

Queering Identity in David Wojnarowicz's *Sex Series*

An honors thesis for the Department of Art History

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Introduction

David Wojnarowicz holds an odd place in the world of art and art history. While popular in the museum and gallery worlds (the Whitney has arranged one of the largest retrospectives of his work to date to open Fall 2016), he has been mostly overlooked in the scholarly literature. In his M.A. thesis “Art and the Politics of Neoliberal Subjectivity,” Gabriel Quick proposes this oversight was due during his life to the largely autobiographical nature of his work, which theorists of the time eschewed for more depersonalized, “poststructuralist” work, exemplified by contemporaries like Barbara Kruger, who maintain prominence even today.¹ Of the small handful of scholars who have considered his work in the intervening years, they engage almost exclusively in a biographical approach. A biographical reading of Wojnarowicz’s work must attend to his identification as a white gay male, his experience with and death from AIDS, the intersection of the two, and how he related to the cultural politics of his day by virtue of these factors. One would imagine then that his work would rely on these identities and experiences as constitutive. While the majority of his work could be described as biographical, this thesis will focus instead on Wojnarowicz’s *Sex Series* (1988-9), to propose that it does not employ these identities as constitutive, but rather consistently disturbs stable identities.

The *Sex Series* consists of eight photomontages, each 20x24 inches in size. Five of the works consist of an obscured pornographic image framed in a small circular inset, set against a non-specific outdoor image. In the remaining three Wojnarowicz employs additional inset images, such as x-rays and images of money, as well as text. I will attempt to counter a biographical reading, arguing that Wojnarowicz does not rely on his own identities in these works.

¹ Gabriel Cetlin Quick, “Art and the Politics of Neoliberal Subjectivity: The Activist Artist in the East Village, 1981-1993” (M.A., Tufts University, 2015).

Literature Review

Within the literature on Wojnarowicz, the *Sex Series* has only been addressed in any depth by the art historian Richard Meyer. In his book *Outlaw Representations* (2002), Meyer devotes half a chapter to Wojnarowicz, and one section of the chapter is an in depth analysis of the series. I would like to address Meyer's treatment of the series in two parts. Meyer begins his analysis by considering the way Wojnarowicz uses sexuality in the series, asking "is sexual fantasy itself a kind of aperture or opening in the visual field, one that disrupts the seemingly secure terrains of public space and subverts the stability of what Wojnarowicz often referred to as the "pre-invented world"?"² In this portion of his analysis, Meyer relies on an assumed white male sexuality. I will argue that given Meyer's assumptions, his reading reinscribes the series within a given set of normative identifications rather than allowing its full disruptive potential to be realized.

Later, Meyer begins, as he describes it, a more "queer" analysis. For Meyer queer refers to "a procedure...that undoes secure distinctions between the normative and non-normative."³ He describes the way that the blurring of details in the pornographic insets in the series begins to create an indeterminacy of bodies, that "there is an occasional slippage or indeterminacy of gender."⁴ Due to these slippages, through "the false possibility of heterosexual exchange, it [the blurring of bodies] also enacts on the body of the receptive partner a certain sliding or confusion of gender codings," and this confusion undoes distinctions, "between acts of heterosexual and homosexual exchange or between identifiably male and female bodies."⁵ Ultimately, Meyer

² Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 252.

³ Ibid, 254.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

claims that “rather from framing sexual exchange as a matter of particular activities or orientations, Wojnarowicz pictures the force of sexuality as a disorientation of the visual field.”⁶ While this gestures toward a queer reading of the series, I will argue that Meyer continues to rely on certain identitarian assumptions which undermine the “queerness” of his reading. Meyer’s analysis suggests an exclusive focus on cisgender sexuality, that is the assumption that all subjects are cisgender (i.e. identify as the gender that corresponds to the biological sex they were assigned at birth). Meyer thus neglects to consider the ways subjects inhabit bodies, considering only the desiring of other bodies. In particular, he ignores the possibility of transgender subjects. I will put forward a reading that attempts to consider the concerns of transgender individuals, and how individuals inhabit bodies more broadly.

Queering Queer Theory

My analysis of the series and the art historical literature on Wojnarowicz will be informed by my own personal encounter with the series as a transwoman. In order to pursue this line of inquiry I will draw on several theoretical approaches including Amelia Jones’ idea of queer feminist relationality, put forth in her book *Seeing Differently* (2012). In doing so, I will demonstrate the analytical insights that come from taking a personal approach to reading this series. Jones defines queer feminist durationality as “an idea. . . [and] the potential for doing something with artworks through interpretation that, I want to argue, reactivates them by returning them to process and embodiment—linking the interpreting body of the present with the bodies referenced or performed in the past as the work of art.”⁷ It is this connection between present interpreting bodies and past performed bodies that I find particularly useful in

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, 1 edition (Abingdon, Oxon England ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 174.

approaching the *Sex Series*. By bringing my own lived experiences as a transwoman to bear on the bodies portrayed, I aim to queer the series in a way that Meyer's analysis, ultimately, fails to do.

To queer the series in this way, I will draw on several interpretive methodologies made possible by Queer Theory. I will focus on theories that share a concern for destabilizing identity, especially the presumptions of a gay white cisgender male subject in much early queer theory. This destabilizing is not done with an ultimate goal of eliminating all identifications, but to interrogate the coherent nature of established identity categories. In addition to Jones' queer feminist durationality, I will employ a selection of other theoretical frameworks, including disidentifications, intersectionality, and strategic essentialism.

The *Sex Series* engages in destabilizing identities in two main ways: disidentifications and intersectionality. As José Esteban Muñoz discusses in his book *Disidentifications* (1999), disidentification refers to a process by which subjects identify neither wholly with a majority identity, or wholly oppositionally to that identity. To illustrate this, he describes a possible encounter with the author Franz Fanon, saying "In his chapter on colonial identity, Fanon dismisses the possibility of a homosexual component in such an identic formation... Think, for a moment, of the queer revolutionary from the Antilles, perhaps a young woman who has already been burned in Fanon's text by his writing on the colonized woman... In such a case, a disidentification with Fanon might be one of the only ways in which she is capable of reformatting the powerful theorist for her own project, one that might be as queer and feminist as it is anticolonial... his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial

discourse was engaged as a *still* valuable yet mediated identification.”⁸ Disidentification calls for a “mediated identification,” as opposed to a simple identification with or against.

Muñoz’s theory of disidentifications is useful for interrogating what is perhaps the most consistent visual feature of the *Sex Series*, the small circular insets of pornographic images. These images are not displayed clearly, but rather are obscured by photographic technique, as Meyer describes. But where Meyer locates the queerness of this obscuring in the images shown, I will argue that it derives from the relation of the viewer to the work. When the viewer encounters the works, they will not react uniformly to the bodies portrayed. They will identify more with some, less with others, in effect “disidentifying.” In the inability for the viewer to identify wholly and completely with any given body shown in the series, the works destabilize gender and sex identifications.

I will not only explore how disidentification offers a productive route to analyzing Wojnarowics’ *Sex Series*, but also how the concept of intersectionality is at play in the imagery and compositional strategies employed. While the term has a variety of meanings, and very particular meanings in the context of the late 1980s (which I will examine), the term today generally refers to a framework of analysis and critique that focuses on the ways in which identities overlap, confusing and destabilizing hegemonic narratives. For example, the concerns of white women, as elaborated by certain feminisms, are not the same as those of women of color; an intersectional framework looks at the concerns of women as always having a racial dimension, so as to counter discourses that assume a *white* woman subject. I propose that one print from the *Sex Series* focuses on intersectionality in particular; the work shows an image of a bridge with text overlaid. The text highlights a number of identity groups affected by AIDS that

⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 9.

are underrepresented in both the news media and AIDS activism: women, people of color, homeless people. By refusing a narrative that assumes people with AIDS (PWAs) to be white gay men, Wojnarowicz not only counters the narrative assigned to PWAs by the mainstream news, namely that they are all highly promiscuous gay men, but also destabilizes the narratives that were being created by activists who often embraced this specific image of PWAs.

In order to not oversubscribe to a theory of disidentification in relation to the series, I will also explore how several works within the *Sex Series* reaffirm certain identities when politically necessary. Contemporaneous with the series as well as much of the theory I have been discussing as foundational to my analysis (such as intersectionality), many major theorists were arguing in the 1980s for a form of strategic essentialism. Perhaps most famously Gayatri Spivak began elaborating an idea of strategic essentialism in her essay “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”.⁹ Recently many queer theorists, in particular people of color, have made arguments for similar approaches, calling the insistence in certain veins of queer theory on destabilization above all else a symptom of an assumed white subject. For example, Cathy Cohen argues that ““queer theorizing which calls for the elimination of fixed categories seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one’s survival.”¹⁰ Similarly, E. Patrick Johnson asks “The deconstructive turn in queer theory highlights the ways in which ideology functions to oppress and to proscribe ways of knowing, but what is the utility of queer theory on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or anyplace where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed—

⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays In Cultural Politics*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰ Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 450.

indeed, where the body is the site of trauma?"¹¹ Spivak, Cohen, and Johnson offer a compelling way to understand the seeming embrace of essentialized identity categories. Rather than arguing uncritically for essentialist claims or eschewing essentialism at every turn, they are concerned with the ways essentialism can be deployed *strategically*. I will attend as well to the ways these theorists seemingly disagree with one another and as such, I hope to consider them in dialogue, in particular looking at the intersection of Spivak's more deconstructive approach and Cohen and Johnson's theories which ally more with theories of intersectionality.

The notion of strategic essentialism is apropos to analyzing one work in the series, featuring a tornado in the background, that consists of six inserts and text superimposed over the background. The text begins by describing a sexual encounter with a stranger (implied to be autobiographical), which then suddenly shifts into an attack on the political discourse within the AIDS debate about abstinence. Wojnarowicz discusses the way gay men are told to simply not have sex in order to avoid AIDS, pointing to the ridiculousness of such an argument. In this text, Wojnarowicz makes use of an essentialized gay male identity. But as I will argue, upon further examination and when considered in the context of the series, the work in fact uses this essentialism strategically, rather than uncritically. A complete elaboration of this argument will rely on the analysis of theorists in dialogue as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, but it is hinted at immediately in the work, for example by the use of figures who read as women, rather than men as in the other seven works, in the pornographic insert.

I aim to ground the *Sex Series*' engagement with the tension between stability versus instability, specifically anti-essentialism versus strategic essentialism, within political debates of

¹¹ E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

the time but also in terms of theories and debates about gender and sexuality today. I will also situate the series in relation to artworks that have often been construed as part of the same “scene” or broad movement, that is to say works that engaged with male homoeroticism. However, central to my argument will be that the *Sex Series* moves beyond a simple representation of male homoeroticism into a disidentificatory realm. I will demonstrate this through a comparison of the *Sex Series* to select works by Robert Mapplethorpe, who slightly preceded Wojnarowicz, and Keith Haring, another prominent figure of the Lower East Side New York scene. These artists are often grouped together simply because they were all gay men and on the scene in the 1980s. But, as I will show, this grouping is ultimately limited.

Photomontage in the *Sex Series*

When considering the ways in which the *Sex Series* subverts stable identities, the medium of choice stands out. Historically photomontage has been used extensively from Dadaism up through the 80s to critique normative and oppressive politics and identifications. I will seek to locate the *Sex Series* in relation to this tradition of photomontage, how the series as a collection of photomontage works draws on and distances itself from early uses of the medium. When considering theoretical treatments of photomontage, Benjamin Buchloh provides a seminal approach in his essay “Allegorical Procedures.”¹² He argues that photomontage functions allegorically, that in effect the montage emphasizes certain aspects of images so as to draw our attention to these aspects in other images which have not been subjected to montage. Just as theorists before him, Sergei Eisenstein for example, Buchloh situates photomontage as a medium whose goal is critique. And yet, the precise manner in which Wojnarowicz executes his montage differs from earlier historical works. For example, much photomontage relies on an immediate

¹² Benjamin Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (1982): 43–56.

feeling of shock and trauma, as Brigid Doherty describes in her essay “‘See, We Are All Neurasthenics!’ or, The Trauma of Dada Montage.”¹³ The *Sex Series* does not shock the viewer in the same manner. Where Dadaism, according to Doherty, gains its shock value from the combining of certain images, any immediate shock to the viewer of the *Sex Series* comes from the inclusion of the pornographic images, not from the manner in which they are included. In its simultaneous use and subversion of certain aspects of photomontage, I will argue the *Sex Series* employs a queer photomontage as well as a queering of photomontage (in so far as it subverts traditions associated with photomontage while also using those traditions to destabilize identity).

Against the grain of the majority of scholarly work on Wojnarowicz, I will consider the *Sex Series* not biographically, but queerly. To do so I will focus on the ways in which the series destabilizes identities, unsettling hegemonic identifications. In doing so I will make use of certain theories with roots in Queer Theory, such as disidentifications, as well as others which address identity, such as intersectionality and strategic essentialism. Using these frameworks, I will elaborate a queering of identity which not only destabilizes identity, but also makes use of identity for specific political purposes. As such, I will argue that the *Sex Series* does not purely destabilize identity at all points, but does so strategically. It destabilizes identities to question the hierarchical nature of identity which privileges certain identifications over others. This reading will draw largely from my own encounter with the series. I will, therefore, consider the series not only within its historical moment, but in the context of contemporary concerns regarding identity. The *Sex Series*, I will argue, provides tools for dealing with identity in contemporary society.

