ABSTRACT

Traditionally, theatre actors wore masks to embody individuals with no clear identity. Masks did not feature specific anthropomorphic qualities, leaving audiences free to imagine the malleable and anonymous characters between fiction and actual plausibility. In contrast, in the photographic series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* by artist, writer, and activist David Wojnarowicz, the use of a Rimbaud mask seems to have an opposite intention, overlapping meanings and allowing spatiotemporal compression. Portraying the French poet in different contexts and activities, Wojnarowicz is able to interpret the notion of identity and belonging following a narrative that is fictional, biographical and collective, addressing queer histories and temporalities. This paper discusses the multiple possibilities that the mask represents in this work.

keywords

MASK(S)
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Role-taking, role-making:

the mask as a tool in David Wojnarowicz's *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*

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Introduction

Artist, writer, activist, and central figure of the American counterculture, David Wojnarowicz often dealt in his work with the theme of alienation and estrangement. From his childhood to his early death due to AIDS-related issues, a strong sense of isolation accompanied Wojnarowicz throughout his life. Central for the artist was the possibility of connecting with people around him, friends, lovers, and fellow artists, to fight loneliness and feel understood. As Olivia Laing recalls, '[v]iolence ran through his childhood like a fire, gutting and hollowing, leaving its mark. The story of Wojnarowicz's life is emphatically a story about masks: why you might need them, why you might mistrust them, why they might be necessary for survival; also toxic, also unbearable' (2016: 123). Likewise, by using a mask, Wojnarowicz made French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud travel through time, inviting him to share his personal experience and creating a manifesto for an entire marginalised community.

This paper analyses the 35 mm photographic series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* by David Wojnarowicz (1978-1979), focusing in particular on the function of the mask as a tool of portrayal, disguise, and mythmaking. After a brief introduction to the genealogy of the work and the relationship between Wojnarowicz and Rimbaud as both a source of inspiration and proxy of the artist, the research focuses in particular on the mask as an instrument for role-making and a mechanism of spatiotemporal compression. The study is conducted by approaching the series as

a whole, addressing themes and concepts that recur throughout the photos, while briefly presenting some of the scenarios portrayed to provide a better frame for the visual dimension of the object of analysis. At a later time, a consistent body of critical literature on the subject and personal writings by both Rimbaud and Wojnarowicz will support the analysis of the work, its context, and imagery evoked. Wojnarowicz's ability to depict and narrate the struggles and hopes of a community made the Rimbaud series, and his body of work more generally, a landmark and true cult in contemporary art and activism. As Crawford recalls from her experience visiting a retrospective on Wojnarowicz, '[a]t the Whitney Museum's shop I buy two pin badges. One the Rimbaud mask, one the house in flames. I can't spin this as a counter-cultural move. The symbols have been co-opted. The task is to turn the signal against itself, from within the bought-up world. Word of mouth. Cruising. Where I might lose myself in you. Because we haven't all found each other yet. Not yet' (Crawford 2018). In particular, this paper stresses how the tool of the mask had a central function in shaping the work of Wojnarowicz, its temporality, and related myth.

Wojnarowicz goes Rimbaud: life and art

A prolific artist and writer despite his short life, solitude and isolation are recurrent themes in the work of David Wojnarowicz. Spanning different media over approximately 15 years of artistic production, Wojnarowicz approached and experimented with multiple techniques in his career. While the first years of his work were mainly dedicated to two-dimensional visual production, from spray paint and stencilling on walls to photography and posters, music, collages, sculptures, performances, and films were also explored. Especially in his later years, his art was deeply tied to his activism, addressing social and cultural injustices and in particular the mismanagement and prejudice that characterised institutional and social reactions to the AIDS crisis that spread in the US and the world from the early 80s. The production of extensive writing, both private diaries and aimed towards publication, also accompanied Wojnarowicz throughout his entire life.

