

The New York Times

Five Art Books to Read This Summer

As the art world mulls whether a return to “normalcy” should be its goal, publishers mine the archives of artists who found their own counterpaths.



An image from Simon Pope's "City Kids London 1973–1975," a zine-style photography monograph from Café Royal Books. Simon Pope and Café Royal Books

By Brett Sokol

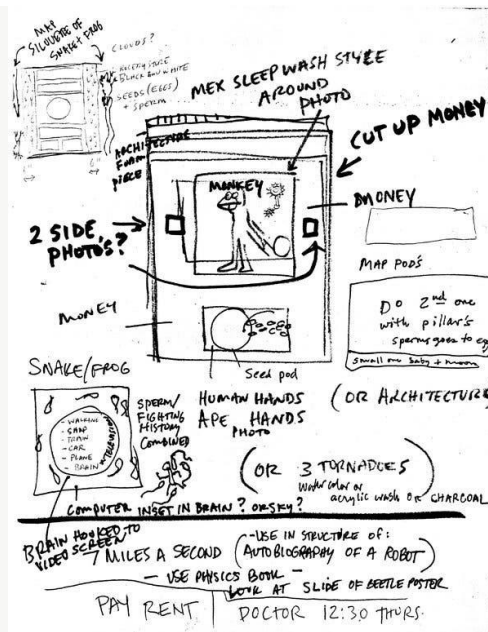
May 21, 2020

For much of the culture industry, as with society at large, a single pressing issue looms over all others: Join the rush to reopen? Or remain anxiously hunkered down, lest — like the fake ending of so many horror movies — the seemingly defeated killer suddenly re-emerges from his hiding spot. Yet in a growing number of quarters throughout the art world, the very terms of that debate are being questioned. Impassioned [essays](#) and teeth-gnashing Instagram [posts](#) are asking if getting “back to normal” should truly be the final goal. Many of these critiques of business-as-usual mirror larger

socio-economic complaints, from the art handlers who quietly keep the entire billion-dollar business humming along organizing for better wages and working conditions, to the emerging artists trying to make sense of the disconnect between their own running-in-place careers and record-setting auction results.

Where is the art to help us make sense of this moment, or to at least freshly question the way our current contemporary art has been produced, bought, and sold? And what would that alternative art world look like? Here are five recently published books that mine that subject.

‘In the Shadow of Forward Motion’ by David Wojnarowicz



Install photos, sketch out collage, visit doctor: How to make art in a plague year, as seen in “In the Shadow of Forward Motion” by David Wojnarowicz. Estate of David Wojnarowicz; via Primary Information and P.P.O.W.