¹³ Brigid Doherty, “‘See: ‘We Are All Neurasthenics!’ Or, the Trauma of Dada Montage,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (October 1, 1997): 82–132.

Chapter 1

The tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism is one of the most rehearsed dichotomies in scholarly literature. As Muñoz says in the introduction to his book *Disidentifications*, “This study is informed by the belief that the use-value of any narrative of identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self is especially exhausted. Clearly neither story is complete, but the way in which these understandings of the self have come to be aligned with each other as counternarratives is now a standard protocol of theory-making.”¹ I do not aim to portray this dichotomy as one that can be resolved, either by a combination of the two or by one triumphing over the other. Rather, I hope to consider the tension between these two as productive for political purposes. By making use of both essentialist and anti-essentialist narratives of identity, we can do more than if we restrict ourselves to one or the other. To this end, I will explore a number of essentialist and anti-essentialist theories (as well as theories that contest this divide) coming out of and influenced by queer theory. I take queer theory to be, fundamentally, anti-essentialist. Yet I will use this as my starting point less because I find it the most productive anti-essentialist route, but rather due to its connection to sexuality and gender. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the tension between anti-essentialism and the recourse to minoritized sexualities in queer theory, saying

“That’s one of the things that “queer” can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically...again, “queer” can mean something different: a lot of the way I have used it so far in this dossier is to denote, almost

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5-6.

simply, same-sex sexual object choice, lesbian or gay, whether or not it is organized around multiple criss-crossings of definitional lines.”²

There are, no doubt, productive routes for exploring anti-essentialism outside of queer theory, but given the focus of David Wojnarowicz’s *Sex Series* on sexuality and, queer theory is a particularly apt framework for examining it.

“Queer” Theory

What does it mean for something to be queer? The obvious answer is that queer means gay, homosexual. Undoubtedly, queer has had several lives. In recent history, it was (and often still is) used as a slur against homosexuals. As happens with slurs, people have reclaimed the word queer in defiance of these negative uses. Starting in the late 1980s and early 90s, queer became a popular self-identifier for many gay and lesbian people, in particular in certain major cities in the U.S. such as New York. But in the academy, the word has a completely different meaning. Queer theory, as it has come to be termed, has aimed to call into question the entire structure of heteronormative society. This does not simply mean eliminating heteronormativity in favor of a society in which gay and lesbian people are accepted as equal to straight people, but rather, queer theory aims to completely destabilize and break apart the notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality upon which society functions. Many early works of queer theory, therefore, worked to call into question the very ideas of heterosexuality and homosexuality. For example, David Halperin’s book *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* recounts the way in which homosexuality was created as an identity roughly one hundred years earlier, as a specific case of sexual deviancy.³ At the time, heterosexuality was not even a concept. Sexual deviancy contained homosexuality, as well as incest and many other sexual practices (many of which we

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

³ David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

still find objectionable as a society). This is described in Halperin's book with the purposes of pointing to the ways in which hetero and homosexuality are constructed in contemporary western society to enforce certain structures of power and domination.

Much early queer theory can find roots in the work of Michel Foucault. His book *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, is in many ways a predecessor to the argument Halperin is making. As Leo Bersani states, "It is the original thesis of [*The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*] that power in our societies functions primarily not by repressing spontaneous sexual drives but by producing multiple sexualities, and that through the classification, distribution, and moral rating of those sexualities the individuals practicing them can be approved, treated, marginalized, sequestered, disciplined, or normalized."⁴ Heterosexuality and homosexuality, by this argument, are not existent elements of nature; they are manufactured by modern western society and then used to situate some people in positions of power over others. This investment of sexualities in structures of power sets the stage for much of the work done in early queer theory.

To engage in queer theory then, as these scholars in the early 90s did, is to disavow a stable gay or lesbian identification. This is not to say that these scholars completely disavowed any sort of positionality with regards to normalized sexualities (i.e. heterosexuality). As Halperin argues in *Saint Foucault*, "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant."⁵ Halperin here is claiming to tap into a shift in activism surrounding sexuality at the time; where previously the main concern was to make known the existence of gays and lesbians, this approach has become insufficient. Homosexuality has been constructed to oppress, and so the only way to escape this oppression is to resist the notion of homosexuality as

⁴ Leo Bersani in *Homos* (1996), quoted in David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, 1. issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 19-20.

⁵ Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 62.

an externally existent concept. This is the central anti-essentialist piece of queer theory. Queer theory denies that there is any essential quality of homosexuality, that it exists solely as a constructed identity meant to control certain individuals. Therefore, the project of queer theory is to unsettle these identities. To commit to an anti-essentialist project is to work against normative, coherent identifications.

Queering Identity

While queer theory originally arose to critique heterosexuality and homosexuality as identities constructed to oppress, it has expanded beyond this scope in more recent years as the notion of “queering” identities of a wide variety began to become popular. Goals were, and continue to be, much the same, to demonstrate the power structures invested in the constitution of various identities so as to unravel them. One prominent of this is the very notion of gender identity. In her essay *Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity*, Susan Stryker considers the ways in which transgender individuals work to queer gender, saying “People with trans identities could describe themselves as men and women, too—or resist binary categorization altogether—but in doing either they queered the dominant relationship of sexed body and gendered subject.”⁶ Where earlier queer theory, drawing on the work of Foucault, questioned and undermined the ways in which bodies were, and are, sexualized by a juridical/medical system designed to oppress, Stryker focuses on the ways bodies are sexed and gendered for similar purposes. Interestingly, Stryker focuses not on an academic interrogation of the sexing of bodies, but the potential for identifications in daily life to queer sex and gender. Furthermore, while scholars have also extended queer theory to more identities beyond sex,

⁶ S. Stryker, “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity,” *Radical History Review* 2008, no. 100 (January 1, 2008): 147.

sexuality, and gender, this particular trio will be my main focus as I consider Wojnarowicz's queering of identity.

Critiquing Queer Theory

Queer theory has not gone unchallenged. I would like to consider a major critique of queer theory posed by E. Patrick Johnson. Johnson begins his critique by considering the ways in which race has been ignored by queer theory. He argues that “in its ‘race for theory’, queer theory has often failed to address the material realities of gays and lesbians of color.”⁷ In describing the race evasiveness of queer theory, Johnson considers the specific material oppressions of people of color that are left out. By arguing for the complete dismantling of identity, queer theory has in many ways ignored the experiences of queers of color. As Johnson describes it, “The deconstructive turn in queer theory highlights the ways in which ideology functions to oppress and to proscribe ways of knowing, but what is the utility of queer theory on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or anyplace where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed—indeed, where the body is the site of trauma?”⁸ Johnson is claiming that queer theory is insufficient to meet the needs of queers of color. Where it has utility in exposing the ways everyday knowledges are in fact oppressive, it does not account for the traumas experienced by oppressed groups, in particular queers of color. Queer theory is choosing too small, too limited a subject of study, confining its lens. To account for the trauma of oppression, one cannot merely look at the ways in which structures of power and domination are constituted and the narratives they construct, but the specific experiences of oppression.

⁷ E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

⁸ Ibid.

While Johnson provides an elaboration of the need to account for experiences of trauma in theorizing, he does not make a wholly coherent claim with regards to the nature of identity and essentialism. He chooses rather to sidestep this issue, taking largely for granted that identity, essentialized or not, is a productive route for considering the ways in which trauma is ignored by queer theory. Considering the bearing of Johnson's critique on our central concern of identity I would like to turn to Cathy Cohen. In her article "Punk, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" she makes a related critique of queer theory in which she considers the ways in which the "deconstructive turn," as Johnson labeled it, may be not only insufficient but at times useless, stating that "Queer theorizing which calls for the elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one's survival."⁹ To read this back through Johnson, deconstructing identity does not *always* provide a means for surviving trauma. At times, invoking identity, in particular communal identity, is both useful and necessary in surviving oppressive circumstances, in which bodies experience daily. By working collectively, groups can resist this violence. Cohen is arguing, counter to queer theory, that identity does not always require deconstructing, but rather at times ought to be embraced.

Strategic Essentialism

Cohen and Johnson are not alone in arguing for essentialism; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has made an argument for what she calls "strategic essentialism." She describes the "*strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest."¹⁰ Making an analysis to

⁹ Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 450.

¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays In Cultural Politics*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 205.

Marx's discussion of class oppression, she claims "Class-consciousness on the *descriptive* level is itself a strategic and artificial rallying awareness which, on the *transformative* level, seeks to destroy the mechanics which come to construct the outlines of the very class of which a collective consciousness has been situationally developed."¹¹ "Class-consciousness" in Spivak's analysis refers to the collective viewpoint of the proletariat, of those oppressed by class. In Marxian analysis there is a standard opposition described between the viewpoint of the bourgeoisie and that of the proletariat, in which the mainstream viewpoint is that of the bourgeoisie. By a variety of means, such as a theorized critique of capitalism, individuals could arrive at the proletarian viewpoint (class-consciousness). Revolution and the overthrow of capitalism derives from a large collective of individuals acting from within a proletarian subjectivity. In doing so, they eliminate the very notion of a proletarian subjectivity by challenging/destroying the dominant bourgeois viewpoint. It is this motion which Spivak is describing. The creation of an essentialized collective under this model is a step in the elimination of the very class the collective represents and identifies with.

Spivak argues for this "strategic essentialism" as a means to liberation. This is the key to her terming it *strategic* essentialism. Where essentialism can be harmful, as she herself admits elsewhere in the essay, it is also at times necessary. Within feminism this distinction is perhaps the most clear. Many early "second wave" feminist works were essentializing in a damaging manner. Perhaps most famous, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* goes beyond creating a collective womanhood for the purpose of rebellion against oppression. She creates a model in which there is a universal, unchanging womanhood. Womanhood, for Friedan, is less a social

¹¹ Ibid.

condition and more an immutable characteristic of an individual. This is antithetical to Spivak's conception of essentialism. For Spivak, essentialism is a contingent location, a means to an end.

Returning to Johnson and Cohen, it may be relevant to term their approaches a sort of strategic essentialism. Cohen in particular argues for the need for contingent essentialisms, where a collective identity is formed not out of a claim to the universal existence of that identity but rather in response to material circumstances of oppression, although this claim is salient in both arguments. Cohen, however, disregards the more Marxian approach toward a collective revolution that has as its goal the overthrow of the oppressive structure and thus, in turn, the terms of identification. Rather, she focuses on the need for survival, recalling a Foucaultian framework, as Halperin describes it. He states, "Nowadays, when gay men in the United States talk about politics, chances are the talk is not so much about change or reform or liberation as it is about *survival* and *resistance*."¹² This dichotomy between transformation and survival is not a reconcilable one, but that does not mean we must abandon one for the other. Cohen and Halperin share a concern for those who struggle day to day, only focused on survival. This is, on some level, the very critique Cohen has levied against queer theory: that it has disregarded those who have neither time nor energy for work against oppression beyond their own survival and the survival of those in their immediate community. In contrast, Spivak is concerned with the transformative. Muñoz argues for a necessity of transformative politics, saying that "The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there."¹³ What Muñoz is alluding to is the notion that the present is, in many ways, unlivable. Cohen, though, would likely agree with this. The

¹² Halperin, *Sain Foucault*, 31

¹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

dichotomy between transformative politics and survival politics does not rest on a different view of how the world exists. Both are responses to a hostile, unlivable present, but they are responses that take different approaches. They are ultimately different strategies against oppression, nothing more. Both make use of a strategic essentialism, but in different ways. Where a transformative essentialism is engaged with so as to eliminate the identity category it claims (by eliminating the oppression of that identity group), survival essentialism is not concerned with the future, focusing instead on the immediate need to survive in the face of oppression.

Intersectionality

Up to this point, I have considered essentialism and anti-essentialism as distinct and separate approaches. I would now like to consider the possibility of engaging with both simultaneously. This is not to say the two will be resolved into one, but rather that they will simultaneously exist as mutual but opposed phenomena within a singular political analysis. To do this, I would like to look at intersectionality. Intersectionality has over time come to refer to a number of analytical approaches, but broadly speaking it concerns the ways in which multiple dimensions of oppression *intersect* and overlap. As a particular theory, intersectionality was originally developed as framework for analysis by Kimberle Crenshaw. She did this to analyze the intersection of sexism and anti-black racism. Crenshaw emphasizes the ways in which these two dimensions of oppression are bound up together, saying she is “exploring the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color.”¹⁴ In considering this intersection, Crenshaw is concerned with the ways in which the oppression of women of color is not simply the oppression of men of color plus the oppression of white women. She is aiming to map a field of oppression which considers

¹⁴ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244.

sexism and anti-black racism simultaneously. Since Crenshaw's initial work on intersectionality, the approach has come to be pervasive throughout feminist scholarship as well as outside of the academy. While there is value in considering the multiplicity of ways in which different oppressions intersect, in particular in lived experiences such as those of women of color, I would like to consider Crenshaw's intersectionality as a temporally and situationally specific choice.