As Olivia Laing writes in her essay 'In Loving Him', part of the collection *The Lonely City* (2016), the work of Wojnarowicz, 'which includes paintings, installations, photography, music, films, books and performances, turns on issues of connection and aloneness, focusing in particular on how an individual can survive within an antagonistic society, a society that might plausibly want them dead rather than

tolerate their existence' (Laing 2016: 122). His need and desire for diversity were central in both his body of work and personal life, since he believed that a stringent and homogeneous society was the first cause of isolation and hatred for those who were perceived as 'different'. The feeling of being misunderstood and marginalised was a primary drive in Wojnarowicz's artistic production, and this sense of alienation can be found in many of his writings. For instance, in his raw memoir *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, he wrote of the sensation of living in a

> world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split-rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. A place where by virtue of having been born centuries too late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement, the bought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies. The packaged world; the world of speed in metallic motion. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 103-104)

In this world, which Wojnarowicz called the Other World, he constantly experienced a sense of detachment from his surroundings. Wojnarowicz defines himself as an 'alien' in this world and the people who run it as 'a different species of humans' (Ibid., 104). It is as if Wojnarowicz experienced his milieu from the outside, incapable (or unwilling) to mingle with his contemporary. The detachment from nature, ongoing industrialisation, and the AIDS crisis progressively caused a diffused estrangement from the world and one another.

The condition of feeling like an outcast pushed towards the margin of society unites both personal the life and artistic production of David Wojnarowicz and Arthur Rimbaud. The distant-in-time relationship between the American artist and the Symbolist poet is extensively documented in Wojnarowicz's bibliography, written by Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (2012). His first acknowledged direct artistic reference to Arthur Rimbaud can be found in a crude portrait of the French poet on a windowpane at the Hudson River piers. However, it was only later, in 1975, that Wojnarowicz started to work on his famous Rimbaud photographic series. That same year Wojnarowicz was hired by an agency for a minimum-wage summer job in which he was trained to both run a photostat machine and print photographs. It was in that studio that he managed to photostat the cover of an edition of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* that he owned and create a life-size mask made of rubber band and cardstock of the poet at the age of seventeen (Donegan 2018), before being quickly fired after having repeatedly asked for days of sick leave.

The photographic series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* was started the same year, starring his friend and lover Brian Butterick and shot with a borrowed 35 mm camera. Butterick posed in front of hanging cow carcasses in the butchers' district, at the Hudson River piers, in Chinatown. He rode a metro covered in graffiti, stood in front of porn movie theatres, masturbated and shot heroin in front of the camera, always wearing the mask of Rimbaud on his face. Produced when Wojnarowicz was just over twenty years old, the series is one of the few photographic experiments of the artist. All photographs of *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* present a lone individual portrayed in the urban context and the surroundings of New York City, mapping places that were central in the geography of Wojnarowicz and the life of his community (Times Square, the Meat Market, the West Side piers, Coney Island, and many more). The masked figure wistfully looks at the camera in both public and private situations from the urban sphere. The moment in time in which the series was shot, the decade after the Stonewall riots and right before the AIDS crisis, was a short-lived period of experiential freedom and innocence, but also danger and material poverty that was followed by a time of physical and cultural erasure. The series not only testifies to the cultural and personal moment of a time of creativity, love, art, sex, and drugs, but also a cross-generational narrative of Wojnarowicz himself, his fellows and influences, against homogenisation and cultural obliteration.

This broader, multitemporal dimension results from the association of Wojnarowicz's contemporary New York City and the presence of Arthur Rimbaud in the photographs. Many shared elements of their bibliographical experiences led Wojnarowicz to identify with Rimbaud and start referencing the poet in his work. Born exactly a hundred years apart one from the other, Rimbaud in October 1854 and Wojnarowicz in September 1954, they

> were deserted by their fathers and unhappy with their mothers. Both ran away as teenagers. Both were impoverished and unwilling to live by the rules. Both were queer. Both tried to wring visionary work out of suffering. David just didn't yet know the rest – that he would soon meet an older man and mentor who would change his life (as Paul Verlaine had changed Rimbaud's), and that he too would die at the age of thirty-seven (Carr 2012: 224).

