For Glenn Wharton at Fales Library, NYU

David Kiehl (DK) Interview, August 10, 2016

With Diana Kamin (Di) and Marvin Taylor (MT)

Di: It's August 10th, 2016. This is Diana Kamin and Marvin Taylor interviewing David Kiehl at Fales Library. So, David, you had talked about the first stencil you remember seeing being the Burning House. One of my first questions was going to be, how did you first learn about Wojnarowicz's work?

DK: I just knew him. I was living in Tribeca in '79 to '81, and I wasn't sure who it was. I just knew there was this person who was doing burning houses and falling men and other things on the sidewalk. And that's, I never put two and two together until the auction in 2001.

Di: Oh, really?

DK: But it was definitely – I didn't really know his name, but he was the person doing the sidewalks just like Jenny Holzer's posters were on the side of buildings, his were on the sidewalk. And they were just these burning houses, falling men type thing.

Di: And you've been the Curator of Prints at the Whitney Museum since 1993. I was wondering if you could speak to – before we get into the retrospective. Obviously, you're also the curator of the retrospective, but before we get into that, if you could speak to his print practice, specifically, what kind of different printing techniques did he work with, what printers did he work with, and how is his approach to prints different than other artists at that time?

DK: I think a lot of it is just commercial work, commercial printing, because the first formal edition, I think, was the one done with Kiki Smith. And I am not sure, David sort of knew how to get money for doing it. Kiki knew how to do screen printing. And I'm almost sure that they got the money, I think, from Public Art Fund? I think; I'm not sure. But they probably made that series of rope--which Fales has the screens for the ropes--and the Rorschach tests on top. And they had previously photostatted or had gone to the copy shop and had the sheets taken out at the Wardline Pier, the drawings by the psych patients, and laid those out for the papers. So that they had the money to do nice paper. I think they must have done it pretty much home-made jobs. I think that's most of what David's work was, home-made. I think you only get him doing formal presses when he went out to Illinois with the set of two diptychs on the Four Elements and the little brain etching. The brain etching, I think, was just sort of a few were run off and that was it. And the Act Up is the other formal work. Everything else is pretty much home-made, going to the copy shops. *One Day This Kid* was done at, was it Giant Photo? Or Photocopy in Union Square? I think that's probably where it was done. They were pretty much done home-mades.

Di: So that said, you've managed to bring in work to the Whitney's collection, through the Prints Committee, that weren't necessarily formal editions. Is that correct?

DK: Yes. I mean, the whole thing starts in 2001. In August, I opened up a – I had on my wish list, I had always had One Day This Kid, because I felt that was the one – we had Sex Series, we had Bandaged Hands. I thought the one thing we really needed was One Day This Kid, if you're talking about the '80s. And so I was always sort of on the lookout for that, but had no way to find out how I could get one. So I was watching auction catalogues. And I opened up a junky catalogue from Christie's, sort of the end of the bin sales. And I'm going through it, and I say, 'Wait; that's the guy who painted on the sidewalks.' Or stenciled on the sidewalks. And it's in the show. It's the map of the United States with the falling man and the radiation. And it's probably one of the best impressions of that set, doing that composition, that I know of. So I had to figure out how to get it, because I was not going to be in town for that auction, because I was supposed to be in Estonia. And I had to figure out, how do we get someone to buy it so that I could then get – they could act as our agent so they could bring it to the Print Committee. Because stencils are a print-making process. I guess technically you would say they're drawing, but I think of them as a print-making process. That's the basis of screen printing and everything else. And I finally found out that the estate was at PPOW. So they agreed to act as our agent. The auction was 13th of September, 2001. It didn't happen. I didn't even get to Estonia. I was supposed to leave on the 11th of September. But it was the next month, we secured it at a very low price, and that acquisition started – Steve and Walter Sudol gave us our first painting at that time, one of the first of the Red Monkeys. In fact, there is a photograph that David took that Marion had a small version of, of a woman holding the Red Monkey, from that image. That started, I said, 'Okay, we have the one. What else is there? If you have the estate, what else is there?' So I started combing through the literature. I had them go through the estate two or three times, go through everything. What they called going through, it's not as thorough as I would have gone through. But they turned up a large body of work, and anything – I was throwing in stencils, anything that I could vaguely put into this body of work. Then I had to figure, okay, the Print Committee needs to step in; how do I do it? I talked to the chair of my committee. She agreed we should really go ahead. And I knew that I wanted to make it a two – because it was a lot of money for the Print Committee. I wanted them to vote once and then vote again at a second meeting, so that they had time to think. And in between, we set up an event at PPOW one evening. We got Kiki Smith to come in. "Oh, I don't know if I can talk about -- I don't have much to say"—then for an hour and a half, a monologue [laughter] on David. By the end of it, even the men in the group were in tears. So I knew we were on our way. And we acquired at that time about thirty things. I don't think we could ever do that again, because all of a sudden, people got interested in – I think growing out of the whole thing of the literature movement, David as a writer, then they started to look for the things by David. So I don't think we could ever have done that again. It was a one-shot deal. But I still had them, I said, "Are you sure this is everything? What about this image here?" the little brain etching that's illustrated in tons of things. "Oh no, we never saw that." Two years later, "Oh, we found this. Do you know what this is?" "That's what I've been asking you about." [laughter] Other things had turned up,

