

ON FANDOM AND SMALLTOWN BOYS

A Dialogue

Matt Wolf and Marvin J. Taylor

As a politically aggravated thirteen-year-old in 1995, I used my bar mitzvah as an opportunity to appeal for quality popular entertainment. At the time, ABC Networks had canceled a teen drama called *My So-Called Life*, which depicted high school student Angela Chase's weekly life lessons. Angela's self-conscious interior monologues complemented a gritty Pittsburgh teen ensemble, including recovering alcoholic Rayanne, an illiterate hunk named Jordan, and a gay, homeless, Latino character known for his ingenious asides, Ricky Vasquez. In 1994, when *My So-Called Life* first aired, Ricky was the only Latino, openly gay teenager on prime-time television. Complexly addressing race, class, sexuality, abuse, and addiction, the show's producers took meaningful risks, which resonated strongly with my peer group.

Meanwhile, America Online had exploded. Besides the plethora of gay chat rooms and message boards, an intensely committed culture of fandom emerged on the Internet. Assembling shrines of pirated media images, poetic tributes, and interactive forums for gushing stalkers, fan sites became important community-building spaces in which teenagers developed meaningful relationships. The fandom culture surrounding *My So-Called Life*—mostly driven by adoration for the show's protagonist—was explicitly queer.

Such risky television is usually short-lived. Following a nineteen-episode run, ABC announced the show's cancellation. In response, its outraged fans shifted their adoring fandom effort to grassroots activism. Listservs and Web sites

organized direct mailings to ABC executives, and countless online petitions were circulated with the imperative "Save *My So-Called Life*." Fandom shrines were replaced with archival databases, which included massive catalogs of multimedia, fan fiction modeled on the show's unresolved plots and characters, transcriptions, episode analyses, and interactive fan response forums fashioned for salvage preservation. This youth activist logic prompted my own appeal on the occasion of my bar mitzvah. I instructed the attentive crowd of old Jews and preteens to fight for their beliefs and to write ABC in support of *My So-Called Life*.

Three years later I was very publicly gay and involved in statewide legislative activism to amend discrimination policies affecting queer and transgender students in California high schools. Following the television moments of Ellen DeGeneres and Matthew Shepard, the cultural temper had shifted, and queer youth became a visibly neglected social and political entity. An aggressive movement led by queer youth emerged alongside high-school-based "Gay-Straight Alliance" clubs, which effected concrete change in school policies and profoundly transformed ingrained cultural ideas about gender and sexuality among young people, particularly the generational group dubbed "the Class of 2000."

Now, as a twenty-two-year-old filmmaker in New York City, I examine the recent past and the relationship between television and generational queer politics. My video *Smalltown Boys* (2003) is an experimental exploration of the life of AIDS activist artist and writer David Wojnarowicz. Using historical fantasy, reenactment, and fandom strategies, I imagine a relationship between Wojnarowicz and the fictional Sarah Rosenberg, a teenage lesbian on the Upper West Side in 1994 who is fighting to save *My So-Called Life* from cancellation.¹ The video, using a fake documentary form with talking heads and staged b-roll, figures Sarah as a generational foil to Wojnarowicz. Their imaginary relationship marks a generational transition and the shifting ideas about activism in queer culture.

Archival strategies build formal and conceptual connections between the fake teen documentary and Wojnarowicz's biography. Shuttling between generational paradigms and representations, the two narratives compare the *So-Called Life* fans and the generation of AIDS activists, whose cultural production and resistance complemented Wojnarowicz's fierce output. This article discusses "archival filmmaking" in relation to queer biographical narrative. Mimicking the formal structure of *Smalltown Boys*, the article prompts a response and a contrasting analysis of Wojnarowicz's artwork by Marvin J. Taylor, director of the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, whose remarkable Downtown Collection houses Wojnarowicz's papers.