By placing Rimbaud in his environment, Wojnarowicz highlights through the series the numerous parallels in the lives of the two artists. In a liminal positionality between photographic portray and autobiography, Wojnarowicz fuses elements from the sphere of the self and historical fiction, while liberating Rimbaud from the constrictions of his time and allowing him to explore activities that were

accused of deviance, immorality, or at least illicitness. As Emily Roysdon argues, Rimbaud (as much as Jean Genet, among others) is not a passive object of interest, but one to which Wojnarowicz experiences deep attachment and fascination, leading its manipulation, negotiation, and transformation to suit the needs of his art and time (Roysdon in Anderson 2019: 99).

In the introduction of *David Wojnarowicz: Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* (1994), Lucy R. Lippard examines with great detail many photographs in the series. She observes: 'Wojnarowicz's Rimbaud is always shown facing the camera, usually dressed conservatively in a dark turtleneck, white sweater, and suit jacket, or sleeveless with a vest. The mask photographs as almost real, its abnormal whiteness making the face the initial focus of each image, before the surroundings are taken in' (Lippard 1994: 9-10). The masked figure is captured in dozens of activities and situations, including smoking, in bed with a beer, standing on the Jersey Shore or by street artworks, and eating at a diner's table. Moreover, '[e]ight images were taken in the Hudson River warehouse that Wojnarowicz used as his studio/sketchbook/journal in those years [… ;] Rimbaud is seen holding a gun; standing before a passageway of door frames; next to some of Wojnarowicz's works, including Japanese ideographs and quotes from a book of American slang ('Junk, Nothing but Junk'), and with other texts, such as Joseph Beuys's phrase "The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated"' (Ibid.: 10). The photographs were the first consistent and solid series completed and later made public by Wojnarowicz.

About 30 photographs were taken, also involving his friends Jean Pierre Delage and John Hall as models, while dozens of ideas were found in Wojnarowicz's diaries, the majority of them never realised. The project was supposed to follow a fictional story with Rimbaud as the main character, arriving by boat to New York City and adventuring in a maze of perdition. The work was made public for the first time in June 1980, when the magazine *SoHo News* reached out to Wojnarowicz asking for four pictures of the series to be featured in the centrefold: 'Rimbaud at Coney Island in front of the parachute drop. Rimbaud holding a small pistol in front of a "Jesus Is Coming" mural. Rimbaud at the pier with the torso-hypo graffiti. Rimbaud with a wounded hand' (Carr 2012: 261). The strong connection between the adventures that Wojnarowicz made Rimbaud go through is evident, and the experiment embodies a powerful exchange between the two artists. In this work, the poet is evoked by Wojnarowicz as an ancestor, a father of the culture of the margins who inspired generations of artists and writers.

Escapism plays a key role in both artists' lives. As Fiona Anderson reports, in a letter to Paul Demeny from 1871, Rimbaud writes about his craving for a 'derangement of all the senses' (2019: 102), a both physical and psychical way to escape

a violent and repressive reality. Despite their contexts differing culturally and geographically, Rimbaud and Wojnarowicz shared the experiential dimension of the margins, characterised in both cases by loitering, substance use, and sexual libertinage. In the photographic series, Wojnarowicz shapes a contemporary version of the *poête maudit*, imagining what he would have experienced living in contemporary New York City. As a result, the two lives overlap: Wojnarowicz claimed that if Rimbaud was one of his contemporaries, they would have had the same life.