Crenshaw proposes intersectionality not as an overarching theoretical framework, but rather as a strategic response to scholarship that preceded her. The field that Crenshaw was responding to was (and in many ways still is) dominated by feminist work that focused on the experiences of white women and anti-racist work that focused on the experiences of men of color. Crenshaw was working to create a shift. In this way, she was not seeking to establish intersectionality as something to be applied at all moments; as she says, "I should say at the outset that intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity."¹⁵ This is often how intersectionality has been taken up in recent years though. To do feminist work, one is often forced to identify as intersectional or not. It is treated as an identity to be assumed. In contrast, Crenshaw proposes intersectionality as a strategy. By definition a strategy makes no claims to being the best option in all situations and at all times. Rather it is a response to specific problems. Specifically, it is a response to scholarship that erases the lived experiences of oppressed individuals whose experiences cannot be described by a single dimension of oppression. In this way, Crenshaw's intersectionality is anti-essentialist. She is taking an essentialized identity, such as blackness or womanhood, and saying that this identity is not actually coherent in the way people have described it, that womanhood is, by default, white in most descriptions. And yet, are there ways in which Crenshaw's intersectionality is also

¹⁵ Ibid.

essentialist? In drawing attention to the intersection of womanhood and blackness, Crenshaw is in fact essentializing the category of black woman. She aims to describe oppressions specific to black women, and as such is saying, perhaps unintentionally, that all black women face these oppressions, that to be a black woman is to face these oppressions. This is not to say Crenshaw has failed in some way. As I discussed earlier, essentialism can be strategic and useful. Rather, what Crenshaw shows is that one can be anti-essentialist and essentialist at the same time. To conceptualize this it may be easier to think of essentialism and anti-essentialism less as identities or stances and more as movements or actions, something one does rather than something one is. Crenshaw is not being essentialist and anti-essentialist at the same time, but rather she is doing both. She is anti-essentializing in pointing to the incoherences in blackness and womanhood, but she is essentializing by establishing the category of black womanhood in the service of resistance to and emancipation from various sources of oppression. Both are things she does, rather than is.

Queering Intersectionality?

If queer theory is, broadly speaking, a totalizing anti-essentialism, what would a queer intersectionality look like? Is intersectionality already queer or can it still be queered? I would like to consider Jasbir Puar's comments on intersectionality in her book *Terrorist Assemblages*. She juxtaposes intersectionality to assemblage, drawing on the Deleuzian idea of assemblage from *A Thousand Plateaus*, saying "As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency."¹⁶ We can see traces of anti-essentialism in Puar's description of assemblage. In particular in more

¹⁶ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Next Wave (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 212.

recent queer theory, time and space have come under critical eye as in need of queering. This is because to describe identity as essential is to describe it as uniform across time and space. To queer identity then can take the form of looking at incoherencies of identity across time and space. Puar believes the assemblage is a perfect tool for this. Assemblage, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it, is a collection of networks with no center. With no center, no central component, the assemblage refuses stability. Every component is equally central and tangential at the same time. This constant flowing of the assemblage is opposed to the stabilizing effects of intersectionality according to Puar. Puar then is attempting a universally anti-essentialist project. In this way, her project is clearly queer. Queer not in its subject matter but in its commitment to the unsettling of identities. A queer intersectionality then, an assemblage as Puar would have it, is one that does not rely on creating an essentialized identity in doing its anti-essentialist work. For Crenshaw, for example, this would mean avoiding establishing an essential black womanhood. Puar is less concerned with “queering” intersectionality, instead setting up an dialectic between intersectional identities and assemblage. She claims that “intersectional identities and assemblages must remain as interlocutors in tension.”¹⁷ I believe that, by affirming this dialectic and arguing purely for assemblage, Puar, somewhat ironically, closes off other (i.e. non-assemblage) dimensions of instability and change.

Closing her argument on assemblage, Puar claims that “For while intersectionality and its underpinnings—an unrelenting epistemological will to truth—presupposes identity and thus disavows futurity, or, perhaps more accurately, prematurely anticipates and thus fixes a permanence to forever, assemblage, in its debt to ontology and its espousal of what cannot be known, seen, or heard, or has yet to be known, seen, or heard, allows for becoming beyond or

¹⁷ Ibid, 213.

without being.”¹⁸ Puar here ascribes a certain temporal characteristic to intersectionality, whereby it necessarily makes claims about identities as existing in the same way forever into the future, as immobile. In contrast, assemblages acknowledge the temporal contingency of identities. But perhaps these are not as different as Puar would have. The initial intersectional impulse, to complicate identities organized around a single dimension of oppression, is doing precisely what Puar’s assemblage does, disturbing an identity which is uniform across time. There may be then an element of intersectionality in assemblage. Puar conceives of intersectionality as a move toward new identities, where I have argued that it is a movement away from old identities first, and toward new identities as a necessary second step. This movement toward new identities is what Puar calls the “unrelenting epistemological will to truth.” A truth in this context would be an identity that is completely coherent and uniform across time. Both intersectionality and assemblage rebel against truth then, just in different ways. Intersectionality takes up contingent identities where assemblage focuses on the unknown. While they reach different points, both intersectionality and assemblage provide avenues for anti-essentialist movement.

Disidentification

In opening this chapter I quoted Muñoz’s comments on the frequently repeated dichotomy between essentialism and anti-essentialism. In his book *Disidentifications* Muñoz attempts to elaborate a model of identity that is both essentialist and anti-essentialist. To do this, he argues that the conflict between essentialism and anti-essentialism is a product of the collision between individuals and society. According to Muñoz, we can “understand identity as produced at the point of contact between essential understandings of self (fixed dispositions) and socially

¹⁸ Ibid, 216.

constructed narratives of self...[we can] attempt to chart the ways in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates.”¹⁹ Our understandings of our self may be fixed, but they will never perfectly correspond to a socially constructed narrative. Rather, incoherencies in socially constructed narratives can be drawn out by looking at the way they fail to match with individual understandings of the self. How does Muñoz propose minority subjects interact with these socially constructed narratives? By what he calls disidentification.

Disidentification is a way of interacting with culture that neither conforms to nor strictly opposes it. Muñoz describes the ways in which “counteridentifying” against dominant culture may, in doing so, maintain the dominant culture, whereas “disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”²⁰ By simultaneously taking up and complicating dominant narratives, subjects work to disassemble these narratives from within. He describes how this may function as the fictional encounter of a queer woman with Frantz Fanon, saying “Disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer and lesbian reader, who would not be sanitized; instead, his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as a *still* valuable yet mediated identification.”²¹ The reader does not universally disavow Fanon, but takes what is useful and critiques what is not, working against the complete narrative Fanon provides. This is, for Muñoz, a response to the formation of identity he describes. Upon encountering societal narratives that do not account for a minority subject’s understanding of their self, the subject,

¹⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid*, 9.

rather than identifying oppositionally, may disidentify, taking up the elements that they find useful while critiquing those that are not.

Muñoz claims that he is combining essentialist and anti-essentialist understandings of identity. In this way, he echoes Crenshaw (whom he explicitly names as an influence), albeit in a slightly different form. Disidentification enacts certain essentialisms, largely strategic ones. In fact, it takes up strategic essentialism's focus both on survival as well as transformation. As Muñoz says, disidentification enacts "permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of everyday struggles of resistance."²² It enacts change by taking up the dominant narrative and twisting it to fit a minority subject. And yet it also values survival by its emphasis on affirmation of minority identities. In other words, disidentification is not concerned with destabilizing all identities all the time, content to affirm certain stable identities when it is important for the survival of minority subjects. It is the very flexibility of disidentification which makes it both essentialist and anti-essentialist. Disidentification is enacted as a reaction to a dominant culture that does not allow for the existence of certain subjects. Precisely what is needed by these subjects varies from situation to situation, but disidentifying describes a way of trying to survive in this culture while also working to change it. Disidentifying subjects are likely to employ both essentializing and anti-essentializing tools in doing so, essentializing what they need to survive while anti-essentializing what makes the dominant culture hostile.

Foucault and Power

Earlier I described the way in which much early queer theory draws on Foucault's work in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. His work is often pointed to as the original call for anti-essentialism in queer theory. By describing the ways in which sexualities were not repressed but

²² Ibid, 12.

rather created and categorized to oppress, it seems Foucault is calling for working against stable and coherent identities. But, I believe this oversimplifies Foucault's work on the notion of power. In fact, if we read him closely, Foucault inverts much of the scholarship that has been done on essentialism, due to his notion of power as pervasive. When discussing power, he says, "I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another, a system whose effects, through successive derivation, pervade the entire social body. The analysis, made in terms of power, must not assume that the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, or the over-all unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, these are only the terminal forms power takes. It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization."²³ Foucault makes an important distinction between power and domination. Domination is what we usually refer to when thinking about oppression. It is, as Foucault puts it, "the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations [of force relations]."²⁴ Power is the collection of force relations, but domination is a specific form of power then, a "terminal form" as Foucault says. Power does not have as specific a form as domination. Because of this, power contains the very possibility for change in itself. Change does not, for Foucault, look like an escape from power. Rather, it is a rearranging of power, a shift in the organization of force relations. One cannot escape power because it is necessary for inter-subject relations. Looking at the idea of intimate, sexual relationships, Foucault argues against the notion that we can escape power. The narrative Foucault is arguing against goes as such: certain sexual relationships exhibit a clear power dynamic, with one partner in control, but

²³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 92.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 94.

we can, through a directed effort, engage in sexual relationships outside of power, where both parties are on completely equal footing. Foucault claims that this is impossible because it is only through these power relations that we can interact with others. He is asking the question “What could a relationship free of power possibly look like?”, assuming the answer to be that it is incomprehensible. This does not mean that there are no power relations to object to. In particular, when power leads to domination, the goal of resisting this domination is important and necessary for Foucault. But to resist domination is to simply rearrange power. What, then, does this resistance look like?

Foucault claims that, not only is resistance a desirable action, it is an inherent part of power. As he says, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”²⁵ Resistance is a consequence, or perhaps even a dimension, of power. And just like power, resistance is not singular; rather, both are pervasive and multiple. There are a variety of resistances, in response to the varieties of power. Foucault argues that, because of this multiplicity of resistances, “it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.”²⁶ Foucault is saying that revolution is somewhat analogous to domination, that revolution is the terminal end of resistances. In moving from resistance to revolution, Foucault argues that codification is necessary. This seems anathema to the anti-essentialist projects he has been taken up by. Most anti-essentialist projects begin from the same understanding as Foucault, that identities are constructed to control them. But this is where they diverge. The anti-essentialist takes this understanding and decides that the best way to resist is by disavowing

²⁵ Ibid, 95.

²⁶ Ibid, 96.

identities, believing that they are purely tools of oppression with no resistive potential. This is impossible under the Foucaultian understanding of power though. To be able to successfully disavow identity would require the ability to step outside the realm of power, which is impossible because power is constitutive of the relationships between humans. Power cannot be removed, only transformed. Resistance, therefore, looks less like the removal of identity and more like the transformation of it. A kind of constant playing with identity is the only way to transform the controlling forces of identity. Several of the theorists I have discussed thus far have advocated a model of this variety, in particular Muñoz, Puar, and Spivak.

Doing Identity

Throughout this chapter I have operated with an unspoken assumption about essentialism, namely that to claim an identity, in particular as a collective, is to a degree, necessarily, a form of strategic essentialism. This is because identity functions to make a group that coheres around a point or set of points, cutting away that which does not fit. While many theorists working on identity, in particular queer theorists, may agree on this point, they do so derisively. Essentialism has become a dirty word in academic work. This is because much of the literature on identity is concerned with truth and knowledge and there are those who seek to discover the actual nature of reality, to determine whether identity exists or not. Looking at identity in this way is not useful though. Rather, one must consider the ways we talk about identity as tools and strategies, not as claims to truth. All of the approaches to identity I have elaborated throughout this chapter exist as strategic approaches to identity. Identity is tied up in power, domination, and oppression, because it is a tool of oppression. But because identity is a tool of oppression, it is also a tool of resistance to oppression as Foucault describes. This can look like a taking up of essentialized

identity, or a subverting of identities. Essentialism and anti-essentialism both exist as legitimate strategies of resistance. Identity then is not something we are, it is something we do.

Chapter 2

When discussing a work of art or series of works, it is commonplace to base arguments in the biographical information of the artist. Scholarship on Wojnarowicz has been no exception. Much of the discussion of his career emphasizes his work as an extension of his gay male identity. In contrast, I will attempt to elaborate an analysis of the *Sex Series* that actively works against this biographical impulse. This does not mean completely ignoring Wojnarowicz's gay male identity, but rather considering as well the ways in which his art is not necessarily confined to issues of identity. Instead, I will consider the way the work is received by contemporary viewers who do not share identities with Wojnarowicz. Ultimately this reading of the *Sex Series* will be largely disidentificatory. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Muñoz's theory is a way for subjects to interface with a dominant culture which denies their existence. To view the *Sex Series* as a minoritarian subject is to find a way to both survive and transform the threads of dominant culture represented in the works. Muñoz emphasizes this combination of survival and transformation, saying "Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."¹ As such, my analysis of the *Sex Series* will consider the ways the works both take up identity as well as subvert it. By treating identity in this manner I am relying on my argument from the previous chapter: identity is done, it is not an immutable part of who we are. We choose to embody identities as well as to rebel against them. Within the *Sex Series* then, in so far as identities are taken up, identities are contingent.