David Wojnarowicz, from untitled video in *Smalltown Boys*. Copyright estate of David Wojnarowicz. David Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library, New York University

Sorting through Wojnarowicz's papers is an inspiring and overwhelming task. Thousands of objects and documents, including original artworks, receipts, personal journals, manuscripts, magazine clippings, pornography, slides, videos, and snapshots, are the residue of Wojnarowicz's prolific life and career as a multi-disciplinary artist, activist, and writer. My relationship to Wojnarowicz is one of fandom. I first came across his work through the catalog from a postmortem retrospective in 1999 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. In addition, historical documentaries on public television taught me about ACT UP and the AIDS activist movement in New York during the 1980s and 1990s. Conceptualizing such political activity and cultural production as historically distant, I share with my generational peers a certain perspective about queer history and politics.

When I decided to make a video about Wojnarowicz, I wanted to complicate the traditional biographical project with an experimental documentary praxis, infused with historical fantasy and interpretation. Rather than simply develop a historical context for his work, I tried to fashion a symbolically charged generational optic through which archival and biographical materials filter. An empathetic breakdown separates Sarah Rosenberg, growing up in New York during an intense era of the AIDS epidemic, from Wojnarowicz's struggle. Juxtaposing



Burning house stencil. Printed by permission of Matt Wolf

Sarah's fake story with Wojnarowicz's real one illuminates a generational disjunction brewing in the early 1990s.

In *Smalltown Boys* Wojnarowicz's biography is perverted by its symbolic connection to the historical fiction of Sarah Rosenburg. In a newscasting voice, the video's narrator says: "In May of 1977, strapped for cash, David Wojnarowicz donated sperm at a Manhattan reproduction clinic. Shortly after, Rachel Rosenburg, a successful Manhattan professional, conceived her daughter Sarah via artificial insemination." This information construes a fictitious, anonymous paternity that unites Wojnarowicz and Sarah. A potentially infectious biological bond connects them, and Sarah inherits the biographical legacy of her father, who remains anonymous. In effect, *Smalltown Boys* is a fantasy about a Wojnarowicz reconstituted in 1994, only two years after his death, as an upper-middle-class teenage lesbian with an overbearing Jewish mother.

I developed experimental formal strategies to handle a range of archival materials associated with Wojnarowicz's artwork and biography. His intensely direct and emotional art uses a quasi-mythological personal iconography that resists traditional critical and historical analysis. Through reenactment, I resignified two of his most iconic images: the burning house stencil and the *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* photograph series. In the spring of 2002 the New York City sub-

way system was filled with a series of AIDS-related advertisements, including public service announcements featuring Magic Johnson and promotional posters for the MTV AIDS benefit concert. In *Smalltown Boys* an anonymous hand tags Wojnarowicz's burning house stencil onto each of these subway ads. This aesthetic intervention reactivates Wojnarowicz's political rage in a culture where AIDS has become mainstream and visible. Nonetheless, the tagging is a fandom strategy, similar to the creation of graphic shrines and fan fictions by *My So-Called Life* enthusiasts. Appropriation and citation signify reverence for Wojnarowicz and acknowledge an aesthetic debt to him.

In a similar vein, I traced Wojnarowicz's footsteps by reenacting the *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* photograph series. In 1980 Wojnarowicz first published these photographs in *SoHo News*, which featured a model wearing a photocopied mask of the French symbolist poet in various downtown locations and scenes. Using a digital photograph to reproduce an identical mask, I copied Wojnarowicz's scenes to restage the static black-and-white photographs in color video. A deliberate fakeness characterizes these seemingly archival gestures.

Most prominently, of course, Sarah Rosenberg's narrative appears in a fake documentary format. Through scripted interviews and staged actions, the actors maintain an artificial, rehearsed poise evocative of social documentaries. Rather than attempt to trick viewers and appear naturalistic, I treated Sarah's documentary as biased and generationally specific. Its fakeness is conceptualized to form a stark generational contrast to Wojnarowicz's extremely personal politics and radical sincerity. Comparing the threat of losing *My So-Called Life* to the prospect of losing one's life to AIDS should give one pause. Nonetheless, in *Smalltown Boys* I wanted to consider the so-called ambivalence and apathy of my generation. How do we, the Class of 2000, and others reconcile our fandom, debts, and inheritances from our cultural predecessors? Can we proceed with the same political and aesthetic strategies as we consider the current cultural landscape?