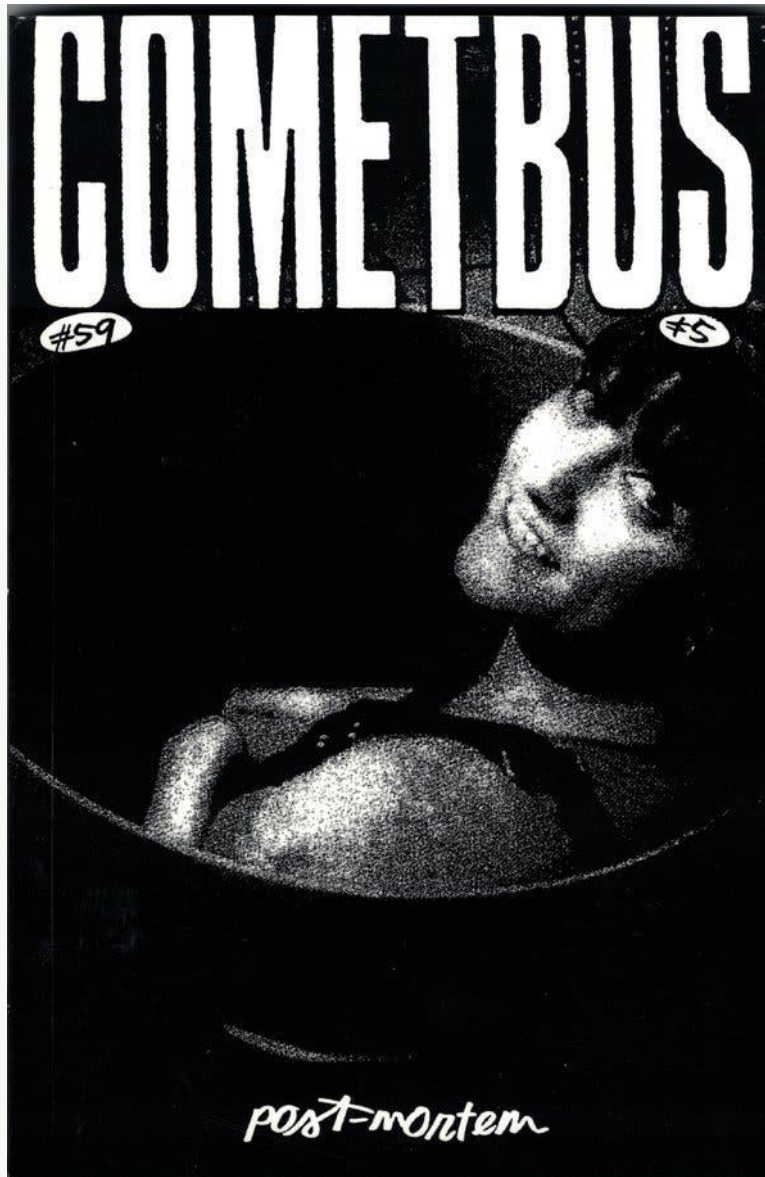


Musings from “In the Shadow of Forward Motion” by David Wojnarowicz. Estate of David Wojnarowicz; via Primary Information and P.P.O.W.

Few modern artists have been as closely associated with artmaking in a time of plague as David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), whose work channeled a burning sense of outrage, first for his friends and lovers as they fell to AIDS, and then for his own looming mortality, as public officials seemed either indifferent or openly hostile to the disease’s victims simply because so many were gay. Wojnarowicz’s diaristic writing took on more complex feelings, as fascinatingly compiled in a handmade catalog he titled “[In the Shadow of Forward Motion](#)” to accompany a 1989 solo show.

His gallery, New York’s [P.P.O.W.](#), didn’t have the budget then for a slick, professionally printed version, so he simply Xeroxed 50 copies for his show’s opening, explaining in its foreword that his samizdat exhibition catalog was simply “rough notes, late night tape recordings, things spoken in sleep and fragmented ideas which at times contradict each other.” He grossly undersold it. Now reissued as a paperback by the archival publisher Primary Information, it offers not only a look into Wojnarowicz’s process, but also his philosophical musings, by turns wistful and playful – yet always with the outside world pressing in. A diagram for how the gallery should hang a wall of his photos is grounded by the notes-to-self scrawled at the bottom of the page: “Pay Rent” and “Doctor 12:30 Thurs.”