Some parallels can be found in the two artists' writings as well. In his works, Wojnarowicz often referred to feeling out of place and a desire for a non-existent somewhere else to live with friends and fellow artists able to understand his condition. In his journal, he wrote

> [i]t is the appearance of a portrait, not the immediate vision I love so much: that of the drag queen in the dive waterfront coffee shop turning toward a stranger and giving a coy seductive smile that reveals a mouth of rotted teeth, but the childlike rogue slipped out from the white-sheeted bed of Pasolini; the image of Jean Genet cut loose from the fine lines of fiction, uprooted from age and time and continent, and hung up slowly behind my back against a tin wall. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 14)

In this regard, as Cameron suggests, Wojnarowicz's creative urge manifested itself in 'the process of turning his personal feelings of cultural estrangement into the core of his creative strength, making it especially striking that his earliest developed artistic statement took the form of a masquerade' (Cameron 1999: 7). Likewise, in a letter Arthur Rimbaud wrote to Paul Demeny in August 1871, he describes his life and work in the Ardennes region as abominable and obstinate, hoping for a way to escape his life and find the much-desired freedom, while scared he will be sent by his mother to correctional facilities.[1]

In fact, in *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, the figure disguised as the French poet is protected by the mask while in the fragile condition of being an outcast in a ferocious world. At the same time, his presence cannot help but scream for attention, demanding to be watched and claiming a place to exist in a society that pushed him to the peripheries, just as it did to Wojnarowicz.

New York City at the end of the 70s was experiencing a phase of decline. High crime rates, poverty, and unemployment following the financial crisis pushed hundreds of thousands of people to leave their apartments and the city. Despite the millions of people living and working in New York, a strong sense of isolation and precariousness was experienced, especially by more vulnerable minorities on the

[1] 'Je refusais cette vie ; sans donner mes raisons : c'eût été pitoyable. Jusqu'aujourd'hui, j'ai pu tourner ces échéances. Elle, en est venue à ceci : souhaiter sans cesse mon départ inconsidéré, ma fuite ! Indigent, inexpérimenté, je finirais par entrer aux établissements de correction. Et, dès ce moment, silence sur moi !' (Rimbaud 2015: 125)

streets. In the pictures, Rimbaud is always on his own, alone despite sometimes being part of a crowd, different from any other subject who surrounds him. The mask creates a feeling of impalpability and elusiveness, it 'marks him out as separate: a wanderer or voyeur, unable or unwilling to display his real face' (Laing 2016: 122). This sense of estrangement and isolation is a recurrent theme in Wojnarowicz's body of work, and the impassive face of Rimbaud functions as a proxy of the artist himself in revisiting the places Wojnarowicz lived but also struggled to survive. Both home-like and haunting memories follow one another in Rimbaud's trip around a chaotic New York City. Looking at the pictures, a bidirectional power relation between Rimbaud and the locations portrayed emerges: while he juggles from place to place, enduring abuse and degradation, an overwhelming sense of tentacular attraction to danger creates a vicious circle between survival and a self-destructive drive.

In *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* there is both an effort towards the reappraisal of biographical knowledge and locations and the desire to imagine a series of movements that can bring together the experience of all the people at the margins, and particularly of the artistic figures that had inspired and preceded Wojnarowicz. As Rizk suggests, 'Wojnarowicz constructed histories that would otherwise go unrecorded. In the Rimbaud series, such sites as the desolate Hudson River piers or Times Square's red-light district allude to the lived experiences […] of countless other outsiders to history-queers, juvenile runaways, sex workers, intravenous drug users, the homeless' (Rizk 1999: 48). In this regard, the following section focuses on the tool of the mask and its role in the photographic work analysed.

Rimbaud's mask and identity-making between biographical and collective

Not the presence of the French poet per se but the choice of including the figure of a young Arthur Rimbaud through the object of the mask (and not, for example, adding it posthumously as a collage, a technique widely used by Wojnarowicz) is doubtless one of the central elements of the *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* photographic series.

The presence of the mask in artistic practices is as long as human cultural history. In Western traditions, these face-covering objects were associated with personality traits and specific qualities of the fictional and mythic characters they stood for.

In this respect, in his pathetic theory on tragedy, Hegel (1975) argues that masks did not stand as faithful representations of specific physical traits of the characters performed, but rather recalled the dominant emotional condition or *pathos* that actors were impersonating, aiming to better typify the different characters. In the frame of Western theatre and performance in particular, when actors were wearing masks on stage, they assumed undefined traits and no clear identity (Vervain 2012: 164). While Greek actors often played multiple roles and needed to be seen from afar by the audience present, masks were of great support in recollecting stylised (and often idealised) characteristics (Halliwell 1993).