Smalltown Boys raises these questions, but without presenting solutions to them. Unlike the conventional social or activist documentary, it avoids coherent political imperatives. I ultimately hoped to fluidly combine fake and real archival materials that do not easily fit together. The ongoing collisions between these materials mirror the juxtaposition of biographical subjects from contrasting generations. I hope that a compelling cross-generational dialogue results from their oscillating narratives, in this article as well as in the video.—Matt Wolf



Arthur Rimbaud in New York video reenactment. Printed by permission of Matt Wolf

Generation. 1. Act or process of producing offspring; procreation. 2.
 a. A single stage in the succession of natural descent; hence the body
 of men, animals, or plants of the same genealogical rank or remove
 from an ancestor. b. Ordinary period of time at which one rank follows
 another, or father is succeeded by child—usually taken to be 33
 years.

—*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1951)

Matt Wolf's visually beautiful video *Smalltown Boys* is obsessed with lineage, legacy, and legitimacy. Using the manuscripts, photos, drawings, diaries, objects, and video footage that David Wojnarowicz left behind at his untimely death at age thirty-seven, Wolf produced a biographical piece on the artist-activist that became an autobiographical piece for himself as well, and a sentinel call to his peers—his generation, if you will.

When I was asked to respond to Wolf's video from a generational viewpoint, I was both excited and a bit dismayed: excited because I like his work very much, dismayed because I don't tend to think of myself as that far removed from the students I work with every day. Of course, I am older than they, by twenty years or so. But generation is not always chronometric. Since 2001 I have been collecting the papers of queer activists who were affiliated with the downtown scene. In

conversations with Alan Klein, Michelangelo Signorile, and Jay Blotcher, among others, the question of how we transfer queer history and activism has been a constant topic. Wolf has asked the same question, but from the point of view of a young queer man. Moreover, he has asked it not only of people his own age but also of those of us who have been around awhile. In this dialogue I pose a set of questions about *Smalltown Boys* that I hope will provoke discussions of queer lineage, queer legitimacy, and queer legacy.

On the surface, *Smalltown Boys* addresses in a rather straightforward manner what activism is and what kind of activism is appropriate. Comparing Wojnarowicz's life and work with Sarah Rosenberg's first attempts at activism, Wolf asks what kind of activism his generation can engage in that will be in any way like Wojnarowicz's. Sarah's rejection of her mother's lame, hippie, feel-good activism raises the question of how young activists deal with the generation preceding them. Wojnarowicz is a complicated activist in this way. Much of his early—what I would call romantic—work focuses on our separation from the natural world. It has the vestiges of an almost hippie approach to nature. There is one major difference, however: there was little room for queers in hippie activism. As Bruce Benderson notes in *Toward the New Degeneracy*, homosexuality was present but stigmatized by hippies.² It took the lesbian and gay activists of the 1970s to foreground homosexuality as a separate issue and to demonstrate that gay rights and equality were achievable only through different kinds of actions. By the time I came out in 1980, the important legacy of these activists, some only four or five years older than I, was already far removed from what we thought about ourselves. Carlo McCormick, the noted historian of downtown New York City art, reminded me recently that in the early 1980s Keith Haring and his friends had a queer coven, “Fags against Facial Hair,” that rejected the activism and self-styling that gay men had adopted in the 1970s. My friends and I felt the same way. We were different from them and struggled in our black-bedecked souls to find terminology and modes of expression that set us apart from the previous generation. Unfortunately, AIDS loomed around the corner and required new modes of activism and ways of being queer that none of us could have foreseen in the heady days of the early 1980s.

Generational shift in activism is inevitable. As Oscar Wilde said, “Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.”³ Each generation has to define its own space for activism, organized and structured around a set of issues important at that time. Only later does that generation begin to see how its work, so radical in its moment, rests on the backs of those who came before. This is certainly true of the generation before my

own. Without the large networks of men who tricked together and became friends during the 1970s, there would not have been a community of caregivers to look after one another during the earliest days of the AIDS crisis, for example. If queer activism succeeded gay activism, then is *Smalltown Boys* a call for something beyond queer? If so, what?