so we kept adding to the, just kept buying the work. And I still wish I could have made a case to get Tuna. That's my favorite of the supermarket posters. And it's about that time I said, okay, and at the urging of Steve and Walt, saying, David really needs a serious show; David needs a serious show. So I started proposing these shows, and they were basically turned down and turned down, until finally, in like, 2013 or so, they said, okay, we'll go ahead and do it. And finally we got the show. And it's one of the reasons I wanted to do this show was that I kept looking at the two catalogues. Tongues of Flame is David at his angriest. He is in very bad health, he has just gone through all of these lawsuits and things, dealing with the NEA and the whole thing with the Artists Space show. So he is very angry, and that comes through in the show; though there's calm in the show, there's sort of a slant that way. And then the New Museum show seemed to be more of the – it's unfair for me to say it this way, but I thought it was a little more on the incidental side. I don't want to say sex, sex, sex, but it's the seamier side of the East Village. And the more I kept looking at David and thinking about the work and seeing images of the work, I kept saying, David is one of these important voices. And when I did the I, You, We on the '80s up at the Breuer building, from the collection, part of that was inspired by David. Because there were two focus rooms, one was AIDS and one was Nan Goldin. And as I started thinking about it and looking at it, Nan and David are two of the most important voices of the '80s. There's other great artists going on: Gober, Kiki Smith, or whatever. There are other great artists working. But the people who seem to really capture that funny moment of the '80s, were David and Nan. And they have now, I call it "rehabilitated" Mapplethorpe. Everyone sees Keith Haring, party, party, party, Basquiat. David is hard. David I don't think will ever be put back – people have a hard time with him because yes, there are some very strong pictures. I think the artwork is very strong. But the controversy was really not about the pictures. The controversy was about his texts. And that is something that you can't whitewash. You can whitewash Mapplethorpe and just say, "Oh, aren't they just gorgeous formalisms!" You can't whitewash someone who has written, and his writing is so strong. And that is why he deserves a show where you've seen the work in a very positive formal way where the texts and the images are really seen as coming out of the same brain. And what a brain. And especially an artist, someone who is basically a self-educated person. And so that was my goal for the show, to really – I think people expected me to do a pier show. And the more I got into thinking about it, the piers are only an incident. And when you read David, he's talking about, the piers were his escape. He would go there to write. When everyone else started invading his pier, he moved to another pier, because it was his escape. Being in New York, it was the closest he could get out to no urban. And I really wanted David to be seen as someone who is very important, not the sort of incidental, oh, that's the last hide-and-seek incident. That is taking David out of context. You have to look at David in context and see the whole David. And so I'm hoping that that's what this show does. I think when Breslin and I started stalking about the catalogue, I said I really want it to go beyond the sort of flash. I wanted it to be sort of serious. I said, as far as I was concerned, the texts should all be different, handled differently, taking different focuses, but when you take them together you start to see a better image of David. And I think that is what he needs. And I have to also say thank you to Tom Rauffenbart who kept saying, "David was a goofball." And you realize, as you go through it, that that whole side of David has not – people

don't know that, and it's under there the whole time, there is that goofball side of him. He was a big kid. And I'm hoping that that's what this show has done, or will do when we get it up. I just can't wait to see it. I've been living it now, it seems like, well, I had a whole year where I couldn't do much except try to get off of crutches, so I was not as focused as I should have been. But I now feel like I have – I don't think I've read C. Carr's biography from page one to page end, but I think I've read most of it multiple times, not spot checking, but just diving in in bits. David has just become – in a funny way, I need to let him go a little bit. [laughter]

[16:25]

Di: That actually ran through the next couple of questions I had, but it brings me to, and I guess you were starting to discuss this, how did the decision, the way you're setting this show against the previous retrospectives, how did it affect decisions for the checklist?

DK: I know that before I fell and had the long hospital stay, I had gone through all, in fact, I have a list, if we were thinking about showing this, was it shown in this one? Was it actually in the show? Was it in just illustrations? How did it fall? There is quite a bit of duplication, I would think. You can't get away from it; there are only fifteen years. The one area that I wish we could have done more, but in a funny way it's a transitional period, is '82 to '84, where the work is a little – we have it in there with the early sort of violence against gay people in the Village, in the jails. But just a little bit. That's a whole period that we – I was getting limited in space, and you can only do so much. So I had to make a choice. But I think there's a number of things that no one has seen in the real flesh, and I think you have – '99 is a long time ago. Looking at younger artists today, they think they've invented the wheel? No; David's under there; they just don't know it. And I think that's one of the reasons we asked Hanya to write her piece for us, as a writer who, in *A Little Life*, it channels David without – she had never read David, she had never looked at David, though the cover is a Peter Hujar photograph. And we asked her if she would be willing to do it, and she totally flipped out in doing it. I mean, she wrote a most magnificent piece about what David means, how he opens your eyes and what he means.

MT: It was clear in the Kiefer exhibition that's up at the New Museum right now, that the one artist who did the notebooks, the young Japanese artist, is so influenced by Wojnarowicz. In looking at them, it was uncanny.

Di: Yes; I went there. Have you seen that? You'll like that room. It's cut and pasted journals that do remind me of the way he would rearrange comics and paint over them, that kind of layering.

MT: Yes, absolutely.

Di: So, Wojnarowicz has frequently been discussed or framed as an artist for whom art and life were deeply entwined. How are you approaching biography in the exhibition? Are you including his personal life details within the space of the show? Within the space of the book?