Malleable and exaggerated, masks stood in the connection between actors and members of the audience, between the fictional, fantastic world and the physical one. Masks transmitted emotions, complementing the vocal element and corporeal gestures of the staged performance. Given the mimetic nature of tragic theatre, masks participated in the action of mirroring: through anonymous impersonation, the public freely interpreted characters and identified fictional elements with real-life experience. While on the one hand masks could limit facial expressiveness and consequentially performative possibilities, they created a great sense of theatricality and immediately recalled the fulcrum and aesthetic dimension of the dramatic act.

As classics scholar Peter Meineck suggests, the 'mask provides a visual focus for emotional communication, and is able to stimulate a deeply personal response from the spectators. The mask demands to be watched' (2011: 121). In this sense, masks play a crucial role in cognitive terms. They attract attention and allow observers to recollect particular spheres of emotional and psychophysical states, together with relevant domains of individual and collective experience. This outcome is related 'to our cognitive prowess at recognising faces, in that we store thousands of physiognomies in our memories and match them to the holistic configuration of the face before us' (Ibid.: 132). Thus, it is historically evident that from the outset masks were predominantly designed and employed in staged forms of artistic expression, functioning as a bridge between spectators and performers in the aesthetic live experience, as a medium between the physical and the fictional (Kimmel 2000: 11).

As Wojnarowicz testified, in contemporary artistic production, the mask ceases to be strictly linked with the sphere of staged performance, experiencing a return to its primordial function: we are identified by our faces, and masks cause an impossibility of recognition and subsequently anonymity. As Laing claims, '[m]asks amplify the way in which skin is a barrier or wall, acting as a marker of separation, singularity, distance' and stand in the opposition between being 'protective, yes,

but a masked face is also frightening […] they reveal our intentions and betray our emotional weather' (Laing 2016: 118-119). Masks not only play a central role in the artistic field, but are also crucial in the public sphere. Masks recur in the continuity between fictional representation and actual life, as long discussed by many authors, including Italian dramatist, writer, and poet Luigi Pirandello. And this aspect was of vital importance also for Wojnarowicz. In fact, Laing continues, '[m]asks also beg the question of the public self: the set, frozen features of politeness and conformity, behind which real desires writhe and twist' (Ibid.: 119). Masks play on the emerging surface, inviting strangers to imagine you as 'someone you are not, living in the closet: these imperatives breed a gangrenous sense of being unknown, of going unregarded. And then of course there are masks as a cover for illegal or deviant activity' (Ibid.).

In the *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* series, the specificity of the subject portrayed implicates consistent differences in the reasons behind the choice of including the mask, as opposed to its traditional aforementioned function. Even if potentially not identifiable by some, the title of the series itself explicitly recalls the centrality of the figure of Rimbaud in this work, both in his biographical story and corpus of work. While the mask for the most part is impersonation and alterity, here it stands for a specific otherness. The French poet is invited into Wojnarowicz's world with a staring and blank portrait, as an observer capturing the experience of his surroundings. Nonetheless, he always appears alone.

In a letter Arthur Rimbaud wrote in 1871 from Charleville to his professor Georges Izambard, he declared: 'C'est faux, de dire je pense. On devrait dire ON me pense. Pardon du jeu de mot : « je est un autre »'[2] (Rimbaud 2015: 86-87). The intended disagreement between the first person *je* (I) associated with the verb declined into the third person *est* (is) emphasises the facets and nuances, but also partition and partibility of the individual into multiple. Rimbaud played, and eventually was, multiple. Young poet and rebel, later coffee and arms dealer in Africa, alterity is central in Rimbaud's life and the way he understood the relationship with the other and oneself, as well as the multiple roles he had to play to meet the expectations of his family and contemporaries. The I and the other coexist, differ, and are one and the same in Rimbaud, while they contrast what is outside and, at times, the idea he had of himself and that he was forced to confine.