What makes Wojnarowicz a model for activism? His romantic early work, while so elegant and moving, is almost contradicted by his later activism. What parts of Wojnarowicz do you desire? Everyone has made him into something they want: hustler, modern-day Rimbaud, artist who never sold out, ur-AIDS activist. The appropriation of Wojnarowicz leads most people to a kind of nostalgia. Is there a nostalgia now for activism? Is it true that the Class of 2000 is not politically engaged? The same was said about those of us who grew up in the late 1970s. Aren't nostalgia and activism incompatible? Isn't nostalgia a conservative gesture, a glance backward, and activism a hope, a vision for the future? Besides suggesting this, Wolf has described fandom as an archival strategy, as something that holds on to something that is otherwise lost. In nearly twenty years of working in archives, I have never heard this idea expressed. I would like to ask Wolf to elaborate on it. It is a provocative idea that goes to the heart of issues of archiving and memory.

As for archives, one problem I see all too often is the conflation of the archival document with the "real." Unquestionably, archival objects, as physical representations of past experiences, have a totemic power. No one understood this more clearly than Wojnarowicz. In his art certain objects appear again and again as that personal set of symbols that Wolf describes. But Wojnarowicz also kept physical representations of these symbols in an orange crate that he called "the Magic Box." On opening it, you experience a rush of emotion, knowing that he handled these totems and imbued them with meaning. But was the keeping of this box as innocent as it appears? Are these objects simply the fossil remains of a life's experience, or are they themselves a performance? In Wolf's video, there is a scene shot in a car in which Wojnarowicz is speaking about a small blue bug that he lovingly allows to crawl over his hand. The text seems too sensitive—too contrived and full of hippie bullshit. If you listen closely at the very beginning of this scene, you can hear Wojnarowicz ask collaborator Marion Scemama, "Are you filming?" Wojnarowicz's seemingly natural, unrehearsed paean to nature and the "real" world is a performance. For me, the staged aspect of "spontaneity" emphasizes the need to interrogate any archival object, no matter what its format, to see whether it is or is not authentic. Archival documents have a greater ability to evoke strong emotions than print or other secondary objects, but beware of mistaking these



Bug on Wojnarowicz's hand. Copyright estate of David Wojnarowicz. David Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library, New York University

emotions for reality. I would like to hear more about why Wolf left the words “Are you filming?” in his video, when he has so thoroughly appropriated Wojnarowicz and made him his own through the cutting, editing, and appropriation of Wojnarowicz's body and work.

When I first watched *Smalltown Boys*, my first thought was, why does Sarah Rosenburg have to be a girl? I assumed that it is because Wolf wants to address the problem of gender that has haunted all lesbian, gay, and queer activism. Certainly, using a female character allows him to show a mother-daughter transfer, or failure to transfer, an activist orientation, rather than a patrilinear progression. Still, the shift in gender haunts me. Why also title the work *Smalltown Boys* after the Bronski Beat song that represents not only the sense of isolation we felt as teens but also the sex that every queer boy had while listening to Jimmy Somerville sing it? I share Wolf's desire to address the gender issues of activism, and yet something is lost in the shift. By making the young activist Sarah, instead of Saul, Wolf displaces the male homoerotic charge onto the female and eliminates the possibility of intergenerational sex instigated by the younger partner. This technique therefore removes the possibility not only of pedophilia but also of teen queer sexuality, which is displaced into activism. Wojnarowicz's own life, as he depicted it in his writings, was not just about pedophilic abuse suffered at the

hands of johns he hustled (it is hard to say how much of his hustling narrative is to be believed). In fact, it is clear that the young Wojnarowicz was attracted to older men—all of his adult relationships were with older men. By shifting the gender here, Wolf evades the complicated topic of intergenerational attraction, but at the cost of a more complex understanding of this very kind of attraction. It cannot be underestimated how tightly erotic charge and activism go hand in hand. ACT UP meetings were not only vital planning sessions but also places for queers to meet. Further, is it not possible that if intergenerational desire can transfer from a younger to an older partner, then the spirit of activism can move in the same direction?