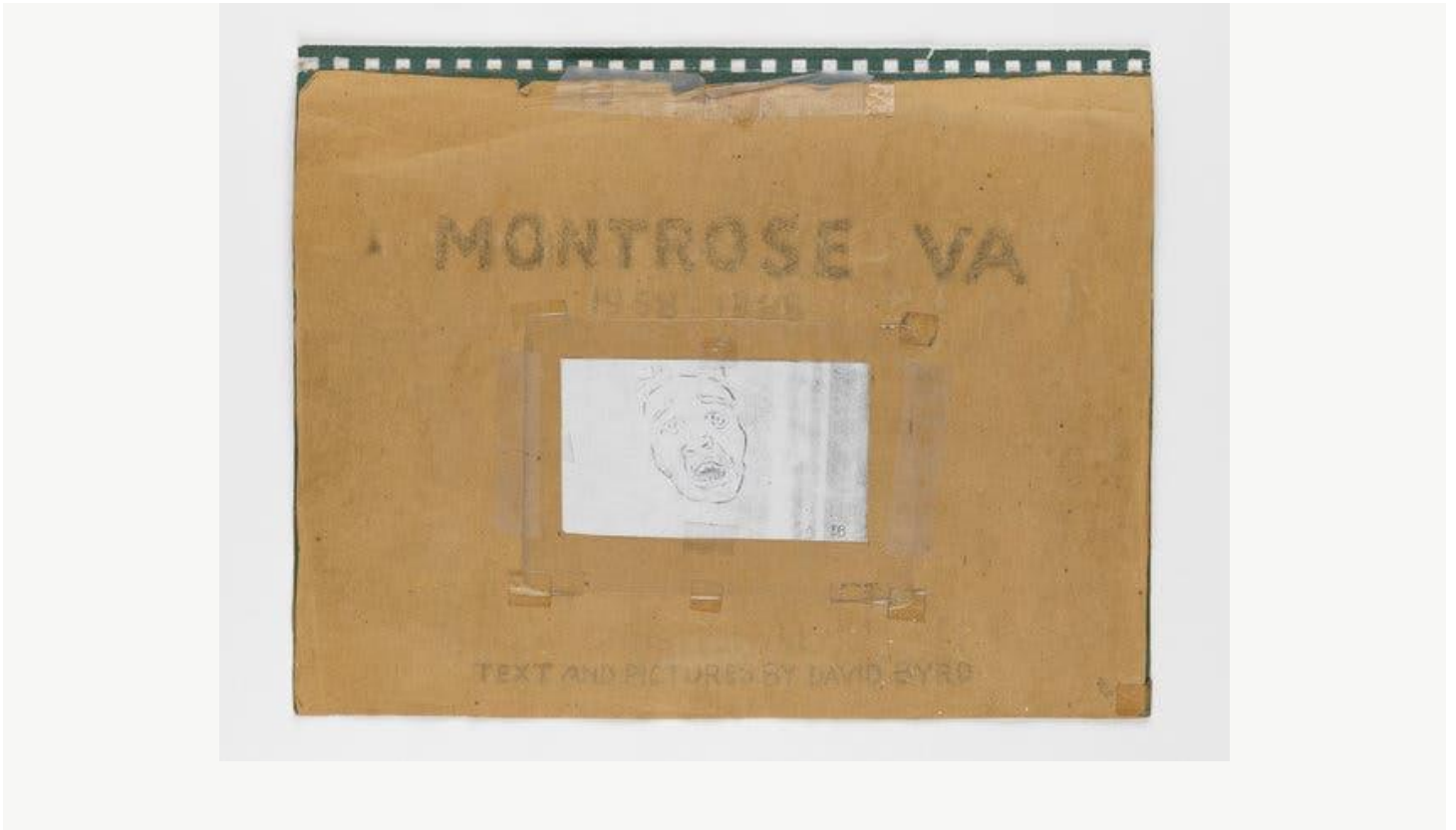
Cometbus journal



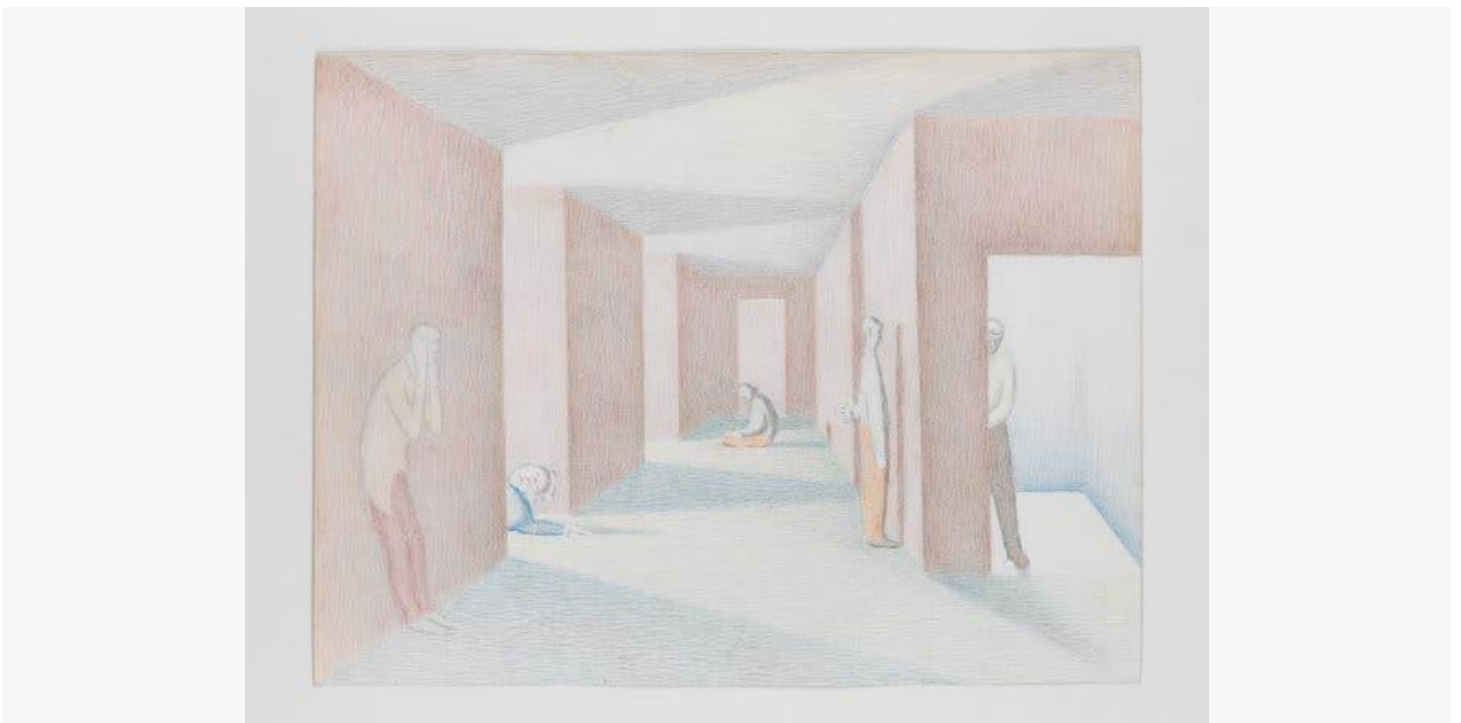
“Cometbus #59: Post-Mortem” by Aaron Elliott.

