Between 1978 and 1980, David Wojnarowicz created the *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* series, nearly five hundred black-and-white photographs of someone wearing a Rimbaud mask in New York City and its surrounds.\(^1\) The photographs say, “He would have visited Coney Island”; “He would have seen porn in Times Square”; “He would have eaten a hamburger and fries.” Spotting the nineteenth-century French poet in the Big Apple is more than delightful. We, whoever feel addressed by him, are like him, and he is a source for our identification, a root for our identity. He is also isolated and alone. When he stands on the subway platform, everyone faces away from him. When he goes to Coney Island, the often overcrowded and public place is empty. In one photograph, the figure lies beneath someone, but our Rimbaud might as well be alone.

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The image on the mask is a reproduction of the Étienne Carjat portrait, which Rimbaud biographer Graham Robb reminds is “now the face most often associated with Rimbaud.”  

Wojnarowicz likely copied the image from the cover of the New Directions edition of *Illuminations*. In this portrait, one of the few photographs that exist of the poet, the seventeen-year-old looks away at something we cannot see. “A faraway look has been obtained.” The forever-young Rimbaud appears wise beyond his years. He looks both to the future and to the past, where infinite possibility meets a condensation of time, where what has not yet happened converges with what already has. For Robb, this is “a picture of Rimbaud pretending to be a poet.” But Rimbaud will be a poet and, for many of us who identify with the New York Downtown scene, Rimbaud will have felt like our poet. And he, whoever he is, has been representing us, whoever we are, for a long time.

The name of Arthur Rimbaud must not be omitted from our galaxy. We are Rimbaudists without our knowing or liking it. He is the patron of our many poses and flights of fancy; he is the star of modern aesthetic desolation.

In this description by Hugo Ball, Rimbaud represents something beautiful and hurting: when we identify as Rimbaudists, as Ball suggests, we create a society of outsiders who belong together.

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3 The image is central to the covers of a number of editions, including the most recent English-language translation, by John Ashbery.
4 Robb, *Rimbaud*, 174. Robb dates this portrait to December 1871.
5 Ibid., 140.
6 Ibid.
But Wojnarowicz’s Rimbaud is a mask for someone outside of social life. This Rimbaud is not our Rimbaud. He is not the one Patti Smith addresses when she yells “Go Rimbaud! Go Rimbaud!” nor is he the one who shot his boyfriend (the poet Paul Verlaine), traded arms, or either did or did not trade enslaved persons. This is to say that whatever we know, or think we know, about Rimbaud’s life, this Rimbaud is genuinely other—a symbol for the effacement of biography itself. This Rimbaud is unseen, separate from everyone who surrounds him. We have never met this Rimbaud.

WOJNAROWICZ’S SERIES FOREGROUNDS the difference between the Rimbaud poet-image and a Rimbaud for whom there is no identification and no identity. Feeling without a self—feeling accompanied by a sense of not having a self or of being too far outside a self—can lead to suicidal fantasy, and suicide is an overt possibility in the series. In one photograph, Rimbaud appears to have overdosed. In another, he points a gun at his head. And in another, he lies on the ground as if he has just shot himself, the gun still in his hand. The repeated presence of the mask—a face that never changes—yields a feeling that never changes. This erasure—repetition without difference—reflects the lack of recognition of a person, a vacuum that, in turn, suicidal fantasy ventures to resolve.

Arthur Rimbaud in New York gestures both toward and away from suicide, reflecting the ambivalence at the heart of the act and the fantasy.  

desolation,” resembles those whose suicides solidify their stardom. The fantasy of killing oneself offers a solution to the problem of being nothing, of being far away, looked at but not engaged with, where “oneself” becomes lost in the sky, nearly impossible to connect with and identify. A lack of identity and the absence of distinct forms of identification constellate important aspects of suicidal fantasy, where what can drive the fantasy is fantasy itself. Put another way, it is hard to know whom I want to kill when I want to kill myself because I do not feel like anyone to begin with. Suicide, like the problem of feeling like no one and nothing, confuses subject with object (or live person with dead person) and recalls the experience of being objectified, being made to feel dead. In dreaming of taking my life, I hope to take complete control over my life so that I can truly live. And if I kill myself, then everyone will see me and I can actually survive.  

The dream of survival that constitutes the fantasy comes to be expressed in Wojnarowicz’s series through the mask. The mask of Rimbaud’s face, rather than the image or picture on the mask, indicates the need for a witness. But in order to witness erasure, the witness must maintain a gap. The one who has not been seen, recognized, or identified with as distinct does not want to hear “I see you” as a positive thumbs-up to their suffering. This erases the experience of being unseen. The Rimbaud mask offers a figure for a witness to a life unseen and the dream of having survived that life.

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In the photograph on the left, Rimbaud holds a gun in front of a mural of Jesus floating above the city, his arms outstretched. The photograph suggests Rimbaud’s destruction of the icon of salvation. It is hard not to hear lyrics from Patti Smith’s 1975 song “Gloria”: “Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine.” Rimbaud’s murderous gesture implies Jesus needs to be killed, again. The mural was meant to portray how Jesus embraces all, how his love is universal. Rimbaud, Wojnarowicz, and many queers, orphans, poor kids, etc. know this is not the case. For us, the open arms are more often an indication of an imminent judgment that can transform into murder. The only way to survive, the image suggests, is to kill before you get killed.