The same expression can also be found in another letter he wrote in the same year to poet and friend Paul Demeny: 'Car Je est un autre. […] Cela m'est évident : j'assiste à l'éclosion de ma pensée : je la regarde, je l'écoute […] : la symphonie fait son remuement dans les profondeurs, ou vient d'un bond sur la scène'[3] (Ibid.: 91). The metamorphic theme is dominant in Rimbaud's writing, both claiming the

[2] 'It is wrong to say I think. One should say ONE thinks of me. Excuse me the pun: "I is another"' (translation by the author).

[3] 'Because I is another. […] This is obvious to me: I witness the blossoming of my thought: I look at it, I listen to it […]: the symphony stirs in the depths, or jumps onto the scene' (translation by the author).

importance of malleability and plasticity and the need to escape in multiple dimensions other than reality. In the narrative captured by Wojnarowicz, the mask of the poet in his teenage years plays on this dichotomy in two different directions. On the one hand, the mask hides the person behind, whether a friend, the spectator, or Wojnarowicz himself, guaranteeing them safe protection to appear in public. This condition is opposed to the absence of privacy that the city causes, a context in which a permanent status of exposure is demanded despite the irrelevance of each individual being just like everybody else in the crowd. On the other hand, the renowned face of Rimbaud clashes with the anonymous and sordid environment in which the photographs are shot. The portrait, shot by the French photographer Étienne Carajat in ca. 1872, is not only the most famous and reproduced image of the poet for its iconic, young, and romantic look but also one of the only eight photos remaining today of Arthur Rimbaud, and one of the two from the Parisian years in which he was actively writing poetry (Desse 2014). In between these opposites stands the mask in its attempt to create the affirmative aesthetic dimension of a valid reality: it is both an artificial construction and the honest expression of the artist's creative vision (Pérez 2015-2016).

A sense of indefinite identity brings together *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* with the traditional function of masks in theatre. Is Wojnarowicz identifying with the Symbolist poet or is he standing behind the mask portraying Rimbaud? Neither of the possible answers can be stated with certainty, probably both are correct to some extent. What is nevertheless more striking in this work is the attempt pursued by Wojnarowicz to erase the relevance of individual identity and capture in the figure of Rimbaud a much broader sense of cross-generational community. It is indeed possible to see the many elements that directly unite the two subjective experiences of Wojnarowicz and Rimbaud. As Donegan writes in her review of the Whitney Museum's retrospective *David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night* (July-September 2018), 'Wojnarowicz identified with Rimbaud when he took those photos, and in the twenty-six years since his death, he has became [sic] a Rimbaud-like figure: young, iconoclastic, gay, and gone too soon' (Donegan 2018). However, for a politically and socially engaged Wojnarowicz, the attempt to bring together a united collectivity was much more important than just talking about his own story. To do so, Wojnarowicz recurred to the construction of a space-time frame out of standard historical order, in which Rimbaud, himself, and a broader community can meet.

Mask as plasticity: travelling space, travelling time

The decision to include the figure of Arthur Rimbaud in the photographic series through the tool of the mask allows Wojnarowicz to compress diachronic discrepancies into an environment able to bring together elements from different moments in history. The compression of time is a concept that recurs in Wojnarowicz's body of work, often constructed through collage and videomaking narratives that overcome the limits of traditional chronological ordering. In this case, the French poet can travel through time, be part of Wojnarowicz's New York, collaborate and even overlap in the same figure with the American artist.
In an interview with Jonathan Olsoff, David Wojnarowicz recounts his first encounter with Rimbaud's poetry:

> [w]hen I lived in Paris in 1979, I read the work of Arthur Rimbaud and there were similarities in our backgrounds [...]. When I returned to New York City I wondered – given that he was living around the turn of the century, and had started writing at age nineteen, and written some of the most beautiful poetry that we have in the world today – I wanted to consider what his life would be like if he lived in New York City in the present. And so I did a series of photographs using a mask of his face, ostensibly of Rimbaud in various daily activities. (Ambrosino 2006: 219)