The [Cometbus](#) journal had a similarly modest cut-and-pasted start in the Berkeley, Calif., bedroom of its 13-year-old editor, and a punk rock enthusiast, [Aaron Elliott](#). Nearly 40 years later, Cometbus is still going strong, still self-published (albeit now handsomely typeset and bound), and still taking as its mandate all the workings of underground culture. Its 59th issue, released just as the pandemic began closing its sales network of independent bookstores, is appropriately entitled “Post-Mortem.” Consisting of a single 48,000 word essay written by Mr. Elliott, now based in Brooklyn, it colorfully records his past year crisscrossing the country to conduct revealing interviews with several generations’ worth of countercultural figures who built lasting counterinstitutions, from Fantagraphics Books’ Gary Groth in Seattle to Interference Archive’s Josh MacPhee in Park Slope — or who spectacularly failed to do so. The end result memorably splits the difference between memoir and business journalism, and is likely the sole place to find equally probing discussions of [freight train-hopping](#) and nonprofit incorporation.

Montrose VA 1958-1988' by David Byrd



Original cover of "Montrose VA 1958-1988" by David Byrd. David Byrd Estate, New York; via Anton Kern Gallery, New York



One of David Byrd's drawings of the patients from his book "Montrose VA 1958-1988." David Byrd Estate, New York; via Anton Kern Gallery, New York

The painter [David Byrd](#) (1926-2013) had the kind of career trajectory most artists dream of — a solo show with the pioneering Seattle gallerist Greg Kucera, followed by an equally acclaimed show at New York’s White Columns, and then representation by the blue-chip [Anton Kern Gallery](#) — as long as you ignore the seven decades before his being discovered in upstate New York. It’s also a cruel iteration that artistic talent often has little to do with timely recognition. During that period, Byrd worked as an orderly on the psychiatric ward of the Montrose Veterans Affairs hospital in Westchester. [Montrose VA 1958-1988](#) is a complete replica of a handmade book Byrd created to document his 30 years there, drawing his patients in various states of despair and confusion, or all too rarely, moments of transcendent peacefulness. To call it a sketchbook doesn’t begin to do justice to Byrd’s draftsmanship, or to the otherworldly quality he brings to rendering his patients’ inner lives on the page.