Wolf's decision to have a financially strapped Wojnarowicz donate the sperm that is used to impregnate Sarah's mother is intriguing. Why is this essentializing of influence necessary? Why, in fact, have traditional familial bonds at all as conduits for activism and queer culture? Why not have queer parenting through aunts and uncles? Through lovers and tricks? Aren't the modes of generation already in place for the Class of 2000? Wasn't the activism surrounding *My So-Called Life* just as real as ACT UP in the effects it had on the participants? Granted, the stakes were different, and it may seem absurd to compare the two, but at some level the passion and commitment that lead to activism are born out of loss and a desire to build communities to bring about change. Each generation finds its own issues in the historical moment in which it lives.

A coda on loss: *Smalltown Boys* is about loss—loss of youth, loss of naïveté, loss of love, and the great loss of the AIDS epidemic. It is also about the loss of memory in queer communities that occurs because they lack the cultural mechanisms with which to preserve their history. Our lineage is not written down. It is not linear. Archives preserve the fragments of our experiences so we can interact with those who are lost. Wolf has entered into a dialogue with Wojnarowicz, a dialogue that I know he wishes had taken place in real time, because when I first met Wolf, he asked me if I had ever met Wojnarowicz. I was sad to say that I had not. Wojnarowicz left us with a legacy. What we do with it, and how successfully, will be judged, no doubt, by successive generations.—Marvin J. Taylor

So often young people use generationality as an excuse to erase histories and legacies and begin with a clean slate. But Taylor also remembers that in the early 1980s previous generations of activists questioned the sincerity of his own peer group's political ideas. Critiquing the supposedly apolitical Class of 2000 is in fact a recurrent conversation that always surrounds the awkward emergence of new values and styles of expression. Taylor's interest in a specifically queer activism and transference of knowledge and legacy particularly intrigues me. He



Sarah Rosenberg, from *Smalltown Boys*. Printed by permission of Matt Wolf

asks, “If queer activism succeeded gay activism, then is *Smalltown Boys* a call for something beyond queer? If so, what?” Without resorting to totalizing claims, I would like to continue to examine fandom as a new style of activism and archiving. The institutions of fan-based communication and “action” have certainly evolved from concert swooning. Yet like the sexually charged corners of ACT UP meetings, the more abstract zones of fandom host a peculiar intersection of fantasy, desire, and community-based need for organization and preservation.

I want to respond most directly to Taylor’s interrogation of Sarah’s gender and my own ambivalent neutering of a potentially eroticized intergenerational exchange. On the one hand, as I tread closely to autobiography, I want to avoid all “coming-of-age” narrative conventions. Sexual awakening is most often the key feature in this now standard queer genre of storytelling. By using the Bronski Beat’s “Smalltown Boy” (by all means “the” coming-of-age anthem) as a recurrent score and title, I tried to reconcile the stifled pangs of autobiography with my complementary interest in the conflicted “gay and lesbian” parts of queer activism. I had always imagined that Wojnarowicz, through biological transference, *becomes* Sarah. How do we reconsider Wojnarowicz’s heroism if he is a privileged, female, and most certainly less poetically inspired teenager in 1994? This biographical reevaluation destabilizes an accepted heroic model and calls into question the val-

ues and aesthetics of the established left-wing queer culture. But Taylor is totally right when he flinches at this essentializing of influence. Why must Sarah's activist spirit be a lucky inheritance from a conventional familial paradigm? Strategies for making change can and should be taught and demonstrated through more creative models. Taylor provocatively elaborates on the connection between generationality and queer paternity by examining intergenerational sex as an alternative model for transferring political ideas.