The *Sex Series*

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 13.

In 1988, Wojnarowicz began working on a series of photomontages which he would later title the *Sex Series*. The series consists of eight photomontages, all twenty by twenty four inches. As Carr describes, for each work in the series, Wojnarowicz began with a background image which he “made by using color slides in the enlarger—a positive would become a negative, though the red light in the darkroom would knock out a certain portion of the light spectrum coming through the slide. So the prints would look like negatives but a little ‘off.’”² Each work contains at least one smaller circular inset image. To create these he would have had to cover parts of the work while exposing the background, then cover the background while exposing these smaller insets. The insets, like the backgrounds, have the appearance of negatives. In the last three of the works in the series, Wojnarowicz has also included text superimposed over the work. The text is surprisingly dense and long for the size of the works, requiring the viewer to stand very close to the work to read it. All three texts discuss issues of sexuality, oppression, and AIDS.

The first five works, all text-free, each consist of a background with a single pornographic inset. The background images are: a house with a water tower in the left of the frame, in a seemingly rural setting (fig. 1); a large boat out at sea, with a large plume of smoke coming out of one smokestack (fig. 2); a dense, wintry forest of trees lacking any foliage (fig. 3); an airfield with a plane on the left and people with parachutes on the right (fig. 4); and an image that seems to be of the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges from the Manhattan side (fig. 5). The insets in each of these are: a figure engaging in oral sex with another figure, who reads as a cis man; another image of oral sex, this time with the receiving figure standing and the giving figure

² C Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 409.

wearing an old-fashion navy hat; two figures engaging in oral to anal sex; two figures engaging in penetrative anal sex; and two figures either engaged in oral sex or oral-anal sex, respectively.

The remaining three works consist of a background, a pornographic inset, several other insets, and text. The backgrounds are: a tornado (fig. 6), a train (fig. 7), and the same picture of the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges (fig. 8). The insets in the tornado work are: two female figures engaged in sex; a close-up of money; an image of a body, which seems to be male; a radio tower; a microscope image of cells; and, an x-ray of a baby. The text discusses one of Wojnarowicz's erotic encounters as well as media portrayals of gay men. The insets in the train work are: an image of police in riot gear at a protest; two figures engaging in oral sex; another microscope slide of cells; and, a piece of newspaper discussing anti-gay violence. The text discusses the general cultural ignorance of the AIDS crisis and the expendability of certain bodies. The insets in the bridge photomontage are: a newborn; a man in a hospital bed, likely suffering from AIDS from his gaunt appearance; two figures about to engage in penetrative anal sex; another image of police in riot gear; another image of money; and an image of Jesus from the neck up wearing the crown of thorns. This work also contains another visual addition, a strange reptilian head. The image of Jesus is its eye and it is eating the image of money. The text of this work discusses the ways in which people, other than gay white men, are affected by the AIDS crisis, including people of color and gay women.

When I viewed the works at PPOW gallery, the works were arranged with the three containing text at the end. While this is not how the works have to be organized, it is easy to imagine why one might order them as such. The works containing only a single inset are easier to contemplate, in particular in light of the name *Sex Series*. They lend themselves to a relatively straightforward reading. The insets portray a homosexual rupture in an otherwise

heteronormative culture. The works containing text complicate this reading, raising issues of police violence, AIDS, and other issues of oppression which are not captured by the simple opposition of homosexual to heteronormative. Interestingly, the recently published book *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* illustrates the series but does not present the works in this order, opting to more or less alternate text and no-text works.³ This is not to claim that there is a right or wrong way to order the series, or to move from one to another. Rather, I believe the order is important because it reminds us of the necessity of revisiting each individual work several times. Each work in the series informs the others.

Viewing the series in person, one is struck by the works' size. They are relatively small and unassuming. You are not shocked by a naked body from across the room, as you may be with a work by Robert Mapplethorpe. Rather, you have to walk up to the works. You cannot even observe very much detail from the distance. To see much of what Wojnarowicz is presenting, you have to look closely, so close that you are inches from the work even. This is especially true of the works that include text. You have to stand in front of them for a while to actually read the text, because much of it is obscured to some degree. The works necessitate, even force, you to contemplate what is being shown from a position of spatial and temporal intimacy.

Meyer

The most extensive analysis of the *Sex Series* to date comes from Richard Meyer in his book *Outlaw Representation*. I would like to focus on a particular section, in which he argues for the queerness of the *Sex Series*. In each work one of the insets contains a pornographic image.

³ David Wojnarowicz, *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape (reconsidered)*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Aperture, 2015).

The source images, as Meyer describes, are vintage gay pornography, from the 1950s and 60s.⁴ But in the series, the images are heavily obscured and distorted. This modifying of the source images renders them despecified; we lose all sense of the context of the original pornographic image. But more importantly for Meyer, the obscuring means the sex of bodies becomes confused. As Meyer puts it, “there is an occasional slippage or indeterminacy of gender,” with Meyer using sex and gender relatively interchangeably.⁵ Meyer argues that this indeterminacy of gender renders the series queer. Queer in this case refers to the ways in which this indeterminacy “undoes secure distinctions between the normative and the non-normative, between acts of heterosexual and homosexual exchange or between identifiably male and female bodies.”⁶ Meyer is following a strict anti-essentialist approach. He is arguing for the confusing and dissolution of identities, that to dissolve identities in such a way is radically queer. While there is potential for positive change from the confusing of identities, Meyer is susceptible to many of the arguments made against early queer theory.

There is an undeniable benefit to working against the strict categories of identity that society forces on individuals, but sometimes this work can in fact reinscribe the categorization it is attempting to overthrow. Meyer asserts that in the *Sex Series*, the bodies are blurred in such a way to confuse identities. But not all elements of the bodies are obscured. Perhaps most obvious, all the bodies appear white. Despite having the color manipulated, the race of all the bodies reads clearly. Similarly, while an argument can be made that we do not know definitively that the bodies are meant to read as cis gay men, most viewers would almost immediately jump to this conclusion. Most of the porn shots center around a penis, engaged in either oral or anal sex.

⁴ Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 252.

⁵ *Ibid*, 254.

⁶ *Ibid*.

While these details do not define the insets as images of gay male sex, within our culture (in particular in the late 80s) this is clearly implied. Heterosexual sex, specifically vaginal intercourse, is the default for sex. To engage in other activities, while common amongst individuals, representationally indicates a movement away from heterosexuality. The images in the *Sex Series* not only read as homosexual though, but specifically male. Only one image appears to be of women, the rest clearly read as cis men. Meyer claims that the bodies in the *Sex Series* confuse codes of gender and sexuality. But as we have seen, the impulse to confuse identities is often derived from a position of relative privilege. This is because, as Foucault argues, identity is inescapable. To work against received identities is possible, as many queer theorists aim to do. But even a scholar as theoretically nuanced as Meyer can fall into the trap of reasserting dominant identities under a new name. Whiteness, masculinity, and other identities of power maintain their positionality through their unspoken nature when we talk exclusively about the erasing of societal codes. This is in many ways the argument Johnson is making. In its relentless pursuit of theory, queer theory disregards the lived experiences of people that derive directly from their identities. Oppressed people often know this from daily experience; when we talk about race, we mean people of color, when we talk about sexuality, we mean gay people. Unspoken identities, such as whiteness or heterosexuality, are the normative default. It is easy for Meyer to argue for a dissolution of gender identities when he as a man does not have to engage with his own gender. While it is definitively gay, Meyer's queerness is white, cisgender, and male.

Trans Bodies

Is there still radical potential in the *Sex Series*? I believe so, if we consider the question of viewer reception. In particular, I would like to consider the viewing of the series by transgender

subjects. In her book *Seeing Differently*, Amelia Jones elaborates an idea of “queer feminist durationality”, an approach to viewing works of art which allows them to become relevant to a current audience for whom they may otherwise be antiquated. She describes it as “the potential for doing something with artworks through interpretation that [she argues] reactivates them by returning them to process and embodiment—linking the interpreting body of the present with the bodies referenced or performed in the past as the work of art.”⁷ Jones’ thesis is predicated, in particular, on a minoritarian viewer. Minoritarian subjects and bodies have historically been excluded from art, and when they are included they are rendered as a damaging stereotype. To view art then often requires a minoritarian subject to find new ways of viewing. Jones proposes that this is done by linking bodies in the past with bodies in the present. I believe that this principle can be taken up when looking at the *Sex Series*.

To reactivate the *Sex Series*, I would like to consider my own personal encounter of the series as a trans woman.⁸ As I said, Meyer’s focus on the dissolution of identity reasserts dominant identities. But this does not change his fundamental insight that the bodies in the series are cropped and distorted. I contend however, that this distortion can be reactivated through the concept of the trans body. For example, in the photomontage containing the bridges but no text

⁷ Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, 1 edition (Abingdon, Oxon England ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 174.

⁸ I will route my analysis through my own experience of the series, focusing on a theory of receptivity. This will involve drawing on much of my personal experiences not only as a trans person but within trans communities. To do this I will make use of various terminology common within trans communities. This includes: trans woman/trans man, a person who is trans and identifies as a woman/man, respectively; top surgery, a common surgical procedure for trans men and trans masculine people to reduce breast tissue; afab/amab, assigned female at birth and assigned male at birth, used to refer to the gender a person is designated when they’re born as opposed to how they identify. This list is of course not comprehensive, and trans communities are actively in the process of defining language for themselves, so much of this may be out of date in the near future. And it is always important to remember that while many trans people may accept this language, there may be others who disavow it for personal reasons.

(fig. 5), the genitals of neither body are visible. The person on the right does not seem to have breasts, but could easily be a transman who has had top surgery. The figure on the left could easily be a transman or a transwoman, there are no sufficient details to say. Or in the photomontage with the house (fig. 1), there is no way to know that the receiving partner is not simply wearing a strap-on. In fact, the same could be said about nearly all the works; given the distortions, the sex and gender is indeterminate yet Meyer assumes them to be cis male, probably a default motivated by Wojnarowicz's identity. Or if they are in fact trans, they could be trans women who have undergone no hormones or surgery. Because the images are not shown in clarity, nearly any body could be trans, and can be seen as such.

How is this any different from Meyer's argument though? Does a reading that pays attention to the potential slippages of sex and gender necessarily fall prey to the same flaws as Meyer? To answer this, we must return to the key feature of Jones' queer feminist durationality: the viewer. Meyer completely ignores the question of the viewer in his analysis of the *Sex Series*, assuming a viewer who shares his own positionality. There is, ultimately, no way to claim that the insets have radical potential for straight, cisgender viewers without being read through a trans positionality as I am doing here. This is because, as I have said, such a viewer would instantly read the bodies as cis gay men, without further analysis. In contrast, given the ambiguous treatment of the bodies in the images transgender viewers may see the potential for trans bodies in the series. As Muñoz says, "The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self."⁹ This is to say, it is easy for majoritarian subjects to inhabit their own identities and bring them to bear in the interpretation of images. While Muñoz

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

does not say so explicitly in this quote, he is focused on the *representation* of majoritarian and minoritarian subjects and on the different ways majoritarian and minoritarian subjects view images. Due to the wealth of positive representations, it is easy for majoritarian subjects to inhabit their identities, and therefore easier for them to exist. But minoritarian subjects must work to inhabit their identities. The *Sex Series* is not, in any traditional sense, *about* transgender subjects. This does not mean, though, that there is no potential for the representation of transgender subjects in the series. As I have already described, it is possible to see trans bodies and trans sex in the series. But this is not so easy for all viewers. As a transwoman, I can easily see these bodies and this sex as trans because they resemble my own body and sex. The radical potential of the *Sex Series*, in this instance, is not in the series but rather in the viewer.

A Gay Male Identity?

If we focus on biography and the original context within which the works were displayed, it would appear that the works focus on gay male identity; however, there are ways in which a disidentificatory viewing subverts this very identity. In the photomontage featuring a tornado (fig. 6), the first piece of the text describes a sexual encounter between Wojnarowicz and an anonymous man. He says “he laid me down on the bed and removed my shoes and pants while I played with his hard dick through his pants and he bent and licked the inside of my legs and thighs under my balls and then laid on top of me pulling my arms up and around his neck and he kissed behind my ears and licked across my throat and across my face and down the bridge of my nose to my mouth where he put his warm tongue in.”¹⁰ There is no question that both Wojnarowicz and the anonymous man are gay men. But in the same work is one of the most intriguing insets. In the top left there is, just like every other work, a porn shot inset. But this

¹⁰ *Untitled (Tornado)* from *Sex Series* (1988-9).

inset stands out because the two figures seem to be women. In a series that seems to be about gay male eroticism, why is there an image of two women having sex? I contend the gay male identity portrayed in the series is being used contingently, simultaneously being assumed and subverted. In the text, Wojnarowicz goes on to critique the way people with AIDS are discussed in the media. He makes use of a gay male identity to make this critique, while also questioning it through the inclusion of the female figures. In the text, he describes a news anchor, saying “he refers to me as nothing more than a disease with two legs and a killer dick with sperm like bullets and he tells you that I am on a mission of destruction because I insist on being regarded as a human being that has a need to explore his sexuality.” Wojnarowicz here is clearly making use of a traditional gay male narratives, in particular taking up themes of exploring sexuality, and of sexuality being a necessity. This stands in direct opposition to the narrative being imposed on gay men by the news media in which they have sex with people with the goal of infecting them, or that they will get AIDS if they have sex so they should simply not, ignoring the option of safer sex. To argue against these imposed narratives he utilizes gay male subjectivity by employing a first person narrative based on his own experience. This taking up is contingent though. While he makes use of these narratives, in placing them next to the image of two women having sex, he disrupts them. In particular, for a viewer who does not share Wojnarowicz’s masculinity, the inset of two women immediately stands out.