Café Royal Books



“City Kids London 1973–1975” by Simon Pope, a two-book series. Simon Pope and Café Royal Books

Café Royal Books
caferoyalbooks.com
Edited by Craig Atkinson
Edition of 250

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City Kids London
1973–1975

Two

Simon Pope

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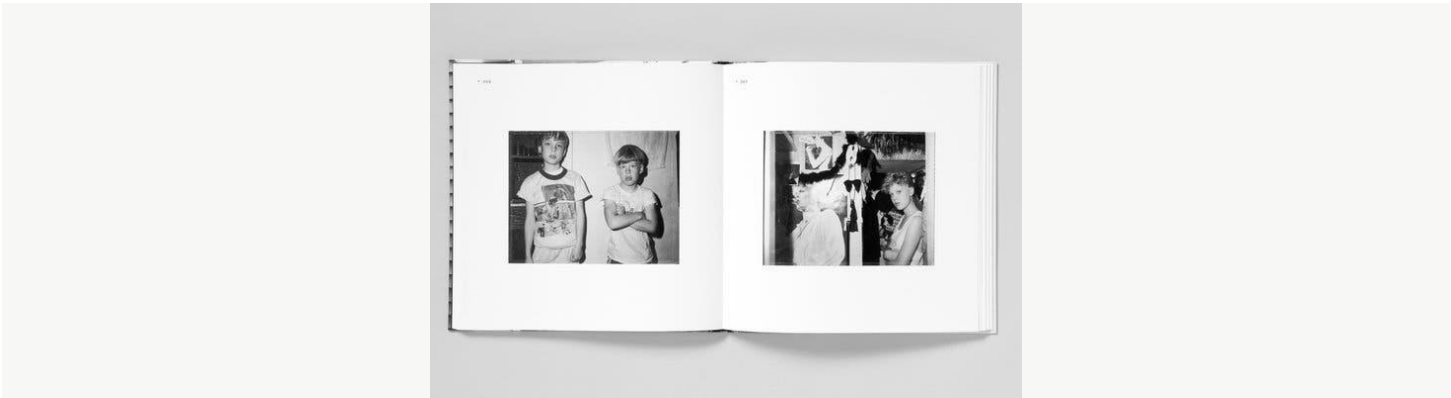
Simon Pope's photographs of children making a gritty site their own are part of a British documentary series edited by Craig Atkinson. Simon Pope and Café Royal Books

A global health crisis hasn't made [Café Royal Books](#) break stride. Virtually every Thursday, Craig Atkinson ("Café Royal Books is just me") of Southport, England, ushers a new, modestly priced, elegantly straightforward, zine-style photography monograph into the world. The goal is simple — "publishing, preserving, and making accessible British documentary photography." That means mining the archives of both relatively well-known figures like [Tish Murtha](#), whose photos of the 1977 Silver Jubilee honoring Queen Elizabeth capture that national celebratory moment in granular (and often hysterically funny) form, as well as those deserving of more attention, like [Simon Pope](#). His grimy shots of mid-70s London children giddily turning their hollowed-out city into an industrial playground make it seem as if the Blitz had just ended.

'Pleasant Street' by Judith Bl



The cover of Judith Black's book "Pleasant Street," published in April.



Images by Judith Black from her book "Pleasant Street" focus on her children. Judith Black and Stanley/Barker

Upon moving to Boston from rural New Hampshire in 1979, [the photographer Judith Black](#) was forced to change her artistic style as much as everything else in her life. Beginning a graduate program, "I quickly realized that I was not going to be able to roam the streets to make photographs," she writes in her new book, "[Pleasant Street](#)," a nod to the address of her new home. "I had limited time between working at M.I.T. as an assistant, attending classes, and being a mother. Our apartment was dark, but it became my studio."

The results, as seen in this monograph, put the focus on her four children, all documented over the subsequent decade with a striking intensity. Her subjects don't just intimately acknowledge the camera, they inhabit it, growing up right in front of Ms. Black's lens. And the outside world never stops intruding, from one child's black eye ("jumped in the street" elliptically notes the photo's caption) to another's suddenly spiky haircut, [menacing gaze](#), and hand-painted cutoff T-shirt emblazoned with the chorus to an equally aggrieved punk anthem, "[We're just a minor threat](#)." As the years unfold, Ms. Black's sumptuous black and white portraiture reveals less a snapshot of cozy domesticity than a series of coping mechanisms, ways of learning how to finally become comfortable in one's own skin.

It's a reminder that, whatever the era, and regardless of whether they're artists, most folks are forced to figure out their own path to so-called normalcy.