DK: It's in the book. We asked, David did his own version of his biography for the *Tongues of Flame*, And it was definitely his looking at his life and, as Tom says, he never lied. However, he shifts the

truth around a little bit. [they laugh] He has something to say; he's trying to make a point, what he's been going through. So that is very focused in there. And Cynthia did this – no one can ever repeat what she did, and there was no reason for us to redo the biography. So what we asked Cynthia to do was, in the book, we have David's published version of his life, which stops in 1982, because that's when he considers himself an artist. That's the first sort of statement: I'm an artist. Which I thought was very interesting, that he stops it in '82, where the work in the show first takes up. We had C. Carr, what she did was to – she's in the column on the other side. His column is in what we call the David font. Any time David's voice is being in the book, we use the David font, and then we have everybody-else's font. And so she is replying, expanding, elaborating, all the way through. And then after '82, sort of does a summation of it all. The other thing we've done is, the exhibition history for him is very quirky, what you can find either from galleries or in the books. And we basically, I spent like two weeks going through *East Village Eye* and looking for every reference that I could, to David, for an exhibition, because the Lower East Side, that whole period, there were a lot of pop-up shows. There were a lot of one-nighters or one-weekenders or whatever. And so I started collecting that, and then we had graduate students doing further. And I must say, a month ago, I still found some more. I was reading an obituary on Frank Wagner in Berlin, and I'm going through, and they're talking about his shows. And they talk about his interest in the Lower East Side and David Wojnarowicz; there was a whole list of shows, two of which were not on our exhibition list. They are now on the exhibition list because when I could get the documentation, David was in them. The same thing with the bibliography; we really pushed and pieced it. But it's to try to – my idea is that part of knowing David is to know seeing this mass of what these exhibitions were, because no one thinks – now when they think of Lower East Side, they're all trust fund kids in their condos, not the same thing as it was then. Maybe it was a little bit more like Bushwick, but Bushwick is also trust-funders. This was scrappy; this was a scrappy time. And I think that when you start taking all of the parts together you get a better idea of, you get a larger read of David. I don't think we want it to come out as a definitive statement on David, because David, again, as Tom said, when he was talking to you, he was talking to you. When he was talking to Marvin, he was talking to Marvin, but it was maybe a slightly different tinge on the story. When he was talking to Tom, he was talking about something else. So you can't do a definitive statement on him, you have to do this sort of triangulating the evidence. [they laugh] And I hope that's what's going to come across in the show. The show will be laid out somewhat in a chronology, starting with the early work, the Rimbauds. We're not going back to the early odd sketches and all that because that's almost like – they were David sketching in his writing, but not as formal artwork. Going from there to the stencils on various things, the show will be more than a chronology building up. After the Peter Hujar, the Peter Dreaming room, there is what I want to call – I'm hoping we can make it into what I call the long gallery at the Frick, the formal period that David really is being a historical painter. And I think that's something that people haven't focused on, is that in a way, he's in the grand tradition of the 16th and 17th centuries, 18th century, of the historical paintings. And it's not recording events, it's recording the four seasons, the four elements, the humours, treating things in somewhat of an allegorical way, of talking about man's damaging the natural

environment, all of these things that were part and parcel of treating it in a very, I consider it grand historical tradition. [26:18]

Di: Cynthia Carr refers to the 1987 show at Gracie Mansion as the history painting show. She puts quotes around it, and I had been wondering if that was her term or his term?

DK: I think that was probably – I don't know if it was his term. But they were history paintings, but those are the later ones, and it starts even earlier. So things like The Worker, the show that was at Anna Friebe, those are all history paintings. The Mexican show is all history paintings. Someone will probably say, why didn't you put in the Science work, the one that was in the '84 Biennial? First of all, the person who owns it is totally off the wall and crazy. [MT and Di laugh] And also, it's so big. We had to think about, if we're going to travel the show, and getting as much work in as we could, we couldn't have something – the other thing is, David didn't paint small. In the early work, a lot of it is 48x48, which is the size of Masonite that you get at the lumberyard. Or he would get for free from his friends who were working backstage in the theater district. Also the tarps came a certain way, and he was painting on tarps. So, he didn't have the money, but he did as much as he could. I think the museum thought all of this work is small and ittle bitty things. Unh-unh. 48 by 48 is a pretty good size. There weren't that many people working 48x48.

Di: Even supermarket posters are bigger than I thought, when I looked at the dimensions. Yeah, they're huge. I was just seeing the small image; I didn't realize how big they were.

DK: So that gallery is going to culminate in the four elements, Earth, Wind, Fire and Water. And I really want them in a gallery that these just are totally surrounded. I think when MoMA showed them the last time, they had them in a straight line. I want you to feel like you are in a special room in Versaille or in a palace of something where this is a special chamber and you are surrounded by the Four Elements as an allegorical sequence. Then go into the area that starts Peter; I'm now thinking of calling it Life and Death. Because you have Jane Dickson's painting of the large hand holding a fetus. It's also in his – he had a niece, I think, born – Pat had a niece. And also, Jane had her kid. So there are these -- that's life. It's also, right after that, first Peter is diagnosed, but then Tom was diagnosed, and David came later, being diagnosed. So, they're starting to really get the dealing with the idea of death. And then you have Peter dying, Peter dead. And then he goes forward again on the next phase, but he doesn't really incorporate photography into the work until after Peter dies. I think that was sort of a Peter thing. Peter was the mentor, father, brother, teacher, uncle, whatever. And then that, to me – and I'm hoping we can have all four Flowers, if we can -- just that the one that's in Munich is big, and I'm told we can't bring it here. But if the show travels only to Europe, then it would make sense to borrow it here. But that is sort of like the counterpoint to the Four Elements, are the Four Flowers, with some of his really vicious texts. I don't want to say "vicious" in a nasty way, but it's strong. And it's where the marvelous sequence – Cynthia talks about how he has a studio in the, I forget now, the kid who works for Barry who finds him a studio and his own student.

