The slogan “SILENCE STILL = DEATH” appeared on flyers and placards designed for street demonstrations organized against the Smithsonian Institution’s November 30, 2010 censorship of late American artist David Wojnarowicz’s Super-8 film A Fire in My Belly (1986-87). Converted to video, this work had gone on view at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) on October 30, in conjunction with the large group exhibition Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture. Under Congressional pressure to cancel the entire groundbreaking show—“the first major museum exploration of the impact of same-sex desire in the creation of modern American portraiture,” says Wikipedia—the self-proclaimed world’s largest museum complex instead singled out and scapegoated the less than four-minute video snippet of Wojnarowicz’s work. Sparking what has come to be regarded as the second culture wars, the Smithsonian suppression of A Fire in My Belly offers what one critic describes as “a splendid case study in cowardice, censorship, and institutional failure,” with the Wojnarowicz affair performing the very premise and relevance of Hide/Seek.

Mysoon Rizk is Associate Professor and Head of Art History in the Department of Art at the University of Toledo, in Toledo, Ohio, where she has taught full-time since 2000. Her talk stems from the book manuscript she is completing about the late artist David Wojnarowicz (1954-92) who played a pivotal role in the first culture wars.