Wojnarowicz makes Rimbaud travel into the landscapes of his teenage years, in a connection between a younger self and the French poet's experience.
This combination of back-and-forth movements through time is a very powerful operation, recalling elements from both historical and personal past. Making Rimbaud visit his own time, Wojnarowicz creates an atemporal figure in a suspended dimension. 'Another self?,' Laing wonders, '[a] sexy, nerveless simulacrum, toughened by experience. Was it a figure he could enter (as later, in his diary: "I want to create a myth that I can one day become"), or a way of retroactively protecting the goofy, vulnerable little boy that he'd once been?' (Laing 2016: 133). The mask functions as a tool for time travelling, not to the nineteenth century Paris in which Rimbaud lived, but rather to an infant mirror stage in which Wojnarowicz tries to recognise his true self for the first time, and erase at the same time the distinctive elements of his personal experience through repetition without difference: the never-changing captured portrayal of Rimbaud makes the definition and recognition of individual personhood impossible.

As Fiona Anderson argues, in the waterfront ruins Wojnarowicz opens the possibility of temporal overlap, shaping a place as physical as imaginary, where present and pasts, and their inhabitants, meet. This dimension is similarly reproduced in the photographic series, in which Wojnarowicz creates a relationship with Rimbaud that is not passive but is adapted and altered in a process of negotiation and transformation (Roysdon in Anderson 2019: 99). Present and past, Rimbaud's and Wojnarowicz's lives are not simply mixed or put into dialogue, but are reworked to shape a third element in which they both participate. Both inhabited by spectral, queer, intergenerational icons and flesh, Anderson calls the world of *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* as one of 'cross-temporal collaboration' (Ibid., 100) of both reality, mythology, and art making. In this way, Wojnarowicz does not displace Rimbaud to his present, but encounters him as he is already in the present, one that is hybrid and multigenerational (Freeman 2010: 95). The spatial and temporal frame created by Wojnarowicz within the series allows the compression of times and activities (Blinderman 1989: 54), what Barney Warf defines as the phenomenal and procedural complexity capable of 'caus[ing] the relative distances between places […] to contract, effectively making such places grow "closer"' (Warf 2017).
The idea of exploring life and art beyond the boundaries imposed by temporal constraints often recurs in Wojnarowicz's writings. In his diary *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* he wrote:

> I'm the robotic kid looking through digital eyes past the windshield into the preinvented world. I'm the robotic kid gone haywire in the sudden mounds and coils of krazy-kat landscapes. I'm the robotic kid lost for a fraction of evolutionary time in the outskirts of tribal boundaries; I've slipped through the keyhole of an enormous psychic erector set of a child civilization. I'm the robotic kid lost from the blind eye of government and wandering the edges of a computerized landscape; all civilization is turning like one huge gear in my forehead. I'm seeing my hands and feet grow thousands of miles long and millions of years old and I'm experiencing the exertion it takes to move these programmed limbs. I'm the robotic kid, the human motor-works, and surveying the scene before me I wonder: What can these feet level? What can these feet pound and flatten? What can these hands raise? (Wojnarowicz 1991: 76)

Here, Wojnarowicz defines himself through elements that cross the diachronic depth of human and personal experience, bringing together his political present with the computerised future, a million-year-old bodily practice that merges in the robotic flesh of a kid and digital gaze. It's in evolution and contamination that the artist can perceive himself and decipher his present.