MT: Right. I don't remember his name

DK: And he talks about how David painted those. And I think they're absolutely – there's a show happening in one of the French museums about vicious flowers or something which, they want to borrow the one in Munich. And I don't think they get it. Because what's so marvelous to me about those works, and it's explained, is how he had the photographs that he had taken in the Botanical Gardens in Washington. So he had these really exotic, almost sexual, flowers. They remind me of the Kuniyoshi lilies that are painted in the bathrooms, women's bathrooms, in Radio City Music Hall. That sort of over-the-top, sexual art deco flowers. So you're in this room. He had projected them, he outlined them, and then he painted. But they're painting of a kind that David isn't normally – you don't associate with David; you think of him as being rough. So you have these fabulous flowers, and you look at them and they're like decadently gorgeous. As you get closer, you realize that all of those little inset panels are sewn in with thread, which are, he's been mining basically his photo archive, his old contact sheets, for appropriate images. So they're mounted on there. Now that he has Peter's darkroom, he can print what he wants. So they're mounted inside. So now you've gone through the first step; you've seen these exotic flowers. Next thing, as you get closer, you're starting to realize there's another story layering of these photographs; what are they telling you? And then, you get closest to it, and you see the text. And the texts just kick you in the balls. Because they are – in those four pictures, he is really, I think he's transcending almost any other painter I know at that time. They are really powerful pictures to me. And then after that comes, sort of sliding to the end. But I think people will come away – we're not going to close – the Head in the Dust is going to be in the last room, but it's not, like, the last picture we really want to let people end with is One Day This Kid. Which, that and the Bandaged Hands, which was worked on his last sort of of the three major big pictures that Gary Snyder was working with him on, was the last one to be done. It was never shown until after his death. And I am hoping that by the time people get through, as I had hoped in the AIDS room at I, You, We, I wanted people to be in tears. I really wanted people to be in tears, and there were a number of people in tears. That's why we put the Haring altar at the end, because it was a bit of resurrection. And I think David's, well, One Day This Kid was always the goal; I wanted that in the collection anyway. And it is a really affirmative statement, in a funny, way, after all of the negativity of some of those late texts. He's riled up. He's riled up in there, too, but it's a very calm, logical statement. And I want people to come away saying: You know, this guy really, it's gonna make me think. And that is, then, the goal all along. I may not be the world's most beautiful writer with quoting 55 different French philosophers, but my little essays in there are really ort of just pointing out things so that people have something to latch onto, and then see, oh, that's over here, the language that he uses. Because it is a visual language, as much as his verbal language is a verbal language. [35:55]

Di: Gosh. Thank you so much for the tour of the exhibition. We got the virtual tour. Particularly ending with that, thinking about the flower paintings then sort of operating on, because it's not just operating on a language of painting. It's operating on a language of photography and a language of text and the way he integrates those is unlike any artist.

DK: I don't know of any artist who has been able to really do that. Barbara Kruger to some degree, but not, I mean, that's coming out of advertising. This is really deep thinking, and also, it's program. To do those paintings he had to really have a sense of progression in a way that I think very few artists have ever thought. Because you are moving as you approach them, you are progressing through – he's setting up little stages for you, of growing awareness of what this is all about.

MT: When I think about Wojnarowicz's work what always strikes me is the sense of time that's always there in each work, because of what you're saying, there's also a sense of moving in time and moving in complexity as you get closer to the painting. But he's obsessed with time. It comes up in the writing everywhere, and I think it's in a lot of the work. Even when he would go to the photo booths and have the photos taken of himself again and again,

DK: Yes.

MT: I think it's about time, and he does it at intervals in his life, and pastes them into the journals. So there's some fixation. Well, and the use of clocks, clock faces.

DK: But clock faces often without hands.

MT: Yes. Right. Altering notions of time, in the way he alters the geography and maps.

DK: And then, I think Tommy's picture of *Something from Sleep III* where you have, it's a dream image, and Tom finally said, "David, just paint the damn thing." So his upstairs neighbor was a teacher -- it's all documented; I've quoted what Tom told me – a science teacher in public school, and he had antique microscopes. So David takes a photograph of this guy looking through the microscope. The other funny thing about that painting, it's totally painted. There's no collage on it. And when you look at the painting, you have this outline of a man obviously looking into the microscope which is painted. On the front part there's like a wall, and looking through him, and you see space. And what you realize is – but now that it's cleaned you can see the blue outline of his figure a little bit. It's Star Trek where they go through the thing when there's that point where they are here and then not here. There's at that point of zap. And that painting is all about that point of zap, that point of, where are you? And I don't know if David – I haven't looked at what he had in his library, but I'm really curious if he had some of this, was reading about that kind of theories about time and how what's out here is coming – in a funny way, it's a reverse, going through this way. And of going fast and going backwards, going forwards and backwards at the same time.

MT: And he talks about that in *Close to the Knives*.

DK: Yeah. It's a real -- to me that's a fabulous picture.

MT: Yes, it really is. I hadn't seen it in years, and when you said it, yeah, of course, I saw it in Tom's apartment; that's where I saw it. I knew I had seen it before but I hadn't seen it in a long time.

Di: Had it been shown before?

DK: It was shown in the 1989 show that has the Xeroxed catalogue. It was in there. It's called Tommy's Picture in parentheses. And I think that's the last time it's been seen. I don't know of many people even who went to see that show. So I think it's a new one for a lot of people.

