion and I didn't feel so bad.

8 tape journal / peter hujar

So you have any heroes?

Oh boy there is one person I could say is a hero to me. It's this guy Peter Hujar. He ist the one person who came into my life at a time that was really necessary. He just got a take on the world and on the whole art thing and whatever that thing is about which was really healthy. And I learned a lot from him.

So.. Peter Hujar, is who?

He is photographer. I think we have a very balanced kind of connection and relationship. We both give each other a lot.

david wojnarowicz:

That was part of an interview I did with this guy who ran Island Magazine. It must have been in the last couple years. It's 1988, almost 89 now. I think it must have been in 1985. And I left it in because I was surprised to hear myself talking about Peter as awkwardly as I did.

interview kikki smith:

kikki:

Peter was his most deep connection.

messages / answering machine

Hi. This is Hujar. I was wondering if you were there?

..... (cont.)

Hi this Charles hospital

.... wondering if there are plans for a funeral?

Silence

ITSOFOMO

I am sitting in this hospital room so high in higher reaches of this building
(cont.)

9 tape journal / art and aids

david wojnarowicz:

I just woke up and want to start talking into this tape recorder. Talking about things I see. Used to do this years ago.

I was diagnosed with AIDS some time this summer. It is now near the end of November. I am living in Peter's house, Peter Hugar. I helped taking care of him. He died of AIDS and

I feel kind of ill. And angry.

I imagine getting to the bathroom sitting on the side of the tub leaning over the toilet and pucking into the toilet but nothing was coming out. And I kept pucking and I felt scared. And I felt like this is the virus. And I felt like if I had hit some point that I couldn't tell, if all my anxieties about the world, about my life, about my possible death, about my work, about showing, about past relationships ... basically the fear that I'm always carrying my whole life. The fear that comes and subsides, comes back and subsides. And I am so sick of the anxiety.

I feel like a fucking mess.

sound/music

interview wendy olsoff:

wendy:

The AIDS crisis was a very hard time. And it is hard for people who were born after the AIDS crisis to really understand what it was like as it seems so eradicated at least now in our Western societies. Every single day, 24/7, death around you. And you saw it and you felt it.

act-up protests / statements

The church will be teaching that homo-sexual activity is sinful until the end of time.

It's an absolute waste of the tax payers dollars to put a crucifix in a bottle of urin is an outrage.

david wojnarowicz:

I feel we are in a Christian occupation in this country.

act-up protests / statements

David Wojnarowicz Tongues of Flame show is excellent in all regards as it will be here in Santa Monica. Because people look at the work and they hear him talk and they see he is talking about the ills of society.

david wojnarowicz:

I think it is a pretty tame show. Just pointing that the paintings are not leaping off the walls. That speaks about the current climate in this country today that a few zealots or extreme conservative politicians can make some gestures through organized mailing or christian broadcast network or other venues to basically create a public hysteria over a few images of the human body, sexual or otherwise. The fact that a few images of the human body can produce such shock or hysteria, can test the fact that there is a lot of education that needs to be done in that country. Creating a climate in which we are not shocked by ourselves.

Thank you.
(applause)

interview marion scemama:

marion:

I think it was the most creative part of his life. From 88 to 91. It was three years. Very intense in terms of what he produced. As a writer. As a painter. As a film maker. Also as a photographer. He knew about the urgency of doing what he wanted to do before dying.

ITSOFOMO

All these moments will be lost in time like tears in rain ...

interview marion scemama:

marion:

He didn't realize really what it means. Of course he saw Peter dying. He saw Keith Davies dying. He saw a lot of friends dying from AIDS. He would

go through mixed feelings like he would get angry, at the same time being depressed, at the same time thinking: ok, I have to do what I have to do in my work to leave behind something about what it means to confront death and what it is to confront this social disease, like he says about society dealing with AIDS.

ITSOFOMO

If I could open your body (cont.)

When I was diagnosed with this virus it didn't take me long to realize I'd contracted a disease society as well (cont.)

... smell the flowers while you can

10 travel america

highway / cars

david wojnarowicz:

I had to pull over to the side of the road a couple of times. Somewhere up in the mountains in Tennessee. I had to keep the windows closed as it rained so hard. But then the inside of the car fogs up, lit up with these huge slashes of bright light.

It is kind of beautiful all the headlights of other cars coming from the opposite direction. Big trucks. There is some light in the sky over the left. There is a rest stop coming up. If I can make it up to that.

rain / thunder

I just don't know in which direction to go. It's like I am living in New York. It's just a city of death, you know, with the disease killing most of my friends. Maybe the people I most cared about have died. So I live in New York City and isolate the hell out of myself. I barely see people, I hardly ever talk to people.

It's not what I want.

Really, I just don't wanna fucking die

sounds / nature / wind

david wojnarowicz:

It's just a real gentle moment. It's like I am here by myself and I don't mind ... I kind of wish it could stay like this for maybe a few years. Or I just never

moved out of this spot. Guess watch the light stay like this. And maybe somebody coming along and put their arms around me for a few minutes. So sweet birds out here. Big trucks

statements / protests

There is a new HIV infection in this country every half hour.

11 death

music: 3 teens kill 4

david wojnarowicz:

On of the things I thought when I die, I remember asking Marion, if I die what I'd really love is for somebody, the moment I die in the hospital, for somebody to take my body, get in a car, go to Washington and break through the front gate of the White House and just throw the body onto the steps. It would be a much more enjoyable gesture to me than a bunch of people getting in a quiet room somewhere and speaking.

sounds

music: bob ostertag

david wojnarowicz:

This is tape journal number three. The 5th or 4th of February. I remember childhood, Jersey late afternoons at dusk, the sky is falling into red.

This morning I woke up and felt like I woke up somewhere else in my head. I felt very strange and very distant, as if I was looking through a piece of four-foot-thick glass – and I could see the place where I usually wake up, or see where I'd been all these years.

What would happen if one never got back to where they'd been?
Or every morning woke up in a different place inside their head?

I keep having these feelings or thoughts of ... I keep dreaming of ...
breaking up things.

smashing up everything

That's why I hate language in this moment.

Sounds which have been uttered back and forth.

It is ridiculous when it is put into language.

it doesn't even touch what it is that I'm ...

It's like a wanna live inside dreams

I want to live inside myth.

Loose myself. I wanna loose ...

Fuck. Take off somebodys ..

Lie down in sand ...

Lie down with this other person.

In just trying to find some simple gestures of language ... reach ...

... touch myself ...

That I am ...

not

if I can knock down a ...

Something of the

.... existing world ... like a set of dominos ...

I don't know if this makes sense but ...

it makes all the sense on the world in some foreign place that rejects the sound of language, rejects the form of words.

I don't even know where it is going ... I don't know where I'm going.

It's just my anger.

It's just my anger at dying.

It's just my anger of fear of dying.

Or it's just my anger at

Lits a cigarette / Silence