But this form of Rimbaud’s disidentification with Jesus maintains their connection. Even while Rimbaud points a gun at the image of Jesus, the poet also imitates him. Rimbaud wears a scarf like his. His arm extends like the savior’s. If Rimbaud were
to turn around and face the mural, he’d be close to a mirror image of Jesus. And Rimbaud holds a gun while Jesus bears the stigmata: one sacrifice resembles another. Rimbaud’s imitation of Jesus suggests the former could be mistaken for, and become a substitute for, the latter. The bottom of the mural reads: “Jesus is coming soon. Happy are they that put their trust in him.” Since it is Rimbaud who has come back from the dead to tour New York, to maybe, hopefully, save us from ourselves, we might rewrite this as “Rimbaud is coming soon. Happy are they that put their trust in him.”

At the top-right of the centerfold, Rimbaud poses in front of a spray-painted figure with a needle in their arm; this recalls the photo, published one month earlier, of Rimbaud shooting up. The pierced or wounded arm also refers viewers back to the wounded palm of Jesus on the facing page. The repetition of these images refers to the mimetic nature of sacrifice, yet the photograph of graffiti also does something different. This figure has a question mark for a face. The question
of mistaken identity that erupts from the other photographs transforms into a question about whether identity exists at all. This is a portrait of a faceless person, perhaps the same one pictured in last month’s paper. This is not the loss of identity but the lack of one. The portrait suggests that suicidal fantasy has something to do with having nothing but an unanswered question as one’s identity.

In both photos—the Jesus mural and the question-mark figure—Rimbaud is photographed in front of a representation of someone who is suffering, someone for whom there is no significant difference between suffering and pleasure, and someone who has died or will die because of, or on behalf of, suffering. The question mark undermines the singularity of sacrifice. Jesus could be Rimbaud could be anyone could be David Wojnarowicz. The substitutable wound suggests suffering in and of itself is not very particular or distinguishable from other suffering or even from other experiences. Murder, overdosing, and sacrifice are all part of the same soup. This is a series of violent substitutions that lead nowhere.

In the centerfold, I am taken in by the relay between photographs, where substitution is perpetual and emptying. The anthropologist and theorist Michael Taussig describes this kind of substitution: “When the human body, a nation’s flag, money, or a public statue is defaced, a strange surplus of negative energy is likely to be aroused from within the defaced thing itself.” For Taussig, there is something erotic about this energy: “It is

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20 Rizk, 190. Rizk suggests something more ambiguous. For her, the question mark signals “a confusion or loss of identity or individuality, much as the Rimbaud mask serves to scramble the protagonist’s persona.”

with the power of mimesis that defacement achieves its highest, its most negative goals. Here again, with the mimetic, we see the intimacy of the bond that connects defacement to its object.”

Taussig links this bond to magic, as when someone sticks a needle in a doll in order to hurt the person the doll represents. This kind of defacement depends partially on knowing who or what is being represented.

Wojnarowicz photographed three friends and lovers wearing the mask: Brian Butterick, John Hall, and Jean Pierre. But the question mark recalls that the mask effaces identity. Anyone can be Rimbaud. And so, too, no one is. Writing from other art critics and curators bears out this undecidability, too.

Dan Cameron, curator of Fever, provides one kind of story about who is in the series:

Inviting his friend and musical collaborator Brian Butterick to don a homemade mask of the French poet’s face, Wojnarowicz photographed him in different New York locations as a way to evoke the spirit of an artistic forebear whose fervent embrace of the underground became a direct source of Wojnarowicz’s writings.

Here, Brian Butterick is a friend and musical collaborator and the only one who is being photographed. Rizk characterizes Butterick differently. “This series of photographs tells the stories of Rimbaud, Wojnarowicz, and his friend and lover Brian Butterick, an occasional heroin user, who wears a mask.

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22 Taussig, 43-44.
23 Ibid., 4.
24 Carr, 123-56. Carr traces many details regarding who is in which photographs and provides the most detailed account of the making of the series to date.
25 Wojnarowicz, Cameron, and Scholder, 7.
representing the French symbolist poet.” Rizk frames the series as telling stories about Rimbaud, Wojnarowicz, and Butterick and incidentally suggests Butterick’s heroin use is the reason Rimbaud shoots up. Although Cameron and Rizk agree that Butterick wears the mask, we end up with a question regarding Brian: what’s important about him? Heroin? Music? How do we know? Art historian Lucy Lippard is vague when she writes of “various friends wearing a sadly deadpan mask of the French poet…” One scholar even assumes it is Wojnarowicz. “David’s series of self-portraits wearing a Rimbaud mask from 1978-1979 include an image of David (Rimbaud) slumped against a wall with a needle hanging from his arm.” This both is and is not a mistake. Cameron refers to these sorts of pieces in Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre

Figure 3. Rimbaud photo booth strip. From Wojnarowicz, Series I.

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26 Wojnarowicz, Cameron, and Scholder, 46.
28 Patrick Moore, Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 100.
as “surrogate self-portraits.” Ultimately, it does not matter who is behind the mask; it is the surrogacy that matters.

The notion of surrogate self-portraits is especially important when considering the pair of photo booth strips in Wojnarowicz’s journal (fig. 3). To shift from defacement to surrogacy is to shift from a relationship between a person and an object to a relationship between two people, both of whom become objects to each other. Surrogate self-portraiture involves a mimetic relationship between photographer and the photographed.

In figure 3, Rimbaud has a gun in his hand. In figure 4, a detail of the strip, he points the gun to his chin. In some shots, Rimbaud simply waves the gun around: there is no clear direction. And, in others, the gun does not appear but remains a threat outside the frame. In these images, the Rimbaud figure becomes a surrogate for the photographer Wojnarowicz. When performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan writes that “all portrait photography is fundamentally performative,” she grounds this claim in a description of how the model (the one being photographed) anticipates the desire of the photographer and tries to imitate it. This begins a relay of vision and imitation, where the model imagines what the

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29 Wojnarowicz, Cameron, and Scholder, 12.