Di: It's very contemplative.

DK: Oh, to me, it's just (sigh). You start working with David, as I'm sure Marvin knows, you start working with David and you can't leave him, really. He's always going to be there. He has a way of – he has something that's very sort of ur-human about him, in the grand German way of saying "ur".

MT: Yes, absolutely.

DK: He hits a chord that is in all of us; whatever you are, it's there. It's something that we share as being human. We may not think about it; we may think about a lot of other things. But he really hits a human quality.

Di: Well actually, I thought we could track back a little bit, too, into earlier in the career and sort of earlier moments in the show, as well. In your research process you had mentioned the East Village scene as, it's not something that exists now, and I forget if you used the word "messy" but it was more, um,

DK: Ad hoc.

Di: Ad hoc, yes, we'll use as hoc. And there was a lot of collaboration. So clearly, also at that time, the gallery scene looked and smelled and felt different than the beautiful new Whitney downtown. And I was wondering what you thought about the contrast in environment, if it was something that you felt you needed to consider, working with an artist like Wojnarowicz who is so associated with that period and that particular gallery scene? [42:53]

DK: I don't think we need to go to a lot of degree of making it look messy. I think the work, in a funny way, just in his materials and the way he works, gives that, more so than Basquiat would or Haring. There is something very sort of scrappy about his work, because he had no money. He was scrounging. Like those globes. In one of the editorial things back and forth, they said: Can we say Walgreens or is it Woolworths? And I said, well I know that Walgreens was definitely in the Midwest when I grew up at that time, but I'm not sure, but maybe we have to just say Woolworths. He could have gotten from a dollar store type thing. I had no evidence, but I talked about cheap, like those big dollar bills and twenty-dollar bills and thousand-dollar play money. He probably had sheets that he got, but then he went to the copy shop, which they all did. I mean, Todd's Copy Shop was really busy, which is why he did that set of very formal stencil pictures; he had to pay off his bill. But the little ad, the announcement for it, he was doing something with, Peter Fend was up at the same time, and it's very interesting.

Di: The show was at Todd's Copy Shop?

DK: At Todd's. I don't know if David had a show, as much, but the flyer has the camouflage rock pattern in it that definitely comes out about the same point; it's something he's playing with. But it's all David. And is the paper great? One of ours is in great condition because it hadn't been put on the wall. The other three are a little tingey because someone had them up on the wall. It's not the greatest paper but it is better than I think he would normally have used. It was a big pad, and you could go through and take out the ones that you wanted. They were $5 apiece, I think, is what I was told that people paid for them. So he could pay off this Copy Shop bill. [they laugh]

Di: Along the lines of that question, a lot, especially in this mid-80s period, or even in the '89, the Decade show at the New Museum, a lot of Wojnarowicz's exhibitions took the form of site-specific installations. So how are you approaching the site specificity of Wojnarowicz's work? I know that you've made the decision not to recreate installations that are not extant, so I guess if you could tell us more about that decision.

DK: I decided, it came up early with the show, the Decade show, the one that has the little skeleton in it. We can't get all of the pieces. Also, when Elizabeth Sussman did the Paul Thek show, could you – the idea of recreating something, what you can't recreate is – it's almost you're becoming a voyeur. You're looking in on something that is totally now alien, because it doesn't have, you can't recreate the sense of what it was, what was in the air at the time, what the physical space felt like. We now have these beautiful white galleries. Can you duplicate a scrappy storefront, which is what New Museum was? It's something that you can't recreate that time. After PPOW did the installation at Frieze from the Mnuchin installation, I got phone call after phone call: Oh, we have to have one of those installations; Oh, we have to have an installation. And I kept saying no. What was missing there was David was so grossed out by this opulence of this Upper East Side life. He and his buddies collected garbage off the street, complete with cockroaches and rats and other things, and that is what is physically missing in that kind of thing. Well, you can't do that in a museum. And the whole impact of that would be different now. I don't think you could really recreate any of those late ones.

MT: One of the things that we were talking about with James and Marguerite was that the installations that he did for them also had a smell component that you could never recreate. Because the one that he did with the Richard Kern film in the background, and I think it was Number 8, was that the one? Installation Number 8? Had dog shit that they brought in off the street, that was outside the wall, there was a wall and you looked through the broken window. And then there was the table with the Thanksgiving dinner set up, which sat there rotting for a whole month. Yeah, there was this whole other aspect, so how do you recreate that?

DK: I remember being in Luzern and seeing the Paul Thek, they own a large part of the Paul Thek installation which he did there, which had live chickens in it. And of course they didn't have the live chickens. In a funny way, it didn't feel right. Because you saw the cage, but there were no

chickens. If you've been out on a farm, you're having to walk into the chicken yard and then into the chicken coop. There was no chicken shit on the floor. And this is the stuff that was missing. And you just cannot, it's not something you can recreate. And I think we have to, my feeling is, you vicariously live through it through what images survive, and that's it. [49:40]

MT: I've made a point of never having people recreate performance work here. I don't want to see somebody in their eighties recreate something that they did in their twenties, and I don't especially want to see somebody else do it. I'd rather just have documentation.

DK: I think I totally agree. Because there's this evolution, again, of time. You're used to certain things, and then it starts looking dated, and the vocabulary is constantly changing. And I think the impact is lost, that impact of the period.

MT: There is a question that I don't have an answer to, of how this differs from dance and opera, which we re-perform all the time. But to me there is a difference with performance art and with installation kinds of things.

DK: I think I agree.

