

File Note 154

# Gregg Bordowitz

Essay by

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# Conviction

In his show, *There: a Feeling*, Gregg Bordowitz offers a holding environment within which you cannot be sure if you're studying the exhibition or your own limits. What comes up for the viewer in this space, can and will come up. This is an art space, but the show is not of a category that you might anticipate. The work might initially seem complicated or conceptual, but it is social. It does not add up to an 'oeuvre' in the way we are taught. There's a fluidity to Bordowitz's approach, he offers a permeability of all roles. And yet there's no one else like him. His impact and conviction in art, criticism, teaching and activism through the last decades are clear.

Here, things aren't how they visually appear to be on the surface. All the roles of an exhibition can have an unnerving equivalence when you sink down into it and give up first impressions. If the meaning of a work is not decided by the artist who made it or by the wall text, then it could be that we have things back to front. There's no author and no audience, no greater authority – it seems impossible to really meet each other if you don't, for a while, give up the role assigned to you – and there's no title and no object, no credentials, no predetermined centre or frame, no mother or father. In this expansive state of being everything is put into movement. Specific details in *There: a Feeling* might suggest things, but not in a controlled way. There is material and information to recombine through experience and sensation.

*Portraits of People living with HIV* (1993) breaks what I thought I knew and had categorised in my mind as people living with HIV in the 1990s. In the video, Bordowitz presents a record of people living, eating, sleeping, someone walking in the forest, another planning a small garden in the city. A video camera can offer a unique degree of objectivity: it captures hesitations, shadows, tiny glances, a kind of humanity that the eye with its brain attached can easily look past. (Someone once told me the eyes are the only exposed part of the brain.)

The calm objectivity of this work is maintained through both the edit and the title. There is no sensationalism: the images are not presented in a way that is intended to provoke public excitement.

When someone sits down and writes or edits a video or paints, the tendency is to overdo it, to ruin or kill it. The art part is bringing it back to life. Here there's a feeling of before before before – simple words and unmodified footage before being framed, valued, assimilated, assigned extra significance, or political meaning. Something to say but nothing to prove.

The material fluctuates between two states: Bordowitz is capable of turning the nothingness of ordinary days into content and back again. Why is ambivalence like this so moving, so alive? What is there to live for in your own life? Regarding the art practices that I love, the industry could burn and those practices would still stand, they would still make sense in the world.

The time of filming Bordowitz has described elsewhere as utterly despairing, angry, as having a constant sense of mortality. I wonder how he can be at his limits and observe them too, without overstating things. His work filters away opinions, and reveals the path only. He speaks and writes and presents a lot of words, but does not add noise.

On watching the video it feels clear to me: the unknown is a given and there are no adults. Bordowitz's writing has that effect for me too. I first came across it in *General Idea: Imagevirus*, a book from the *Afterall One work* series, published in 2010. It left me connected and wanting. Who is he? Even though he had a clear topic and assignment in that book – it is a book of art criticism – the writing is an unconscious incarnation of something else. There is an energy unknowable in itself that is seeking fulfilment through the mediation of meaningful encounters. His drive – to sex, life, death – is there in the assemblage of words.

A montage of more recent video works is shown in a dark room in the heart of the exhibition: Bordowitz as rabbi, rockstar, comedian... Included is an iPhone video of an old man dying in a bed, a father figure maybe – a person who is certainly loved by the onlooker. I recognise it, and I know the sound of breathing before someone goes. The scene is cut quite crudely, acting as a break between other much longer videos. It's made unavoidable, death. It's already there in the gaps like water,

but more certain than water. It's somehow repetitive and singular; you really can't get accustomed to it, but you can learn to live in that.

I remember the skin in that clip too, as the oxygen leaves it, and the sensation in my own cells of how mesmerisingly beautiful and true death is in the skin on a face. This, and my mother's courage going towards her own death. It was life force, a gift for those present. For a few minutes, I was ecstatic somehow. As in torn up, not whole.

Bordowitz's exhibition reminded me of being at her bedside and thinking: should I use this in my work? Because I remember that what I was feeling then was, and is, what I want from culture, from cinema, songs, literature and exhibitions. Something anti-establishment and naked, a cut in my internal continuity and then the pathlessness of finding it again. But I had always from the beginning hidden things, making things and being an artist from her. I was or am ashamed of myself or her or both. I don't know. Shame and authorship go together.

People say witnessing someone you love die is the most common other-worldly experience available. It's like you have your time back, and all the build-up of bullshit and capital is stripped and you see for a while with the unrushed eyes of a newborn. You are ... a set of very physical, primitive processes and sensations.

The mouthwash on the bedside table, promising satisfaction in three weeks, was a bright, mad cartoon. Daisies in the grass outside had outlived her. Later in the car, passing Gordo's Pizza, fire raging behind two people who worked there talking, a woman looking at a man, black eyes, questions, easiness. You try to hold on, promising to stay in the new world, stop giving a fuck once and for all and also, significantly, act from this place.

As I said in the first paragraph, this now seems to be more about my limits than the exhibition. I'm grateful to Bordowitz for the provocation.

