



Ant Rap

GAY ART IS BACK IN THE FIRING LINE, BUT THE CULTURE WAR REMATCH, EMBODIED BY THE CATHOLIC LEAGUE VERSUS THE SMITHSONIAN, IS A CASE OF SIX DEGREES OF APPROPRIATION.

BY TONY PHILLIPS



"I had to get permission," Simon Cowell tells Ryan Seacrest on season 8 of *American Idol*. "I literally had a call on Saturday from Bono saying it would be their pleasure for Adam to sing this song." Cut to the blue-black spectacle of Adam Lambert aerobically stomping the stage. A lacquered fingernail punctuates the air as he octave-hops U2's "One" into an interpretation that's like his *Scream 4* audition.

In *Idol*'s compressed world, it takes less than 90 seconds: a queer fever dream jacked directly into America's prime-time consciousness. Lambert's is the umpteenth remodel of this ballad, released in 1992, the year Tony Kushner was prepping *Angels in America* for Broadway and Tom Hanks was shooting *Philadelphia*.

U2's single benefited AIDS research, and they tailored three videos to help boost sales. A moody, sepia-toned clip of the band cavorting about Berlin in drag was shelved over fear of conflating AIDS with sexuality. Another—the band's favorite—features Bono at a cocktail table in the smoky Manhattan nightclub Nell's. But the third video came closest to the song's AIDS-crusading heart.

It's often attributed to East Village artist David Wojnarowicz, who died the year "One" was released, but it was directed by Mark Pellington. His black-and-white clip of a single buffalo running in slow motion complements the final fade to Wojnarowicz's

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best-known still from 1988–89, an untitled gelatin silver print depicting three buffalo falling from a cliff. The image, like most of Wojnarowicz's work, is drawn from nature, yet suggests our discord with it.

"Animals allow us to view certain things that we wouldn't allow ourselves to see in regard to human activity," Wojnarowicz said in 1989. He also used images of clocks to convey the urgency of his life's work, cut short when he was 37. Dan Cameron, who curated the Wojnarowicz 1999 retrospective "Fever" at New York's New Museum, recently wrote that he was "one of the indispensable American artists of the end of the 20th century," and that his "art was never less than a matter of life and death."

That matter has become a postmodern quandary touching on authorship, authenticity, and appropriation centered around his short film *A Fire in My Belly*, which dates to 1986–87 and was classified in Wojnarowicz's CV as unfinished, before the contents were stripped for use in other works. The footage was shot on a trip to Mexico and contains recurring imagery of a flaming eyeball, Mexican newspapers, a masturbating man, falling coins, Tarot cards, and ants swarming a crucifix.

These tiny ants loosed a giant shit storm, culminating last December when the Smithsonian's secretary, G. Wayne Clough, yanked the piece from the National Portrait Gallery's queer survey "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" on World AIDS Day, after the Catholic League labeled the work "hate speech" while the fresh-faced Republican class of 2010 piled on. The question becomes: How do you protest a protest against a work never completed, but reconstituted years after the artist's death in a way that may not square with his original intent?

A four-minute video condensation of Wojnarowicz's significantly longer film ran for a month in Washington, D.C. This facsimile opened with the "edited for museum display by Bart Everly," but the gallery representing Wojnarowicz's estate adds "Hide/Seek" curator Jonathan Katz to the editing team. Katz admits to appending an ACT UP march as the new soundtrack for his streamlined film, but could the "Hey, hey. Ho, ho," marching rhetoric of ACT UP ever possibly construe as hate speech, even by the religious right? And is Katz's tinkering just as much a violence to the film as its ultimate removal from the show?

"It's a fragment of a fragment," Sur Rodney Sur says. "The whole thing is much longer, but it's a silent film." Sur, Wojnarowicz's Gracie Mansion gallerist, says entropy is an element of mythology around the artist, most of it self-cultivated. Performance artist Holly Hughes calls Wojnarowicz "a perfect artist" but details a "Dickensian life of bouncing around to foster homes, being abused and on the streets." Sur counters, "He was from a very bourgie family. He had certain aspirations. He ran away and lived on the streets, but when you're that young, it's easier."

Easy enough to support a rock 'n' roll lifestyle? Wojnarowicz's band, 3 Teens Kill 4, folded when his art career turned a corner in 1988. His bandmate and fuck-buddy Brian Butterick recently reformed their band, but a MySpace page mysteriously appeared years earlier. "None of us put it up," Butterick recalls, "but someone digitized all our music." Butterick eventually solved the case. "It was this 20-year-old kid out-

side Atlanta," he says. "People who want to find the outsider art will find it anywhere."

Especially online, where Wojnarowicz's fragment continues to morph. The four-minute clip on YouTube now begins with the crucifix imagery the religious right objected to so strenuously. The ACT UP soundtrack is replaced by a song from avant-garde composer Diamanda Galás's 1986 AIDS requiem *Plague Mass*. Her unearthly, near-four-octave growl is spooky enough but downright menacing wrapped around lyrics like "he that be spat on by him unclean becomes unclean," especially with her diaphragm rumbling like an idling tractor trailer on the word "unclean."

It's likely it was this version of *A Fire in My Belly* the Catholic League found objectionable, evoking nostalgia for the days when the religious right broke into the NEA to rifle through artists' files for some muck to rake. Today, they're content to lazily troll YouTube before pulling down a major museum show. Ironically, the film they are protesting did not appear in the National Portrait Gallery, and the lyrics classified as hate speech come chapter and verse from the book of Leviticus.

"It's very confusing indeed," Galás says. "I had no idea who, when, or how the video was put together. I saw it and thought, *This is odd. I didn't know that David knew my work this well.* We never met because we were both very shy, but we lived right next to each other in the East Village."

Ultimately, Galás is OK with the mash-up, whoever orchestrated it. The six degrees of appropriation is as old as the culture wars themselves, stretching from

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Wojnarowicz to U2 to Adam Lambert to herself. "I don't have much to do with lawyers," she says, "because I can't afford them and they like money. But when I was asked, as the surviving artist of this collaboration, to write a statement for the two of us because David is dead, I said 'Of course.' The lawyer watched it on YouTube, and there are 90,000 people who have seen it now, but who put it together?"

We may never know, but perhaps that makes artists of us all. Cynthia Carr, a journalist who has been working on a biography of Wojnarowicz for three years, recalls his successful trial against Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association. What sparked that legal action, she says, "was the AFA got hold of his catalog for 'Tongues of Flame' and went through and cut out all the penises. They pasted them onto sheets of paper and sent them around the country, saying, 'This is what your tax dollars are supporting.'" Wojnarowicz was awarded \$1 in damages, but his real victory was making the AFA over in his own image: artists feverishly working in the mixed media of penis and paste.

Galás has no such interest in legal recourse, but she's still curious. "I've heard David had a copy of *Plague Mass* in his studio as an inspiration," she says. "I don't know if that's true. I don't know anything. And the bottom line is, I don't give a fuck. I'm still alive, but one day our time is up. Somehow, when I look at this video—I know this is delusional because I don't believe in an afterlife—I think maybe we'll have an espresso somewhere after it's over because someone put us together on this earth, yet we were never able to meet." ■



GINGER & THE PROFESSOR

Philip Monaghan's exhibition "At Moments Like These He Feels Furthest Away" realizes the New York writer Tim Dlugos's poem "Gilligan's Island." The collaboration, started in 1983 and unfinished upon Dlugos's death from AIDS in 1990, is on view January 26 through April 29 at NYU's Bobst Library.