Taylor asks, "Why not have queer parenting through aunts and uncles? Through lovers and tricks? Aren't the modes of generation already in place for the Class of 2000?" Clearly, intergenerational sex has symbolically generated familial and paternal chains of support, influence, and communication throughout history. Nonetheless, I wonder if these idealistic conceptions of gay male sexuality (romanticized by Wojnarowicz himself, of course) still captivate young people. In 1988 Leo Bersani asked how sexual pleasure generated politics during the AIDS epidemic. "Gay men's 'obsession' with sex," he wrote, "far from being denied, should be celebrated [but] not because of its communal virtues, not because of its subversive potential for parodies of machismo, [and] not because it offers a model of genuine pluralism to a society that at once celebrates and punishes pluralism."⁴ Although Bersani defended an uninhibited gay male sexuality during the homophobic backlash to the AIDS epidemic, he questioned the symbolic politicization and the utopic glorification of gay male sexuality. My personal response — perhaps itself part of a generational trend — is the feeling that idealizations of gay sexuality involve a rhetoric of "liberation," indeed nostalgia for a previous generation's politics and experience. Of course, liberation is the act or process of trying to achieve equal rights and status. But are we now too mainstream, too visible and acceptable, to desire a kind of sexual liberation that renders our sexuality countercultural and radical? If mainstream gay politics, specifically the politics of gay marriage, neutralize and soften the edge of gay sexuality, then is a call for liberated, utopic, and radical intergenerational sexuality in fact a nostalgic impulse that clings to previous ideals and modes of expression?

For gay teens, "sexual identity" is less underground now than it once was. Queer teens go to school dances in same-sex couples and see themselves dating on television. But this circumstance recalls Sarah's dilemma. "Behind the acceptance and support," she says, "is real fear, and I feel so alone." Sarah's peers may accept her as a "gay teen," but they ignore or disapprove of open expressions of her sexuality. Consequently, Sarah is a prude, and *Smalltown Boys* is a prude film. Unlike the countercultural affiliations fiercely paraded by previous generations of

gays, including Wojnarowicz, Sarah straddles the mainstream, in which her gay identity fits but her queer sexuality must be disguised or displaced.

Sarah's repression points again to the topic of fandom: she replaces her queer sexuality by identifying with gay characters and the female protagonist from *My So-Called Life*. In a similar vein, we might consider the thousands of young gay children around the world who transfer their queer sexuality to obsessive adoration and fandom for the queer enigma of all queer enigmas, Michael Jackson. Of course, fandom's modes of adulation and obsession reek with repressed desire. Nonetheless, fan-based expression and communication always materialize in community contexts, such as mailing lists, Web sites, Internet-based bulletin boards, and live events like concerts or, in the case of Jackson, court trials contesting charges of pedophilia. In all seriousness, common desire related to star subjects unites disparate individuals around the world.⁵ Such fan communities catalyze real-life relationships and sometimes even spawn movements. Furthermore, the predominance of Internet-based fandom enables people to connect and express ideas across boundaries of gender, sexuality, race, class, nationality, and ability.

Still, I wonder how the structures of fan-based communication and organization might lead to concrete change or to what we traditionally consider activism. Underground punk rock and riot-grrl music models have certainly paved the way, notably with fanzines, which artists, activists, and kids brilliantly produce to express political, aesthetic, and personal ideas. But I want to readdress Marvin's question "Is *Smalltown Boys* a call for something beyond queer?" Yes, the structures and modes of expression in fandom are not exclusively queer. Instead, the precarious institutions of fandom cause and accelerate instant commiseration, collective frustration, and, most important, shared fantasy and desire between unlikely partners and cohorts. Ultimately, when considering the political potential of the Class of 2000, we must closely watch the most genuine and complex networks of communication, where young people express their ideas with unique style and romantic commitment. I think that my generation feels despondent and more than a little insecure about the hippie idealism surrounding past historical transformations, which made it seem quite possible to "change the world." So I cling to Taylor's thoughtful recollection: "We were different from them [the previous generation of activists] and struggled in our black-bedecked souls to find terminology and modes of expression that set us apart. . . . Unfortunately, AIDS loomed around the corner and required new modes of activism and ways of being queer that none of us could have foreseen."

Notes

1. Johanna Fateman and Rachel Greene discuss fandom in relation to community and art in "People with Similar Turn-ons," in *Whitney Biennial 2004*, ed. Chrissie Iles and Shamim M. Momin (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 86–89.
2. Bruce Benderson, *Toward the New Degeneracy: An Essay* (New York: Edgewise, 1997).
3. Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (London: John Lane at the Bodley Head, 1894), 81.
4. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 222.
5. Needless to say, in the past fandom united queer people around objects of camp delight, such as hyperbolic movie stars and opera divas. What I want to address more specifically is Internet-based fandom.