The reality described by Wojnarowicz appears like a limbo from which the artist was not able to escape, a place in which he experienced the impossibility of living fully. In this context, Rimbaud functions as a stand-in for the artist, participating in Wojnarowicz's experience but free from the judgment the artist suffered from his contemporaries. This should be the role of the poet in society, as Rimbaud wrote in the same letter to Paul Demeny in 1871, '[l]e Poète se fait *voyant* par un long, immense et raisonné *dérèglement* de *tous les sens*. Toutes les formes d'amour, de souffrance, de folie ; il cherche lui-même, il épuise en lui tous les poisons, pour n'en garder que les quintessences'[4] (Rimbaud 2015 : 93-94). Rimbaud freely moves in time, able to distance the outside world protected by the mask and experience the rawness of Wojnarowicz becoming a youthful mythic figure. Again, the idea of compressed spatiotemporality returns, bringing together under the category of the illicit and socially unaccepted the two rebel artists, together with Rimbaud's Paris during the Belle Époque and Wojnarowicz's twentieth-century New York. In this regard, writer, activist and art critic Lucy R. Lippard claims that Wojnarowicz's

> photography is not "documentary" in any ordinary sense. The Rimbaud pictures reflect extremely personal emotions […]. Functioning as a compression of historical time and activity, they also constitute a kind of objective autobiography, permitting Wojnarowicz simultaneously to be himself and to step outside himself. The masked man records and perhaps exorcises a life his creator was gradually abandoning. Photographs, like writing, he said, could *strip the power from a memory or an event…cut the ropes of an experience*. At the same time, for viewers, those connections are not cut, but forged. (Lippard 1994, 10)

The past holds a powerful imaginative potential that becomes, through Rimbaud and other cross-generational artistic figures, a space to express present states and emotions. Memory is for Wojnarowicz a place to inhabit, at times safer and freer than reality, amplifying interpretative possibilities and practices of resistance.
The series portrays specific moments in historical and geographical terms, but also a retrospective of Wojnarowicz's personal life. By making Rimbaud live that moment, Wojnarowicz captures his private history while detaching himself from it, shaping a new version of his experience that can then belong to anyone else, as an object of contemplation, a new whole contemporary myth. As years go by, the alluring and dangerous world Wojnarowicz lived in 'was followed by an era almost opposite in every regard, years when Manhattan became dominated by money and death, a sleek wealthy city rising, while an entire generation of gay men, drug users, and others were being buried' (Vitale 2018).

[4] 'The Poet becomes a seer for a long, immense and reasoned disorder of all senses. All forms of love, suffering, madness; he seeks himself, he depletes all poisons in himself, to keep only the quintessence' (translation by the author).

Conclusion

While the use of the mask in *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* contributes to the representation of the alienation Wojnarowicz suffered all his life, the artist portrayed in his work the narrative of a much broader collective experience, able to bring together individuals in a cross-generational community through space and time. The mask of the French poet, as a tool for identity shifting and making, 'emerged as a central strategy of Wojnarowicz's collage aesthetic as well as the conceptual operation at the heart of the artist's formulation of a spiritual genealogy and vision of history' in support of 'the necessity for, but also the complications of, actively constructing a personal history as a defence against the many ways that silence may be imposed' (Rizk 1999: 47-48).
More than the depiction of his estrangement per se, Wojnarowicz's choice of the mask of Rimbaud seems an attempt to make people feel less alienated, to make them feel like someone else. The experience of Olivia Laing in front of the photographic series perfectly evokes this effect:

> [t]his sums up exactly how I felt about his work. It was the rawness and vulnerability of his expression that proved so healing to my own feelings of isolation: the willingness to admit to failure or grief, to let himself be touched, to acknowledge desire, anger, pain, to be emotionally alive. His self-exposure was in itself a cure for loneliness, dissolving the sense of difference that comes when one believes one's feelings or desires to be uniquely shameful. (Laing 2016: 160)

Wojnarowicz repeatedly wrote in his diaries how he felt understood and seen reading Rimbaud's poetry. Likewise, he hoped to achieve the same effect with his community witnessing his work portraying the adventures of the French poet around New York. Wojnarowicz thus contributes with his practice to the redefinition of dominant ideological and socio-economic temporalities, in favour of plural ones. The Rimbaud series encapsulates the possibility to play with time and multigenerational chronology, within what will be later defined as queer temporalities, a malleable frame that opposes heteronormativity and its reductions reclaiming a queer dimension of rethinking history, as well as relationships and cultural concepts (Dinshaw, Edelman, Ferguson et al. 2007).

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