MT: And I don't know exactly why I feel that, but I do.

DK: Someone told me there was a re-creation of that Lucinda Childs, Sol Lewitt and Phil Glass piece that was first done at BAM. I remember going to it. And someone said, oh, well you should go out and see it again. And I said, no. Because there was something very, very interesting when you saw it for the first time. Now everyone does it. But there was something very striking about it, and it wasn't totally smooth. I also had a long talk before she died with Elizabeth Murray about when one of the Denby plays was done at St. Marks, where she did the sets. And she was amazed that someone could – I said, those sets have always lived with me. They're there, I mean, they relate to the paintings, in a funny way, but no one ever talks about them. But you can't recreate that play. I said, that play meant a lot to me. It's always lived there. I always think about it. And she said, that's what it's really about. The idea of recreating is just – besides, David reused everything, like Paul Thek did, too. [52:10]

MT: This has been an issue with this entire project. How do you structure a knowledge base about Wojnarowicz's work? Because he reuses things. And some things get described sometimes as works, but what happens when they're in an installation and then moved to another installation, and so it's really about relationships between objects and things, and not about complete works.

DK: I think the Burning Child, there's some debate if there's one, two, or three of them.

MT: Mm-hm. Yes.

DK: And it's unclear.

MT: The child skeleton, we know it was used in installations but we did see it in photographs and other things, too.

DK: I almost think that our version of *One Day This Kid*, which is, when we bought it, there were two in the estate, one signed and one not signed. And I haven't been able to find measurements for the one that's shown in the Decade show. But I think ours is – we bought the unsigned one because I knew that collectors will only buy a signed one. But I knew where this came from. I have a sneaking suspicion we may have that one, but I'm not sure. Because there's no pinholes to put it up on the wall. But then he may have cut them off.

MT: Mm-hm. [laughs] [53:35]

Di: So this introduces a little bit one of the challenges we've been working with with the knowledge base that I'm sure you encountered organizing a retrospective as a curator in a museum who is used to working with traditional art historical categories, which is that Wojnarowicz's central impulse was to disrupt boundaries, disrupt categories, to work outside of traditional modes. Did you find that a challenge, as you were thinking – it sounds as though the way you're organizing the show is thematically and loosely chronologically. But is there a sort of desire to talk about Wojnarowicz as a photographer; Wojnarowicz as a painter?

DK: No, because I think, coming from the way I have approached printmaking at the Whitney, which is, I don't think anyone else really does it that way, I go from the artist. If the artist wants to call it a print; fine. It could be an edition. It could be a sculpture. I'm not setting up – if I were only collecting technique? How boring. [MT and Di laugh] And for someone like Wojnarowicz, he used whatever method that he needed. He wanted to work on those banged up trash can lids. Peter at least said, replace the lid.

MT: Right; yes.

DK: But to me, I'm not going to set up a category. I think it's the semi-educated who have to have a category for everything. [MT and Di laugh] We did run into this when doing the index. Do we call these stencils, or are they paintings? And if he referred to them as painting, they went in the paintings.

MT: Mm-hm.

Di: And those trash cans lids were painted?

DK: We put them under sculpture because it was just easier to deal with them that way. We could only go so far. We had to make it logical a little bit.

Di: How are they displayed, by the way?

DK: We put two little nails up here and here, put it up, and then have something, a bracket, to hold it on.

Di: So they hang on the wall.

DK: We're going to hang them on the wall.

Di: Is that how the owners of the work are displaying them?

DK: I think some have. Who knows?

Di: They're such unusual pieces.

DK: It was interesting, when they did the Science Lesson globe, the Tony Ganz's, he was there and there were endless shots of that because it's on all three sides. He had his favorite view. We wanted the Running Figure to come through, and I think Julie Ault shows another side of it. There is no right side to it. We had a back and forth with the photographers. They were shooting the Loaf of Bread. Well, I'm going to try to get this much paper up here and this much – because it's a period newspaper from the date. And so we wanted to really get you to see the whole sheet of newsprint, but Tony was right there. That's a great collector who really feels involved with the work. He said, 'No, you're absolutely right; we don't want to block out the top of the sheet. We want to be able to show the bread is really sitting on the sheet so you get the feeling of the sheet.'

MT: Because every one of those things was meticulously chosen. It's like the wolf's head, the pieces that were used to create it, were all carefully – pieces of newspaper headlines taken by David and put together very, very intentionally. [58:00]

DK: I feel like in putting this show together, I've only barely touched David in some things. I regret that I didn't spend a lot more time at Fales, because, but I had so many other things to do, and in a funny way, you have to sort of close off certain things. You can get too involved into – like his Magic Box. I mean, I think that's something very important, but you get too involved in, why is this and not this; what is this and what is that? My goal was to set him up in a formal way, so that other people can do it. I just hope they don't – I get a little tired of reading about sort of the same things over and over again with him. I don't think that in the show up at the Bronx that they totally understand David in what those two works are about. Definitely no mention of *Peter Hujar Dead*, where he had the eye…It's like they didn't even notice that. And in the St. Sebastian, they were all getting off on the gay issue of it, and it's part of the story but it isn't the whole story with that.

MT: They tend to do that with David way too much.

