

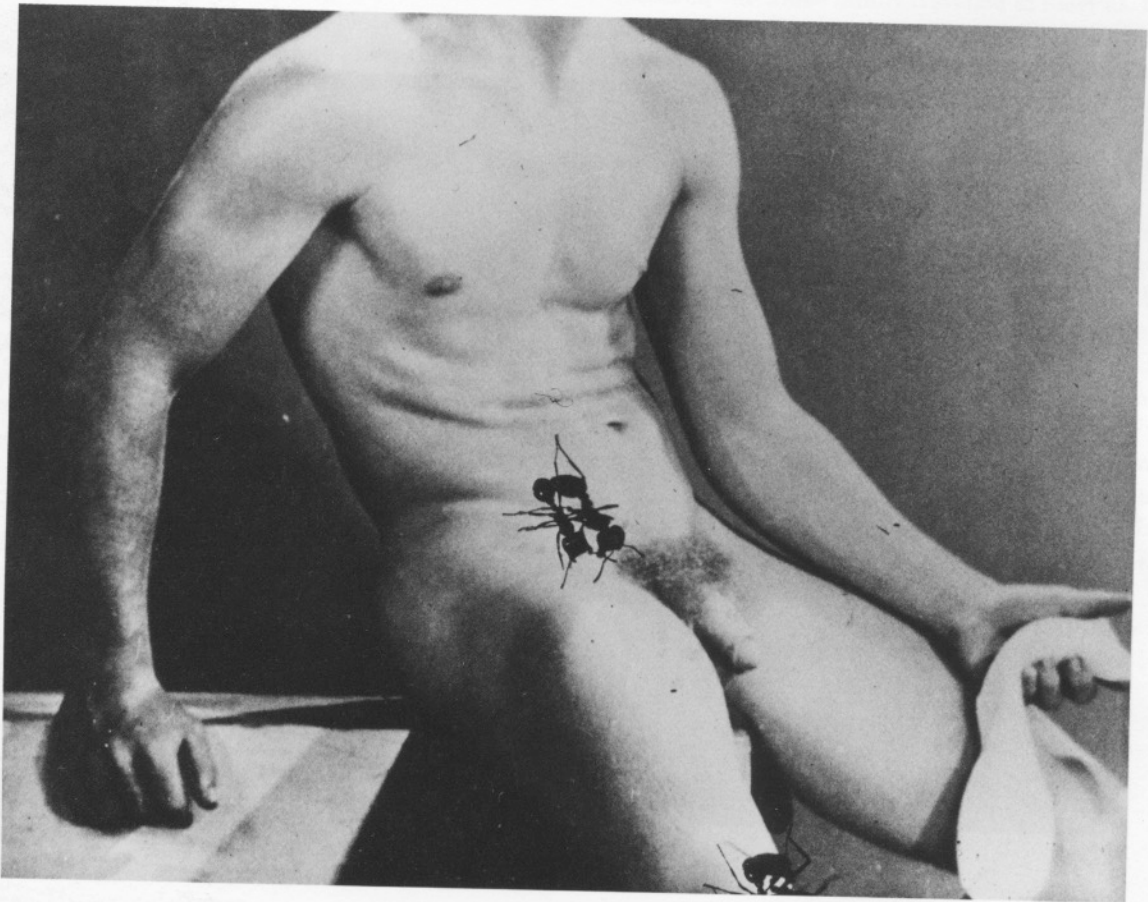
It was a catalytic year. In 1987, New York City, plodding through the fog of a viral crisis, death had become a guiding force for how to live. David Wojnarowicz was 'positively' diagnosed; it was the same year he lost his ex-lover, mentor and chosen family—photographer Peter Hujar—to AIDS-related complications. Concurrently, the direct action group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was formed. Fuelled by loss and rage, ACT UP meetings and protests would usher David through the last years of his life. The following year, in 1988, as absences and actions swelled, David moved into Peter's loft. And, as if channelling Peter's spirit, David produced a flurry of black and white photographic works, one of which was *Untitled (desire)*.

In this image of an image, a nubile male figure, stripped, cropped and seated with a casual hunch, grips a towel, as if posturing to rest after a soak at the baths. Casting an incongruous shadow, a swollen ant traverses his faceless groin, as remnants of a second ant escape the print's edge. I became obsessed with understanding how *Untitled (desire)* was made: rather simply, by allowing ants to crawl on the image of a nude and re-photographing it. Unlike the other works from the *Ant Series*—because of the way the image of the nude, is cropped—there is a skewing of perception that makes it impossible to locate what is illusion and what is not.

Last spring I was invited into the Harvard Art Museum Archives to peruse a series of photographic works by David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin, among others, as part of a collection it had recently acquired and was preparing for exhibition. I was there by invitation to respond—artist to artist—across a generational and situational divide. But what divides David and me most is his premature death. In all likelihood our *queer* paths should have crossed. The age difference between Peter and David was 20 years; between David and me, 21. This is a fact I reflect on all too frequently; an entire generation is missing from the experiences of my generation. Trauma precipitates well beyond its apex.

Print after print was revealed to me through the repetition of delicate sweeping gestures only a conservator can perform. It was in this sterile, evenly lit, white-gloved environment that I was presented with *Untitled (desire)*. The parenthetical title implies a complex relationship between these two: the ant and the nude. David's work, often reliant on symbolically weighty images, begs the question, 'What is this desire?' What is it about an Adonis-like torso, a youthful, seemingly healthy, white male body? Is this desire erotic or a desire for power rooted in an archetype of the patriarchal order? For David, a terminally ill gay man, we might assume it was a conflicted desire for both. But the ant—disproportionately scaled against the limp phallus—is a colonising force, omnivorous predator and excellent recycler. When considering desire we have to reflect on attraction as much as repulsion. And the abject impulse triggered by

monstrous insects implies that something is rotting to attract this ravenous scavenger. It is a peculiar repulsion that absorbs me into David's large black and white print. And as I lean back and glance around the room to request the next print, odourless recycled air fills my lungs. Here, inside this meticulously preserved sarcophagus, I see the remains of David. Discretely packed into a single photograph, an image of a society that values his body of work more than it valued his body.



David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled from Ant Series (desire)*, 1988.  
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum,  
Schneider Erdman Printer's Proof Collection,  
partial gift, and partial purchase through the  
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