There is a powerful description of shame by philosopher Joan Copjec from an interview she made in 2014. It's shortened here, but as a full a passage it changes one's perception of seeing and being seen.

The affect of shame, which is searing, painful, is not ... a feeling of being negatively judged by another but of being intimately attached to something you do not understand and which thus feels alien to you ... This feeling of being tethered to something one cannot assume as one's own is worse than death.<sup>1</sup>

Copjec is saying that there's something in us that we do not understand. This internal foreignness is interested in or engaged by something else to what we can ever know. (It's picking up information all day; it's what dreams are made of, and everyone dreams.) Space has to be left for that. Space is here for that in this exhibition.

Is it possible that some portion of ourselves remains a secret from ourselves?

Is it possible that some portion of ourselves remains a secret from others?

Is it possible that these two portions (secret from ourselves and secret from others) are not identical; they are different portions of a self?

Is the secret a structural feature of the person?<sup>2</sup>

It's quite easy to speak about intention and ideas, but here it's as if Bordowitz has crossed a threshold and is able to describe (speak, draw...) the recesses and inaccessible magnetism of a person that essentially keep that intention, dream, libido and curiosity turned on and seeking.

Can you make work from not who you are? Do I want to be doing this, what is free will? As an artist you do get to a point where you ask – do I believe myself: that I made a series of committed, artistic and critically engaged decisions in the work, in getting from A to B. Or is the organising principle of my project, so to speak, a kind of shame, a secret life-instinct. Something is being exposed to others that I can never fully grasp. The need for recognition, the winning of affection,

competition, the habit of losing, or simply a response to someone else's character, a fear of being cast out, a dread of showing oneself fully to anybody in case what I say or am is not viable.

If, as Bordowitz's work suggests, the answer is both – belief and its secret undoing – can you learn to tolerate or love such a base internal ambivalence? What, then, is conviction if it is not self-serving, if it does not prop up who you think you are, what and where is the path? 'Am I a sum that's never totalled? ... How do we make pictures now?'<sup>3</sup>

Camilla Wills is an artist and publisher living in London. She started Divided Publishing in 2019 with Eleanor Ivory Weber. Her work is represented by dépendance gallery in Brussels.

1 'The Inheritance of Potentiality: An Interview with Joan Copjec', 2014, Verso blogpost

2 Gregg Bordowitz, *Volition* (Printed Matter Inc., 2009), p. 7

3 *Ibid.*, p. 11

## Reading List

- Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (San Diego: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1936)
- Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1972)
- John Cowper Powys, *Wolf Solent* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1929)
- Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1976)
- Samuel Delany, *Dhalgren* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975)
- George Perec, *Life A User's Manual* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 1978)
- Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Peramo* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955)
- Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957)
- Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience* (London: Penguin Classics, 1923)
- Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923)

## Viewing List

- Hanne Darboven  
San Francisco Newsreel, *Black Panther a.k.a. Off the Pig* (Newsreel #19) (United States, 1968), film
- Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company
- Blinky Palermo
- Adrian Piper
- Yvonne Rainer, *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (United States, 1980), film
- Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell, *Performance* (United Kingdom, 1970), film
- Martha Rosler
- Jean Rouch and Edgar Moran, *Chronicle of a Summer*, (France, 1961), film
- Ben Shahn
- Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, Bernhard Sinkel, Alf Brustellin, Hans Peter Cloos, Katja Rupé, Peter Schubert and Volker Schlöndorff, *Deutschland im Herbst* (West Germany, 1978), film
- Jack Whitten

## Listening List

- Miles Davis, *Miles Davis at Fillmore* (Columbia Records, 1970)
- Abbey Lincoln, *Abbey Is Blue* (Riverside Records, 1959)
- The Ramones, *Rocket to Russia* (Sire Records, 1977)
- Lou Reed, *Transformer* (RCA Records, 1972)
- Arnold Shoenberg, *Moses and Aaron* (Zurich Opera House, 1957)
- Cecil Taylor, *Unit Structures* (Blue Note Records, 1966)

# Biography

Gregg Bordowitz is a renowned filmmaker, writer, and activist whose work has been exhibited at the Whitney, the New Museum, Artist Space, MoMA (all New York), the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and Tate Modern, among others. A major retrospective of his work, *Gregg Bordowitz: I Wanna Be Well*, was organised by the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, in 2018 and subsequently presented at the Art Institute of Chicago and MoMA PS1.

In the 1980s, his creative practice was focused on responding to the AIDS crisis. He organised and documented a number of protests against government inaction and advocated for health education and harm reduction as a member of the groundbreaking AIDS activist group ACT UP. He also served as a founding member of the 1980s video/film collectives Testing the Limits and Diva TV.

Bordowitz is the author of *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986–2003* (2004), *General Idea: Imagevirus* (2010), *Volition* (2010), and *Glenn Ligon: Untitled (I Am a Man)* (2018).

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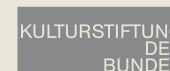
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‘Bathos is that which is intended to be sorrowful but because of the extremity of its expression becomes comic. Pathos is that which is meant to be comic but because of the extremity of its expression becomes sorrowful. Some things which seem to be opposites are actually different degrees of the same thing.’

Charles Ludlam

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