DK: Yes, and I want to bring David into the general discussion of what were the '80s and what were they about, and this whole thing about identity and thought that you get both in him and with Nan. Once you get through all of the different layers going on, you're getting a real sense of someone who's really thinking about what it was to be alive, with or without AIDS, with or without everything, and having money or no money. What was it like to be this kind of person? Because I think it tells us a lot about what it is today. [1:00:45]

Di: That sort of gets to, my last question was going to be, what do you see as the essential recurring themes that he dealt with. But I think we've been sort of addressing that. I also would want to go back thinking about what has to be closed off, or also addressing this question of time and what can be recreated or not. There's also the issue of Wojnarowicz's time-based media that he worked with, in terms of film and video, and I believe that's also something that you've made a decision not to focus on within the retrospective. There might be a screening program, it sounded like.

DK: I really have trouble with – it's a personal thing, but I've listened to a few people in galleries, and Ken Griffin said it really succinctly. He says, 'Why do they have all of this moving imagery? It takes away; you don't get to focus on that which isn't moving.' Because we've raised a whole generation of television people. You watch them in a gallery; the minute they see a moving image, their concentration changes.

MT: Mm-hm.

DK: And since there are so few complete David – there are some wonderful snips, but complete David film? No.

MT: There are basically two. Or three.

DK: ITSOFOMO,

MT: Beautiful People, and Heroin.

DK: Which is probably too violent to put up on the wall. We'd have to put up: Be sure Johnny and Sally don't come near this; they may have bad dreams. [laughter]

MT: And actually, some of his most beautiful footage is footage that was just never used in anything, just stunning footage.

DK: I think that is why I'm thinking of just having, if we can do, or what we want to do is sort of a series of small things. Like I can see having maybe two sessions about ITSOFOMO on a Friday night or something, and have people come and talk about it. Or the Richard Kern films. And treat them like a little classroom session. The one that I have to admit, I'm going to hopefully be in here this fall to look at it because I really have to look at all of these. I know David Breslin looked at them. But the one for Peter.

MT: Which is deeply problematic, because Jon Gartenberg fooled around with the footage when he was working on its preservation a long time ago with Manny [?] from Visual AIDS, and so we know what David had, and Brent went through and undid what Gartenberg had done, because Gartenberg had strung them together as though it was a completed work, which it wasn't.

DK: It sounds like Fire in the Belly.

MT: Yes, well, it's very similar. And we asked Jon for the documentation. He would never give us his documentation on the decisions he made.

DK: We don't want to deny that David did use a film camera, but in a funny way what this show is doing is setting up a legitimate body of work. And I think this is where we need to figure out, now that we've had this delay in when the show happens, that we have the luxury of sitting back, and very definitely we will be talking with Fales, because they have more expertise in this. And I think the solution is going to be something that we very closely talk about so that we are in agreement. Because, like with titles, where I finally brow-beat decisions, like all the Arthur Rimbauds, I had all these little subtexts. And I finally said, you know, what did David show? What did he call these? He always refers to the Arthur Rimbaud in New York, but he doesn't say "at the piers" or "at Coney Island." What did he, how did he want them referred to? And they said, 'Oh, we put those subtitles on so we knew which ones to sell.'

Di: Yeah.

MT: I know.

DK: So I said, okay, off they all go. Let's just call them the *Arthur Rimbauds in New York*. Same thing with the Ant series. He showed them as Faith, Hope, Charity, whatever, Commodity. He had real titles for them that were – so we're saying "Untitled" and then in parentheses is what he called them. Because those titles have meaning to when you're looking at them, and heaven forbid the Christian right comes after us with ants on the cross again because he made very clear choices.

MT: And in the letter about Fire in My Belly, he talks about the ants and the ants salving Christ's wounds. It's the exact opposite of what they made it out to be.

DK: It's sort of like the rich man, poor Lazarus, where the dogs were licking his legs. Dogs were, that was the cheapest pharmacist that you could get in Near Eastern society. There is the sense of healing, that nature is healing.

MT: And it's incredibly important for him.

DK: Oh, all the way through.

MT: That restorative force of nature.

DK: Yes. We're not going to be able to borrow Danny Buchloss's *Earth, Wind, Fire and Water*, because it's so big. But we wanted to illustrate it there because it's about the destruction and the restoration of nature, and how nature really will – I want to sit there and say, if David were alive today, what would he be saying about global warming? Because he was talking about global warming in the '80s. The only two artists I know talking about that stuff were David and Frank Moore, Frank coming from a much more scientific background and having gone to college and focused on that, David coming from an innate sense of nature. But both of them are saying so much, and people dismiss them. They only want to see David the Keith Haring party girl, and

it's not party girl here. That's just sort of an aspect of his personality and that's life, and let's get on with what he wanted to focus on, which was his work. He had things to say. And I think he was probably very frustrated at the end that he couldn't say it all.

MT: Yes, you get that sense from the archive, that he was creating and creating and creating, and it was very frustrating as he got debilitated and couldn't. We found what we think is his last note, written the day he died. And the handwriting looks like somebody who is in their late nineties, by that point. And it's a little bit of poetry, and it's really beautiful. Lisa and I found it, and we were like, oh my god.

DK: I think C. Carr may have put that into her, or Julie may have.

MT: I don't think we found it until after both of those – I mean, this was within the past six months that we found it.

DK: I know there's an image that says "David's last work."

MT: There is, okay, oh, you mean she may have put it in your book.

DK: The illustration.

MT: Yes, because that would have been since we discovered it.

DK: And it's really, because he can't even keep to the lines.

MT: Right. It's really moving.

DK: Yes, he's someone who's quite incredible. I just hope – there are other people who know a lot more about him, and I just hope that they give me credit for doing the best job I could with it.

