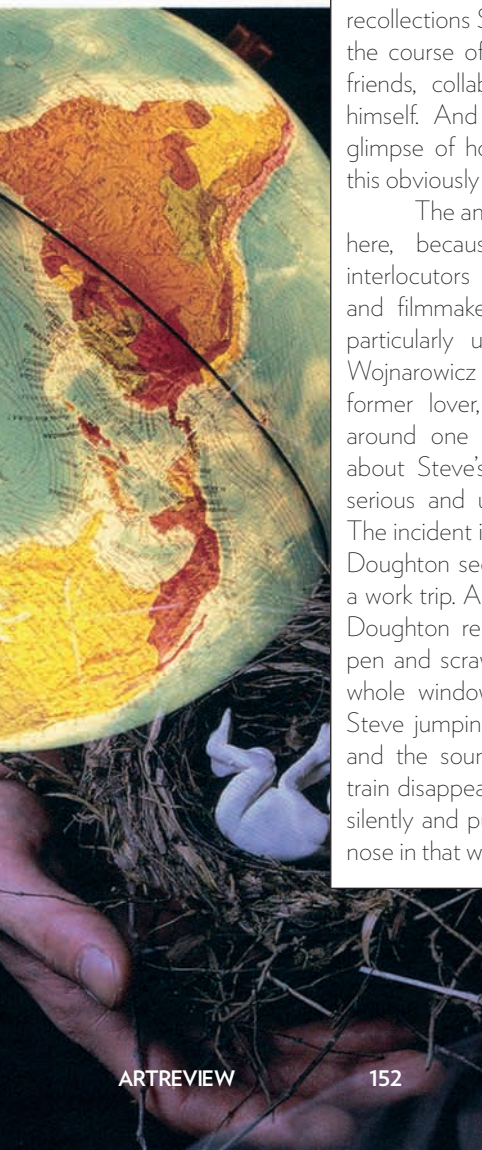


WOJNA

Definitive history of the lower east

Sylvère Lotringer, Ed



A Definitive History brushes the genre, or the discipline, of biography against the grain. Even the book's title signals its challenge to the subjective datum of 'a life', normally a requirement for a study purporting to deal with a biographical object. Here, countercultural artist, writer, poet and muse David Wojnarowicz becomes mapped onto a place, New York's Lower East Side, whose tight streets and tenement buildings played host to generations of immigrants, outcasts, beats and artists, all looking for a place in which to work, live, and love in relative peace, away from an intolerant society they nevertheless enriched. There is also the troublesome inclusion of that 'or' in the title, which mocks the claim that what follows is anything close to 'definitive'.

Instead, this new title gathers together what must be the first words of a narrative that has yet to be written, that of the artistic and cultural nexus that was Manhattan's East Village and Lower East Side from the late 1970s until the early 90s, and of one man's singular sensibility: Wojnarowicz – 'the Wojé', as James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook's *Ground Zero* comic depicts him – serves at once as central figure and foil in the many recollections Sylvère Lotringer has gathered over the course of 13 years. The voices are of close friends, collaborators, lovers and Wojnarowicz himself. And through them we are offered a glimpse of how deeply generous and affecting this obviously wounded character was.

The ambivalence of 'affecting' is important here, because the accounts of Lotringer's interlocutors are not always flattering. Artist and filmmaker Steve Doughton recounts one particularly ugly bout of behaviour that has Wojnarowicz playfully victimising his friend and former lover, Steve Brown, by following him around one day and writing solicitous graffiti about Steve's homosexuality, much to Brown's serious and ultimately quite emotional dismay. The incident is capped off with Wojnarowicz and Doughton seeing Brown off at Penn Station on a work trip. As the train pulled out of the station, Doughton remembers, 'David whipped out his pen and scrawled "FAG" in big letters over the whole window... I'll never forget the image of Steve jumping up and down in his little room... and the sound of his muffled screams, as the train disappeared... David stooped over laughing silently and pushing his glasses back up onto his nose in that way he always did.'

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ: A DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF FIVE OR SIX YEARS ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE

Interviews by Sylvère Lotringer, Edited by Giancarlo Ambrosino, Semiotext(e), £16.95/\$24.95 (hardback)

Such cruelty is difficult to come by, but as David West, another artist to emerge from the East Village scene, noted of Wojnarowicz, 'I think that profoundly he was full of violence.' Violence, that is, as the outward expression of a deep rage, which Wojnarowicz put to work in his art and writing, and ultimately in the service of free expression and political activism, both when the National Endowment for the Arts came under fire and as the government sat back and watched AIDS ravage the gay community.

This, sadly, is the cultural heritage of the 1980s, as are neo-expressionism and postmodernism, which, as Jennifer Doyle's closing essay rightly demonstrates, have largely kept critical assessments of Wojnarowicz's work at bay. Too bad we can't count that essay as first in such a much-needed reassessment. Though Doyle does go so far as to position Wojnarowicz within a long and largely literary tradition of activist cultural production, she badly misrepresents what is disparagingly called the 'disciplining machineries of art historical and critical writing'. (Apparently 'literary criticism', which Doyle seems to think is better suited to the critical engagement with Wojnarowicz's work, has no such 'disciplining' tendencies.) A book that is sure to become a staple of any future reappraisals of Wojnarowicz, the East Village scene and the 1980s more generally demands a far more thoughtful, critically astute and agenda-free kind of writing to round out its otherwise unsentimental generosity.

Jonathan T.D. Neil