Critiques have often been made of the discussion of AIDS by groups like ACT UP, which sometimes similarly focused on the need for safer sex education. By focusing solely on safer sex, people ignore the danger for intravenous drug users of contracting AIDS through needle sharing. Safer sex, in particular the use of condoms, is narratively relevant specifically to cis gay men. Cis gay women, trans men, and trans women all need other safer sex supplies, such as dental

dams. This inset can be interpreted to render visible the insufficiency of the then dominant narrative surrounding safer sex.

The contingent use of gay male identity is in some ways akin to Spivak's conception of Strategic Essentialism. The narrative presented assumes a gay male identity without the goal of making such an identity uniform across time. Instead, it is open to critique. But there is some difference between the two here as well. Where Spivak believed groups would assume a single identity to ultimately overthrow the dichotomy of identities which oppressed them, the *Sex Series* makes use of a collective gay male identity even more contingently, undermining it without dissolving straight and gay male identity, rather undermining the way in which a dichotomy between straight and gay often assumes a male identity. Wojnarowicz's gay male identity crystalizes for a brief moment, before dissolving again. In this way, the *Sex Series* is performing something very much like the intersectionality Crenshaw describes. The series presents us with the intersection of gayness and womanhood, in particular the way in which womanhood goes unnamed in gayness. Ultimately, intersectionality pervades much of the *Sex Series*, in particular in the bridge work.

Solidarity

The second photomontage featuring the bridges (fig. 8), is the other in the series with a large block of text, and this is largely devoted to naming people with AIDS who are ignored by groups like ACT UP. Looking at media put out by groups like ACT UP and other major activist groups working at the time, the focus was on the negligence of the government to provide necessary treatment for AIDS. In particular, the slow drug approval process meant that there were no options. The only available drug, after much work on the part of activists, was AZT. But as Wojnarowicz says in the opening text of this piece, AZT was "highly toxic" for many, not to

mention largely ineffective. The only alternative was drug trials. Wojnarowicz devotes the first paragraph of text to looking at the availability of drug trials. Almost all minority groups were barred from these trials. His text states: “only white middleclass men have some chance of receiving drugs.” Wojnarowicz explains in greater detail specific exclusions, for example lesbians, “Puerto Ricans, Blacks, Haitians, and other people of color are excluded from these drug trials.” This is of course a common historical trend in drug trials and even persists today. From here Wojnarowicz moves onto a larger discussion of groups that are excluded from care, in particular poor and homeless people. According to Wojnarowicz, “Homeless men or women are not diagnosed even though city statistics acknowledge there are between five and ten thousand homeless people with Aids living on the city streets or in shelters.” Homeless people would frequently go undiagnosed because “hospitals are overcrowded and the beds are saved for people with insurance or money.” Wojnarowicz aims to not only point to the problems with the FDA and inclusion in drug trials, but more broadly the poor treatment of PWAs (People with Aids) by the medical establishment.

By focusing not just on PWAs in general, but specifically those who are mistreated by the medical establishment, Wojnarowicz is practicing a type of solidarity and decentering. AIDS was, and often still is, a disease associated exclusively with white gay men (this becomes obvious looking at media discussing AIDS ranging from Leo Bersani’s “Is The Rectum a Grave?” to the recent documentary of 2012 *How to Survive a Plague*). This was often true of ACT UP, the main AIDS activist group at the time. But there are many other people who contracted AIDS who were ignored both by the medical establishment as well as activists. As Wojnarowicz says, AZT was highly toxic, and because it was the only available drug white middleclass men were forced to enter experimental drug trials in attempts to receive treatment.

But people of color, women, and poor people did not have access to these drug trials, and were often denied hospital care for opportunistic infections. The *Sex Series* complicates the traditional narrative surrounding AIDS by including these people. Wojnarowicz steps back from the dialogue, as a gay white man, shifting the focus to other underserved groups. In this way Wojnarowicz decenters himself and decentering lends queer a potential new meaning. Where queer meant to unsettle established identifications, a decentering queerness unsettles the dominant identities of the speaker. These identities, which by default assume power, move to the side, creating space for oppressed identities and viewer-centered interpretations of the work. This means that while not all identities are unsettled as queerness often means, Wojnarowicz destabilizes the connections between power and certain identities.

I would like to consider now several of the inserts in the series other than the pornographic inserts. It is easy, as with much of the series, to read these inserts as associated with gay male identity. In the bridge work, there is an image of a man in a hospital bed. His body is sickly, you can see his ribs. This image is not uncommon in media about AIDS during the 1980s and '90s. In the film *Silence=Death* by Rosa von Praunheim (which features Wojnarowicz), much of the footage consists of men suffering from AIDS in hospitals.¹¹ Even in other works by Wojnarowicz we're presented with similar images, such as in his documentation of Peter Hujar immediately after his death.¹² But in this work, the image takes on new meaning. Set against the text, which discusses the unavailability of hospital beds for poor and homeless people, the image pictures a sort of privilege or luxury. Of course these terms are far too extreme, but it is this discomfort that the image evokes. In both the bridge and tornado work,

¹¹ Rosa von Praunheim, *Silence = Death*, Documentary, (1990).

¹² David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Peter Hujar)*, 1989. Gelatin-silver prints, triptych. 10x14 in. each

there is an inset containing imagery of money. The connection here is perhaps more straightforward; the money alludes to the way in which, without money, one cannot access medical care. Both works also contain an image of an infant, although in the tornado work the image is an x-ray. Within the context of the work, the insets take on a variety of meanings. For example, it is possible for HIV to be transmitted from mother to infant in childbirth or through breast milk.¹³ The use of x-ray also alters the possible meanings, alluding to the role of medical institutions in treating AIDS, or more specifically lack of treatment.

But perhaps the most in need of complicating are the insets in the bridge and train works containing police in riot gear. Meyer discusses one of these in depth, saying “The photograph of the police is the only image in the work that is not tonally reversed...The photograph, it turns out, was taken by Wojnarowicz himself at a 1988 ACT UP demonstration at the headquarters of the Food and Drug Administration...[it shows] the threat of antigay violence and that of police action against public demonstrations.”¹⁴ Meyer’s specifying of “antigay violence” is, I contend, insufficient. The series spends a great deal of time focusing on the many identities that are oppressed in connection with AIDS. As such, the police represent not the threat of *antigay* violence, but violence against all minority groups. The *Sex Series* in its picturing and describing of oppression, is fundamentally focused on solidarity between oppressed groups.

Wojnarowicz’s Contemporaries

Wojnarowicz is often grouped amongst a variety of other artists who were also gay men, such as Keith Haring and Robert Mapplethorpe. While this comparison makes sense from a biographical perspective, if we work against a biographical impulse, differences between the

¹³ “Preventing Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV | HIV/AIDS Fact Sheets | Education Materials,” *AIDSinfo*, <https://aidsinfo.nih.gov/education-materials/fact-sheets/20/50/preventing-mother-to-child-transmission-of-hiv>

¹⁴ Meyer, 255

work of these artists are drawn out. In particular, while the *Sex Series* emphasizes contingent identifications, intersectionality, and solidarity, the work of these artists often upholds gay male identity as an ideal without critique and without any attention for other identities.

Haring is arguably the most well-known artist to come out of the New York Lower East Side scene. Like most artists of the time, his art did not take on a political content until the AIDS crisis. His early subway drawings, in his signature outline style, were light-hearted and had little to do even with gay politics. This changed over time though, and several of his most popular works address AIDS explicitly. In one work, *Ignorance=Fear* (1989), he takes up the already common ACT UP slogan of “Silence=Death. Fight AIDS. ACT UP.”¹⁵ The addition of “Ignorance=Fear” at the top of the work is Haring’s own invention. While this seems relatively neutral, merely a work supporting AIDS activism, there are a variety of ways in which it reaffirms dominant AIDS narratives. Somewhat obvious, all three figures in the middle of the work, like the figures in nearly all of Haring’s work, read as men. They have no obvious gender markings, but greatly resemble symbols we already use to denote male, such as on restroom signs. He also includes a small pink triangle, much like the original *Silence=Death* poster, to indicate homosexuality. The three figures, acting out the gestures meaning “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” are meant to be analogous to the gay men that are not currently actively fighting for improved AIDS policy. This is of course reinforced by the ACT UP slogan “Silence=Death,” where to speak up about AIDS is the only way to survive. Haring’s addition of “Ignorance=Fear” functions similarly, where to ignore the inevitable is an act of fear and will do nothing to solve the problem. The overwhelming focus on silence and speaking up, while seemingly straightforward, speaks largely to a gay male community. To be more specific, it

¹⁵ Keith Haring Foundation, <http://www.haring.com/!/art-work/253#.VtsIJpMrJE5>

speaks to a gay male community with the time and resources to speak up. In contrast, other communities, such as the homeless, had no option to speak up even when they did have AIDS. Haring was speaking to people largely like himself, white gay men, and in doing so normalized these identities at the cost of other oppressed identities.

Mapplethorpe presents another body of work that embraces and celebrates gay masculinity. He is most well-known for his male nudes, but Mapplethorpe's oeuvre spans a variety of subject matter, including female nudes, flowers, and portraits. In refuting a biographical reading of Wojnarowicz though, I would like to focus on the male nudes, for they are the works most often compared to the work of Wojnarowicz. Mapplethorpe is often described as appropriating a modernist approach to photography with an explicitly male homoerotic subject matter. While I don't dispute the accuracy of the first claim, I wish to challenge the idea of similarity between his and Wojnarowicz' work. To read the male nudes of Mapplethorpe as homoerotic comes directly out of an appeal to his biography. To see this most clearly, one can compare these to his female nudes. For example, *Dennis* (1978; fig. 9) and *Tit Profile* (1980; fig. 10) are nearly the same shot, portraying the subject's chest in profile against a dark background, but with small and important variations. Where *Dennis* covers the subject from chin to nipple, *Tit Profile* travels from the top of the subject's breast to her stomach. *Dennis* emphasizes rigid, hard lines such as the jaw and chest, where *Tit Profile* has a greater focus on curve, in particular the arching of the subject's body. *Tit Profile* ultimately is just as erotic as *Dennis* but in its own way. Mapplethorpe does not attempt to create just a male homoeroticism, but a general eroticism that pervades all of his work. This eroticism is often a same-sex eroticism, such as in the work *Sonia and Tracy* (1988) in which two nude women, arms intertwined, gaze longingly at each other. But it is neither always male nor always homosexual.

If we take Mapplethorpe's work to be characterized not by male homoeroticism but eroticism in general, what do comparisons to Wojnarowicz indicate? In discussing the *Sex Series*, Carr quotes Wojnarowicz, saying that "it essentially came out of wanting some sexy images on the wall—for me."¹⁶ To read this quotation into the series would indicate that the pornographic images are meant to indicate a sort of male homoeroticism. In contrast, Meyer quotes Wojnarowicz saying "The images I use are just naked bodies, sometimes engaged in explicit sexual acts. I know they are loaded images but I'm not just putting sex pictures on a wall, I'm surrounding them with information that reverberates against whatever the image sparks in people."¹⁷ Meyer's quote disassociates Wojnarowicz from any eroticism of the pornographic insets in the *Sex Series*.

I find the series exists somewhere in between the two. As I have discussed earlier, there is a potential for male homoeroticism in the series, but this can be easily undercut depending on the viewer, such that any eroticism in the works becomes queer. This is similar to Mapplethorpe's work. But while there is some degree of similarity, the two diverge stylistically. Specifically, Wojnarowicz's photomontage approach, which leaving the edges between different images clear and distinct, unsettles the eroticism of the images. Mapplethorpe's photographs are singularly erotic, with a clear and consistent theme to each. Viewing the *Sex Series*, while looking at a pornographic insert may read as erotic like a Mapplethorpe photograph, the placement next to non-erotic images renders the pornographic inserts less ready for consumption by the viewer. Instead the viewer is forced to contemplate the way in which these two images collide. Wojnarowicz is bringing together radically different themes that may otherwise not coexist.

¹⁶ C Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 410.

¹⁷ Meyer, 254-5

Additionally, looking at the ways in which Wojnarowicz and Mapplethorpe crop their images, there is a startling difference. Mapplethorpe would often crop off the face, such as in *Dennis* and *Tit Profile*. This places a focus on the bodies, on eroticized anatomical details. Wojnarowicz does not have such a logical, careful process for cropping. There is no apparent aesthetic motivation to what he chooses to include. In this way Wojnarowicz further subverts the eroticism of the images. To make art works with erotic overtones was commonplace amongst gay male artists at the time, as we see with Mapplethorpe and Haring. Wojnarowicz's de-eroticizing distinguishes his work from his gay male contemporaries.