Di: Well I have a couple of sort of boring questions that I was skipping over, but maybe I'll just return to them to make sure we hit them before the end. Because part of what we're trying to gather is advice or information for future conservators, curators. So I was wondering if, in your research, you discovered preferences that Wojnarowicz expressed regarding the display of his works in terms of hanging or framing or placement.

DK: The only thing I know about are like the Neil's set of *Sex Series*, he has a set that's framed in David's choice of frames. And we'll order up frames to match them. I thing Steve and Walt have an Ant series that are using frames that David – I'm not sure if it's David's master set or what, but they're blue and black frames. But for the most part, he was painting on Masonite, and if you look on the backside, it's sort of fun, because you have, he's gone out on the street and scavenged but he'll have strips to sort of balance and counter-balance the weight so that the Masonite doesn't bow. [laughter] The grommets, I think Dan Voe's painting is on four-foot by four-foot Masonite, but it has grommets that you can, you know. David, certainly no gold frames. [laughter] I think probably any framing where we don't – because a lot of the stuff was pinned to the wall, the posters; we can't do that, obviously, so they will be framed. But

hopefully – I'm not going to do the decorator job of saying, "Oh, you have to only do it this way. We've got one and one so you have to have two green frames." No. These are personal choices. Unless it's a hideous gold frame. I think the, Pascal's drawing on the Wardline Pier paper of Slam for Slam Kick, it's just in sort of a wooden frame, and he's just going to reframe it simply. But you have to with works on paper. But no. And hanging? The pictures that got sent to me for In the Garden showed it very crowded.

Di: Yes. [1:13:13]

DK: I think the only time he was really specific was when he did *Metamorphosis* with the bull's eye, and then the shelf fell, because they didn't have a support for the shelf.[1] Unless you know of anything like that.

MT: The only thing I know is that when I talked to Barry Blinderman he said that David wasn't really involved in installation at their retrospective out there.

Di: Wendy also said he installed his exhibitions in the space and he came in with an idea of what he wanted. But I agree, they look pretty crowded, and it might not have been a display decision as much as, these are the works in the show and they all have to go up.

DK: Yeah. I think in the Garden there is the image showing the show, photographing the show, and there is a wall in the front, and it's a tribute wall to Peter. It has "Peter Hujar, dead" and there's a vase with a dead flower. And I'm toying with the idea of having a little vase with a dead flower, but that's a little corny; you can't do that today. But one thing I'm hoping is that – last time I went up to see Tommy, Anita was there. And fell in love with Anita; Anita is just wonderful. And I said, we hope that on the outside of the show we'll be able to show David's two, the panel for Keith Davis and for Peter, that he did. So we'll have the two large sections of the AIDS thing. And I said, "Tom, maybe you can finish your panel." "Oh, I don't know if I can . . . ." And Anita said, "Tom, I'll help you. But you've got to do it for David." Because there is no AIDS panel for David, because Tom was going to do it.

MT: Yes, and then Tom himself was very sick; and then got better. [1:15:30]

DK: And got better. It is a story of survival, for everything. The Fales, taking it, what you all did, really meant the survival of – that we can now go back and really give David his place. Because I think ten years ago, or the mid-nineties, no one would have cared. Whatever New Museum did would have been the story for David. And I think now, with the way that the archive has been looked at, focused on, worked with, I'm benefitting, and I think we're going to come away with a much fuller idea of David. And I keep saying maybe I should start working on the catalogue raisonné of the work. But, I can start it; I don't know if I could ever finish it.

MT: Uh-huh; uh-huh. It's going to be difficult.

[1] Kiehl is referring to the 1984 solo exhibition at Civilian Warfare.

DK: Where do you cut off on what is a drawing?

MT: Yep.

DK: And then how much work is still in people's back closets?

Di: How much of the work that's in the archive here is work that it goes into the catalogue raisonné, or not?

DK: Yes.

MT: That's a question.

Di: Well, I have one more boring question, and then maybe we'll do final thoughts. Are you okay on time?

MT: I'm already late, so.

DK: Oh, I'm sorry. I talk too much.

MT: That's all right; no.

Di: You might not even have an answer for this question, but it's if you've encountered conservation problems that are kind of specific to Wojnarowicz, in the course of planning the show.

DK: Well, we originally were thinking that we wanted to travel the show to three places, another place in the United States, and two in Europe. And we had sent out a preliminary request to LA County, and they said, our work can only go to three places, you and two others. And that was a big signal, because 75 percent of this is paper. Even if it's collaged, it's paper on other things, even though, yeah, some of it is protected; there's varnishes and other things on top, it's still paper.

Di: Even the paintings have paper.

DK: They're not straightforward paintings, most of them.

Di: Sculptures have paper.

DK: They're Masonite with paper put on top and then drawing, collage, painting on top of that. And Tommy's picture with the microscope is totally paint on canvas, totally paint on canvas. I was afraid to even ting it when I was arranging with him, and our conservator who took off the grime that was on the surface, said, "It's all paint, and it's canvas! There's not a single piece of collage on here." [laughter] Which is unusual.

MT: Very unusual.

Di: Any sort of final thoughts or notes?

DK: No, I just say, thank you, Fales. [laughter]

MT: Well, thank you.

DK: I think that, what I'm hoping out of this whole thing, is that we work very closely together, because you can't do this show, really, without totally interconnecting Web sites, the information. The only way to get the complete – I can't do the complete picture. They can't do the complete picture. But putting it together, we can let people begin to get a better picture.

MT: And we're delighted to do that. And I just met with Hugh Ryan, who is going to be our curator, today. So we'll all get together soon.

Di: Well, thank you so much. I'm going to stop the recording now, then.

END at 1:19:45