Photomontage

In using photomontage for the *Sex Series*, Wojnarowicz follows a historical trend of montage as a political medium. Dada artists were perhaps most famous for using montage for political ends, but a variety of artists throughout history have employed the technique politically, such as members of the Situationist International, Martha Rosler, and Robert Heinecken. I will consider the ways in which the *Sex Series* uses photomontage as a formal tool for political ends, as well as the ways his work diverges from historical trends of photomontage. In particular, I believe he not only uses photomontage for queer politics, but in fact queers photomontage.

In her essay "'See, We Are All Neurasthenics!' or, The Trauma of Dada Montage," Brigid Doherty elaborates the ways in which Dada montage functioned and by what means it affected the viewer. She opens the essay discussing a recent civil case in which a co-worker is sued for the psychological damage caused by a collection of collaged images. As she describes it, they "pasted the plaintiff's face and name to photographs of 'nude and partially nude female

bodies in sexually explicit poses”¹⁸ Viewing these images, as the suit claimed, caused traumatic damage to the plaintiff. This, according to Doherty, mirrors the effects of Dada montage. There are three parts to this similarity,

“First, there is the vivid description of the plaintiff’s traumatic psychophysical reaction to the photomontages, a reaction that I shall argue is strikingly similar to the reaction the Berlin dadaists attempted to effect in the beholders of their work. Second, there is the notion that a volatile mix of sexuality and politics plays a part in the trauma caused by photomontage...Third, and most important for my purposes in this essay, there is the suggestion that the capacity to induce trauma inheres specifically in the *form* of photomontage, where the beholder’s traumatic experience is, so to speak, already embodied in the composite image of a figure whose parts do not match.”¹⁹

It is worth considering all three of these in further detail. The first focuses on the reaction of the viewer. This reaction is simultaneously mental as well as physical, and traumatic in nature. The notion of a trauma reaction is ultimately central to Doherty’s framework, whereby montage functions specifically through immediate trauma, as opposed to a more slow, thoughtful comprehension. Second, Doherty specifies that this trauma is centered around sexuality and politics. There is no singular way of using sexuality for Doherty, but it seems to form a key component of montage, perhaps because it is often easier to shock a viewer with sexual imagery. Last, Doherty argues that the form of montage duplicates and mirrors the trauma of the viewer. This is particularly clear with Dadaist work, where images were often bizarre composite bodies. These composite bodies represent and/or trigger physical and mental distress of the viewer. Doherty’s argument centers around the notion of trauma, both trauma of the viewer and trauma in the image. This trauma is represented through the body. Describing a work by George Grosz, she says, “Traumatic shock in *Monteur John Heartfield* is embodied in the overall

¹⁸ Brigid Doherty, “‘See: ‘We Are All Neurasthenics!’ Or, the Trauma of Dada Montage,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (October 1, 1997): 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 84.

pose, as well as in the body divided against itself—regressed, disorganized, and sexually transformed.”²⁰ The bodily trauma of the figure portrayed is doubled by the trauma experienced by the viewer. The montage is both shocking to the viewer, inducing trauma, as well as representative of the trauma they are feeling. Central to this experience in the viewer is the shocking quality. The viewer is not slowly unnerved by the montage, but quickly and viscerally traumatized.

In his essay “Allegorical Procedures,” Benjamin Buchloh describes the way in which montage has been used to critique commodity culture specifically. When an object is turned into a commodity, it is stripped of all deeper meaning, leaving only the superficial image of the object itself.²¹ Marx describes this extensively, arguing that this movement of object to commodity leads to “commodity fetishism,” where consumers do not desire to use an object, but merely to possess it in name. We do not buy things because we need them, but rather because we are enticed by the concept of owning these goods. Buchloh argues that a key feature of montage is to mimic this process. The artist takes objects, often images, which have already been commodified, and devalues them a second time by creating a montage with them. This second devaluing is far more transparent, allowing the viewer to see the process of devaluing which was masked and hidden when the object was initially commodified. In doing so, the artist draws attention to the ways in which commodity culture encourages commodity fetishism.²² Montage, according to Buchloh, functions by allegory, duplicating processes which already exist in the world.

²⁰ Doherty, 114.

²¹ Buchloh makes use of the idea of sign, from Ferdinand de Saussure, to make his point, claiming that when a sign becomes a commodity it becomes pure signifier, with no underlying signified. Benjamin Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (1982).

²² Buchloh, 44.

Both of these prominent theories of montage have bearing on the *Sex Series*. Both center around the political potential of montage. Doherty focuses on the traumatic collision of bodies while Buchloh is more interested in montage as allegory. These two analyses focus on a fundamentally different reaction on the part of the viewer. For Doherty, the reaction is immediate and visceral. It is not an intellectual process but a physical one (including unconscious mental processes). In contrast, Buchloh focuses on the slow contemplation of montage, requiring time to assimilate image and meaning. How do these relate to the *Sex Series*? I believe the series takes up both concepts in some ways, while simultaneously disavowing elements of both.

To look at the process of trauma in the *Sex Series* then is to ask if there is anything shocking about the series. No doubt the inclusion of pornographic images could appear shocking to the viewer. But in this way the image does not double the trauma of the viewer. Wojnarowicz never combines bodies to create a traumatic figure. Interestingly though, he does incorporate trauma into the series elsewhere: in his portrayals of police brutality. In both the train work and bridge work containing text, Wojnarowicz includes images of police. Additionally, the train work includes insets discussing police violence, especially against queer people. This trauma, of police brutality, looks very dissimilar to the trauma of Dada art. The trauma is not expressed through a combining of images, but in fact through the cropping of images. All the police images, as well as the text discussing anti-gay violence, have been cropped. This creates a kind of disorientation. It is difficult to get a firm grasp on what is happening in the images and text. This disorientation mirrors feelings of experiencing violence and trauma that Wojnarowicz is describing and evoking. The images do not shock the viewer, rather failing to come together into an easily understood image that unnerves and disturbs the viewer. Wojnarowicz' use of montage follows Doherty's account by, doubling the experience of the viewer with the visual

representation of trauma, but moves away from shock toward disorientation. This accounts for the far more pervasive, lurking quality of the trauma Wojnarowicz is focused on. This trauma is founded on identity-based violence.

Unlike Doherty, Buchloh's analysis of montage requires contemplation. It is the allegorical movement of images and meaning which creates the critical nature of montage. Wojnarowicz is clearly not concerned with commodity culture. But is the series allegorical in other ways? Wojnarowicz often describes, in text, the ways in which various groups are ignored in discussions of AIDS. They seem to disappear in mainstream media, as if only rich white straight people exist. In many ways, the insets mirror this disappearing. They show queer bodies that cannot be fully grasped. And, as I argued these queer bodies can easily shift in to straight bodies given certain viewers. This all mirrors the disappearing of queer bodies, and other oppressed people as well, in media discussions of AIDS. Wojnarowicz is not so concerned with the depletion of meaning from objects, but more so the way in which bodies are depleted of value by the dominant culture.

Wojnarowicz's queering of montage does not mean simply that he reuses old strategies of montage to address issues in the lives of queer people. Rather, he executes a more fundamental shift in the form of montage. The *Sex Series* uses montage in a way that seems initially bizarre. Every image is separate. They are not cut together, but rather placed next to each other, sometimes overlapping, to create a collection of images. It is this multiplicity which is queer. Historically, in particular in Dada, montages came together into a single image. Wojnarowicz denies this singularity, creating a complex web of interconnected images. In some ways this resembles associative montage, where multiple separate images are placed next to each other to evoke a meaning (such as in the work of Sergei Eisenstein). But associative montage still settles

into a single meaning. In contrast, the *Sex Series* creates a multiplicity of meanings.

Wojnarowicz's different approach is particularly easy to see through a comparison to Hannah Höch. Höch often addressed issues of identity in her works. For example, in her work *Strange Beauty* (1929), she places a shrunken head on the body of a female nude.²³ The image acts as a critique of media representations of women at the time. As Maud Lavin says, "By rendering beauty strange...Höch revealed the representation of beauty as a cultural formula rather than a natural given."²⁴ Höch's singular image creates a singular critique. Where it critiques womanhood, it does not question race, class, etc. In contrast, the multiplicity of Wojnarowicz's montages allow for multiple dimensions of critique, unsettling identity along various dimensions. As I have discussed, he simultaneously notes the false representations of gay men in the media, while also addressing the ignoring of homeless people when addressing AIDS. The *Sex Series* encourages moving constantly between various points of critique, even critiquing itself at times.

Contingency

Perhaps the most defining feature of the *Sex Series* is the way in which it never settles into a single meaning. As I have discussed with the use of photomontage, the *Sex Series* does not create a single image which it gives to the viewer but rather a collection of images to be connected by the viewer. This is particularly pertinent to the way the series comments on identity. Not only does it critique along multiple dimensions of identity, but duplicates the constant movement between essentialism and anti-essentialism in all expressions of identity. The series moves quickly between structuring a stable identity and critiquing that very identity, breaking it apart. Situated politically, this movement again recalls Foucault, who stated that "one

²³ Maud Lavin and Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 166.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society- that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds.”²⁵ Stabilities are cut up only to be put together in new ways. The emphasis rests neither on a single meaning nor a pure instability, but tenuous stabilities which shift as necessary. All meaning in the *Sex Series* is well-defined yet contingent.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 96.

Conclusion

Is identity a choice?

Identity may be something that we do, but that does not mean that doing it is easy. For minoritarian subjects in particular, the options with regards to identity are frequently oppressive in some way. Subjects are presented the option of taking up identities that are given to them or rebelling against these identities. Assuming a minority identity though exposes one to oppressive forces (e.g. if a gay person chooses to live openly gay they may experience anti-gay violence). But to rebel against imposed identities is no safer (e.g. a cis woman who dresses in a masculine way is punished for not conforming to notions of femininity). As Marilyn Frye put it, “One can only choose to risk one’s preferred form and rate of annihilation.”¹ But as I have explored, just as there is no choice which escapes power and oppression, there is potential for resistance both in assuming an imposed identity as well as rebelling against identities. Even more so, a combination of the two, as Muñoz advocates, has great potential for resisting oppression. While I have called identity something we do, I do not mean to imply that there is a great wealth of choice when it comes to identity. Instead, identity is ultimately something we have to negotiate. It cannot be escaped, but there is choice in how we respond to it. This response does not need to be the same all the time, and different circumstances will call for different strategies. Where sometimes critique is important, other times an affirming of identity is for more vital for survival. Ultimately, the *Sex Series*, and my reading of it, demonstrate the possibility of using multiples strategies for dealing with identity.

Essentializing and Anti-Essentializing

¹ Marilyn Frye, *Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, N.Y: Crossing Press, 1983), 3.

The tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism is central to the *Sex Series*. This is particularly when one considers essentialism and anti-essentialism as elements of intersectionality. Intersectionality demonstrates the ways in which essentialism and anti-essentialism are not necessarily a state of being but a theoretical motion. As a text solidifies certain identities it is essentializing, just as it anti-essentializes other identities by complicating their relationship to power. The *Sex Series* clearly uses identities, such as when discussing identity groups which have limited access to AIDS treatment. But at the same time, it is also complicating identities, in so far as this discussion of AIDS points to the ways in which the media and often even activists would focus exclusively on white gay men as the only victims of the epidemic.

Assemblage and the Rhizome

Ultimately, to understand the way the *Sex Series* functions, I would like to return to the idea of assemblage which Puar brings up and the connected notion of the rhizome, both originally from Deleuze and Guattari's book *A Thousand Plateaus*.² The rhizome is the organizational structure upon which assemblage is based. Deleuze and Guattari propose the rhizome as an alternative to the tree as a way of structuring knowledge. Where a tree is hierarchical, with categories and subcategories, a rhizome is completely horizontal. It is composed of individual nodes connected in a complex network. Each node is connected to a variety of others, such that if any connection were to be severed the rhizome would maintain relatively unaffected. The uses of identity in the *Sex Series* are structured like a rhizome. Each individual use of identity is a node, and they are connected to other uses through affinity and critique. Deleuze and Guattari propose the rhizome as superior to the tree because it does not

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, 1 edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

prioritize certain knowledges over others. The same can be said of the *Sex Series* in that it does not prioritize certain approaches to identity over others. Rather it considers the benefits and dangers of various approaches.

Disidentification and Durationality

In looking at the *Sex Series*, the question of temporality and reception has figured as central. Rather than fixing the series temporally at the moment of its creation, I have focused on its reception by a contemporary audience as a way to access its radical potential. Jones proposes that looking across time is not only a way to reinvigorate works of art but is a queer way of looking at art. This is because of the way in which queerness tends to refuse a straightforward synchronic interpretation of history. She argues that instead queer is “diachronism, desire, temporality, distortion (anamorphosis), unrecognizability. Queer in this chapter (the queer of queer feminist durationality) becomes the potential of bodies, images, texts, performances in the visual field to unsettle by opening out the durationality of our desiring relationship to particular aspects of the world.”³ Queerness, by this formulation, unsettles the separation between past, present, and future, pointing to the ways they overlap and influence each other. Muñoz elaborates this connection between present and future, arguing that we can glimpse the future in the present.⁴ Jones qualifies this “impossibility of a subject or a meaning staying still,” saying that while queerness is about change, it also necessarily refers back to the queer body. In this way it shuttles between a synchronic and diachronic analysis. It is this very mixing which I have taken up in my own analysis of the *Sex Series*. In many ways, synchronic and diachronic are analogous to essentialism and anti-essentialism. A synchronic analysis of history and identity

³ Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, 1 edition (Abingdon, Oxon England ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 171.

⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

fixes it, creates a stable identification. In contrast, diachronic analysis considers the ways identities shift over time, and the ways they will continue to shift. While my analysis of the series and its treatment of identities has embodied both synchrony and diachrony, I have also taken these as guiding my reading the series in relation to my own experiences. Looking at my own reception of the series in the present moment is diachronic in so far as I bridge the moment of the series' inception as well as the moment of my viewing it, bringing together past and present. And yet, it is also synchronic, as my viewing of the series, a collection of objects which still exists and I observed in person, takes place at a specific moment.

While I make use of a great deal of Jones' framework, I would also like to complicate her argument. I find she comes down firmly on the side of anti-essentialism. She claims that "times have changed and the binary terms of a discrete model of sexual difference or gender no longer have clear explanatory value...It is a matter of extreme urgency that we complicate these binaries, which are still often entrenched in cultural discourses and institutions in spite of the shifts outlined here."⁵ This clearly goes against the argument Cathy Cohen makes, that there is potential value in discrete identities. Additionally, Jones fails to consider a multiplicity of social spheres in which these "cultural discourses and institutions" exist. Perhaps one of the most valuable insights to be gleaned from the *Sex Series* is that an argument may only be valuable, relevant, and even accurate for a certain audience and social sphere. Within the academic sphere, in particular contemporary art, it is easy to see discrete identifications as nothing but dangerous. But outside the ivory tower, as Cohen and Johnson discuss, sometimes identities are necessary for survival. The *Sex Series* speaks to multiple spheres at once in its simultaneous focus on both essentializing and anti-essentializing strategies.

⁵ Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 172-4.

Is it Art History

In enacting a reading of the *Sex Series* which comes out of my own, contemporary encounter with the series, I have found several questions regarding the nature of art history as a discipline to come up. Specifically, the discipline, as the name would indicate, tends to focus on the historical location of a work or collection of works. In contrast, I have devoted very little analysis to the historical moment of the *Sex Series*. As I have just discussed, much of my analysis is focused on the series in the contemporary moment, how it speaks to contemporary audiences. This indicates a potential shift in art history which I believe several theorists such as Jones have already begun to call for. In its pure focus on history, art history can often turn a blind eye to the effects of a work on the modern day. In doing so we risk propagating oppressive forces and narratives, ignoring minoritarian subjects who have been excluded from the historical canon. This does not necessarily mean that we should abandon history altogether, but rather we must pay attention to the way in which past, present, and future are interlinked. In particular, it is important to consider the ways in which a present day audience will create meaning within a work of art which was impossible at the moment of its creation. Art history must not only consider the way art was received in its time, but the way it is reclaimed today.

Appendix



Figure 1. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* (for Marion Scemama), 1988-9.

Gelatin-silver print, 20x24 in.

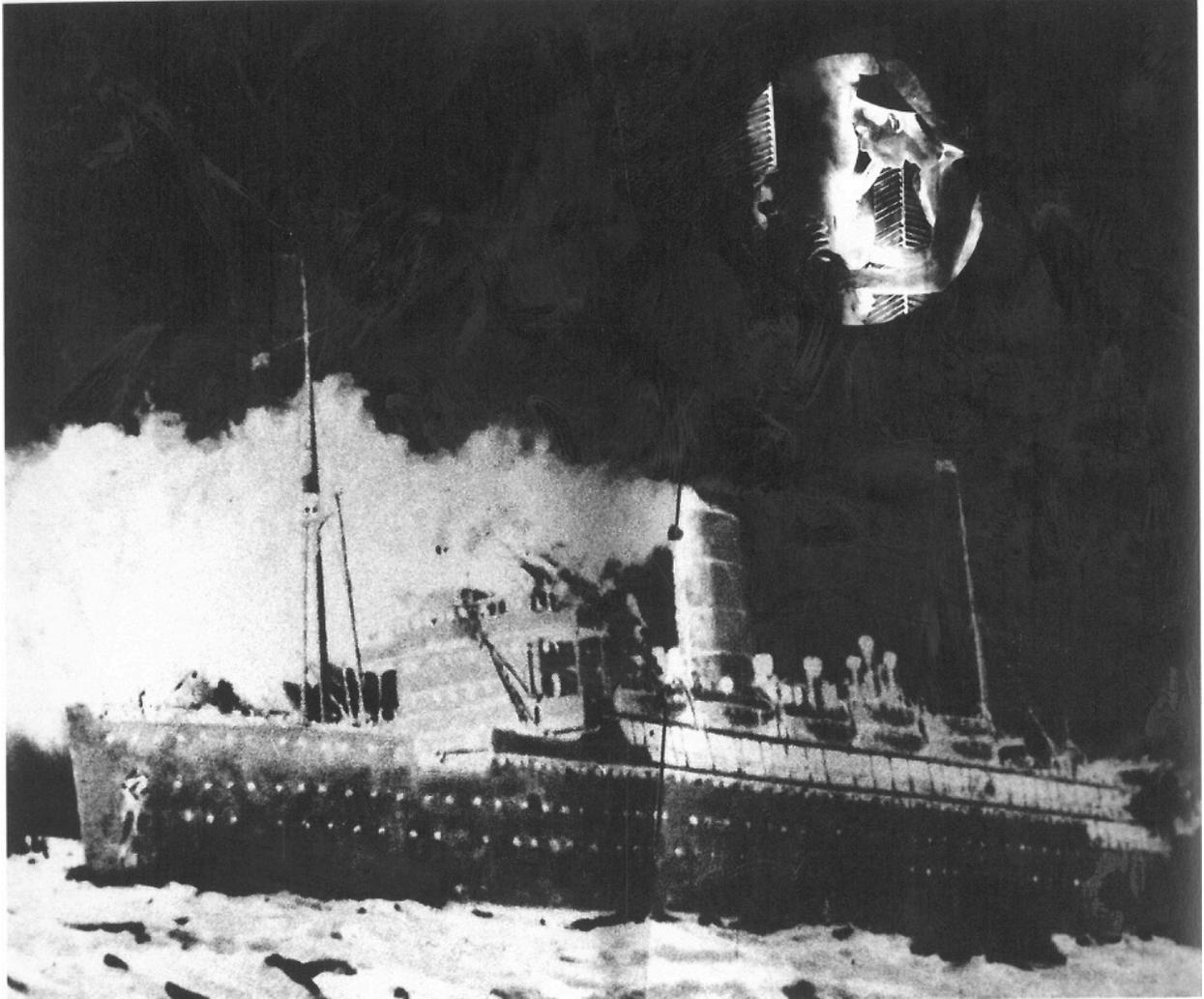


Figure 2. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* (for Marion Scemama), 1988-9.
Gelatin-silver print, 20x24 in.



Figure 3. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* (for Marion Scemama), 1988-9.

Gelatin-silver print, 20x24 in.

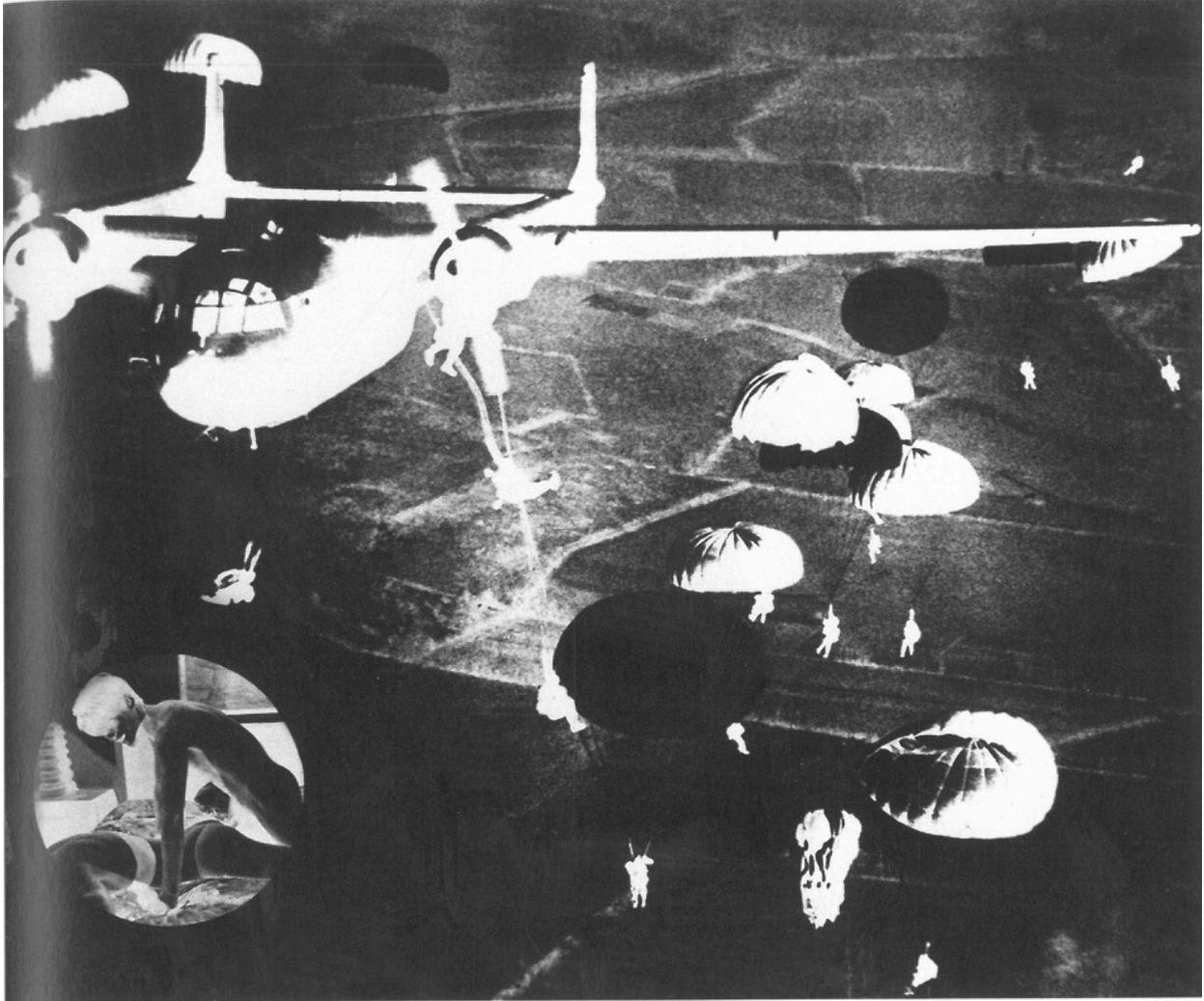


Figure 4. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* (for Marion Scemama), 1988-9.

Gelatin-silver print, 20x24 in.

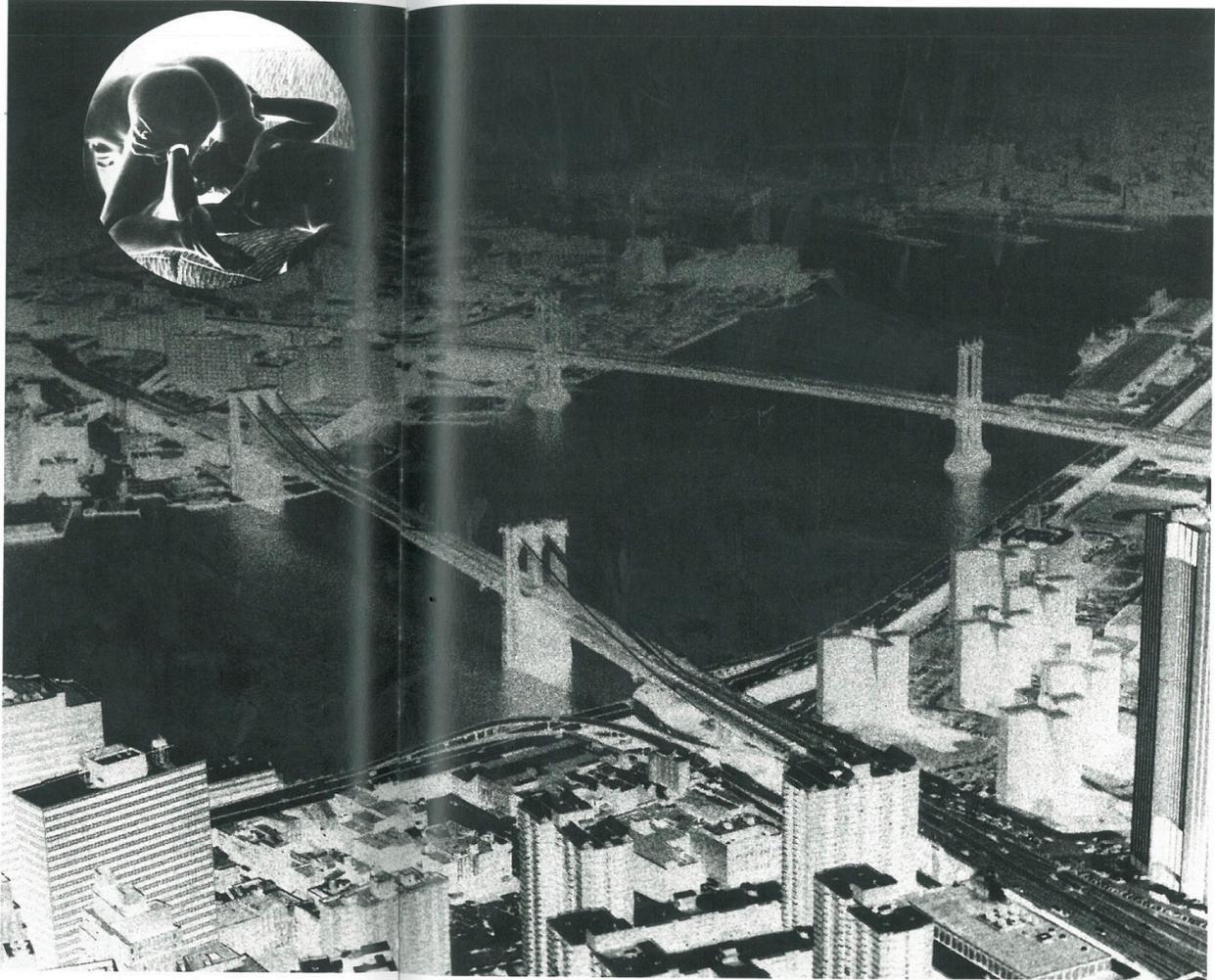


Figure 5. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* (for Marion Scemama), 1988-9.

Gelatin-silver print, 20x24 in.

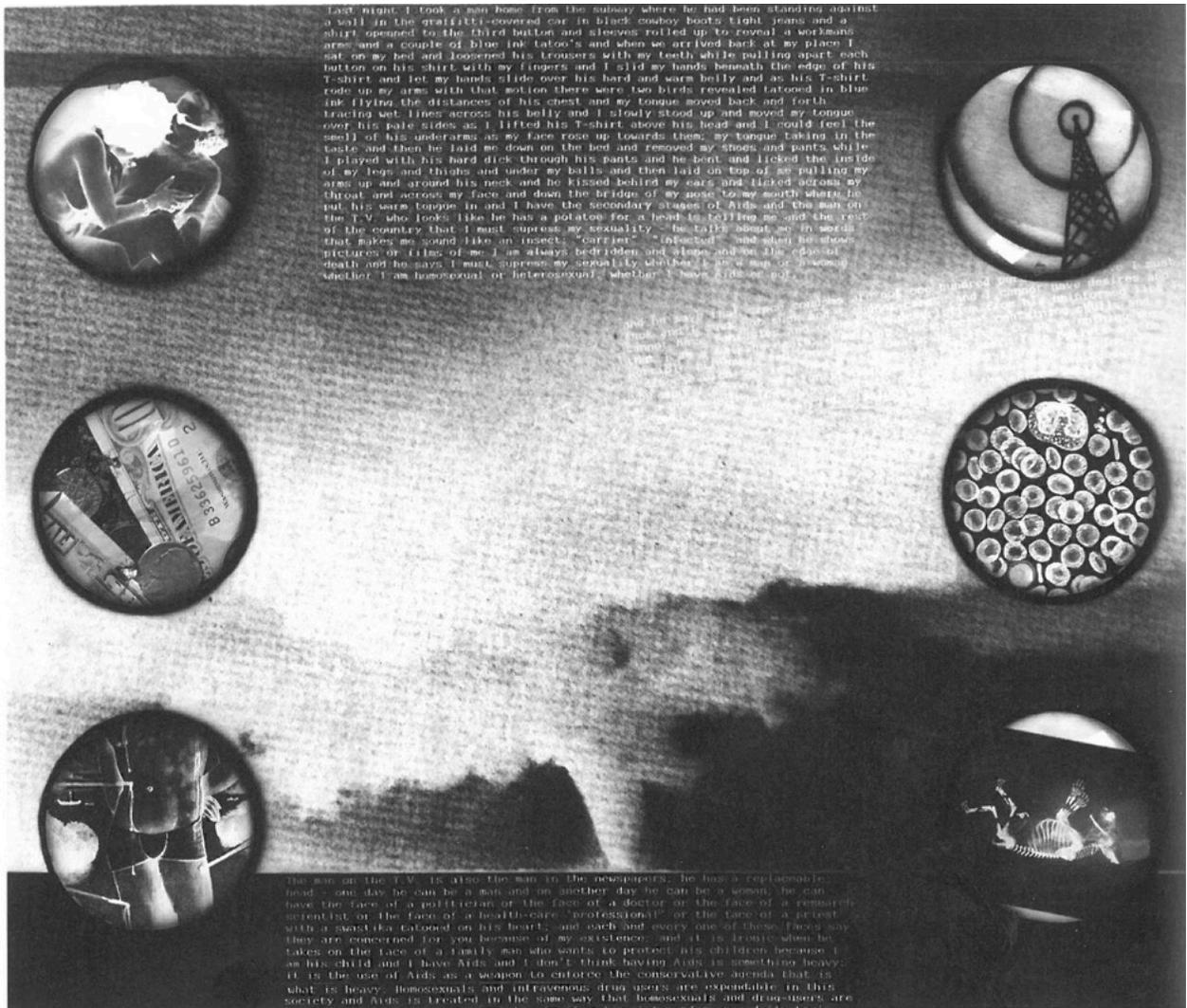


Figure 6. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* (for Marion Scemama), 1988-9.

Gelatin-silver print, 20x24 in.

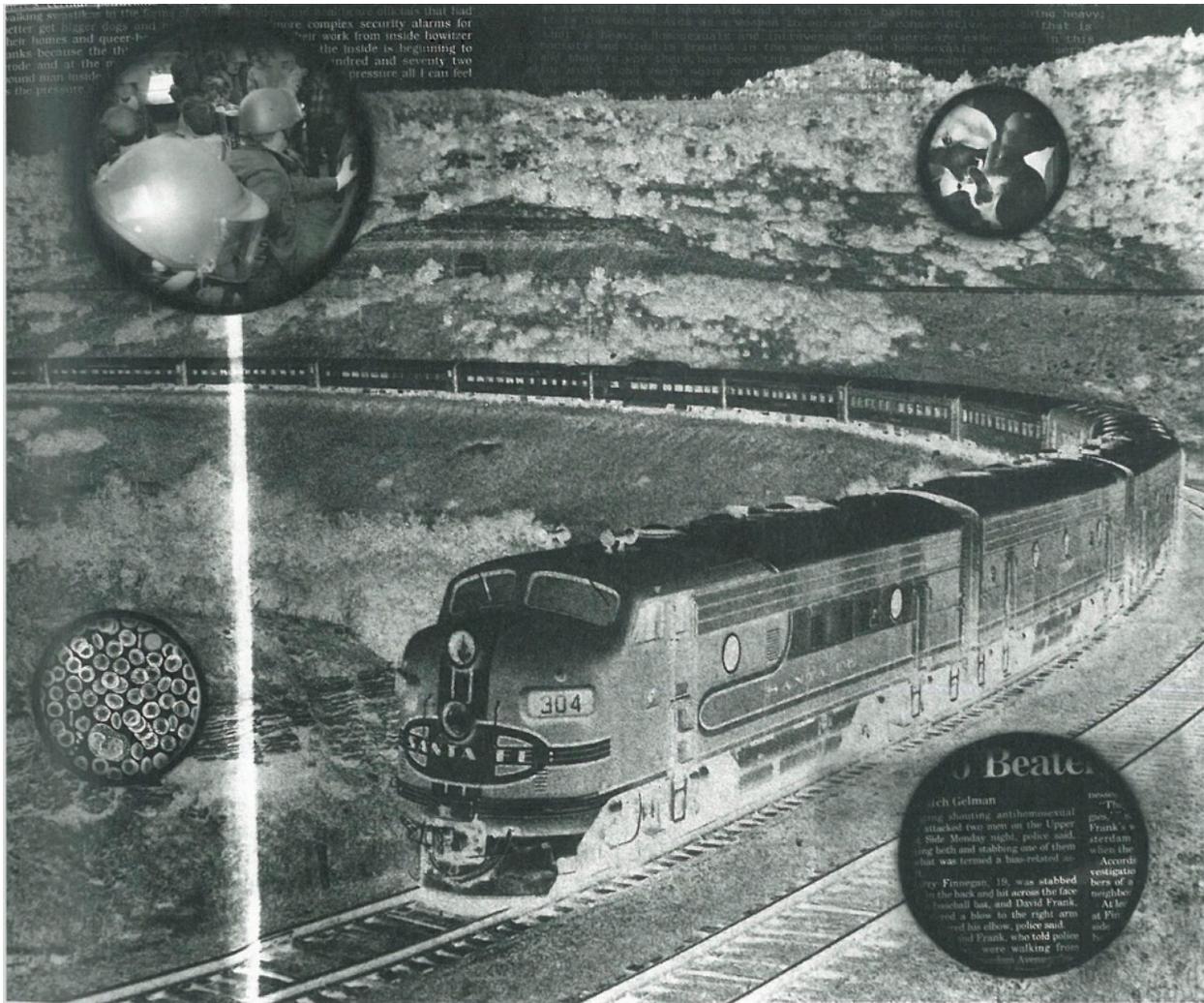


Figure 7. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* (for Marion Scemama), 1988-9. Gelatin-silver print, 20x24 in.

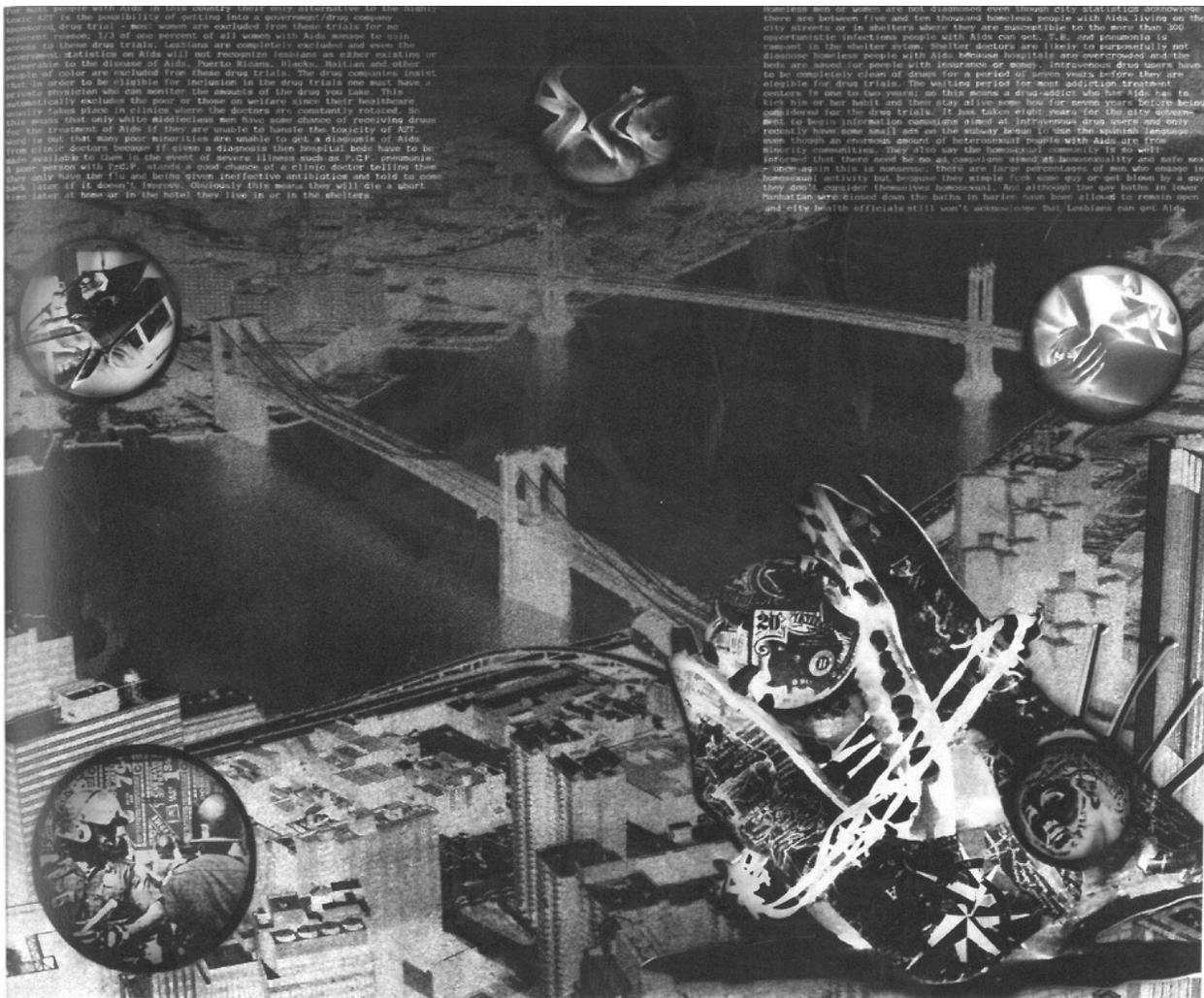


Figure 8. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* (for Marion Scemama), 1988-9.

Gelatin-silver print, 20x24 in.



Figure 9. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Dennis*, 1978.



Figure 10. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Tit Profile*, 1980.

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