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Gregg Bordowitz: Criticising Representation in Order to Represent People With AIDS

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Gregg Bordowitz's literary and artistic output is seminal to postmodern art theory, institutional critique, and post-AIDS queer theory. This paper demonstrates both the need for appropriate self-representation for People With AIDS, and the insidious culture of disavowal and dehumanisation of PWAs that artists like Bordowitz confronted and discredited.

As a response to an international epidemic decimating marginalised people, the politics of representation was at the heart of AIDS activism and the art it generated. The two established modes of artistic address to the public were artists becoming spokespeople for their culture, social identity, and marginalised group (the representation of politics); or 'publicly questioning the validity of widely shared cultural beliefs and imagery (the politics of representation)' (Speretta 8). Gregg Bordowitz's art takes the second position, addressing the previously-employed narratives artists established during the preceding years of the AIDS crisis to create a responsive and representative body of film and writings, the latter of which are accumulated in *The Aids Crisis is Ridiculous* (hereafter abbreviated to *TACIR*). Being a homosexual Jewish artist with AIDS, Bordowitz's artistic identity and the narrative of his 1993 film *Fast Trip, Long Drop* are crucial to refuting both the ideologies of those propagating the dehumanisation of PWAs to define them as socially powerless, and the gaze of that heterosexual and/or uninfected audience – the 'socially powerful' (Rosler 2). His work addressed activist art and the relationship it has with the society that hosts and generates it while responding to it, with Bordowitz notably having 'particular interest in the relationship between the artwork and the beholder' (Grabner 319). When considering Bordowitz's work in relation to 'the gaze' it is important to recognise his handling of the intersection of heterosexual and homosexual gazes in observation and response as a resistance to the othering manifested in objectification. His work directly addresses paradoxes in representation, particularly in the portrayal of PWAs as part of an individualistic community of victims and survivors, and the conflation of love and death during the AIDS epidemic. Bordowitz's own narratives are resistant, disruptive, and resilient to the climate of terror, pity, and quarantine that the media propagated in the late 1980s and 1990s. This will be evidenced through juxtaposing his work with Nicholas Nixon's *Living with AIDS*, General Idea's *Imagevirus*, and Gran Fury and ACT UP's *Let the Record Show...*, all from 1987.

Bordowitz's writing is a critical part of his practice, but *Fast Trip, Long Drop* provides a framework to compare earlier representations of AIDS and the simultaneous presentation of the personal, the performative and the political. Bordowitz portrays his ambivalent attitude to the mass media's role in disseminating stereotypes of persons with AIDS (PWAs) and establishing discursive modes that would allow the indirectly affected public to engage with the epidemic. This ambivalence is rooted in the media itself, simultaneously criticised and celebrated by Bordowitz because of its reach

and capability to inform. By taking control of the channels that had been used to alienate PWAs and handling that media with irony and anger Bordowitz's activism is immediately evocative and given permanence through documentation. By creating a film that presented a subjective experience that investigates the domestic, public and historical Bordowitz's *Fast Trip, Long Drop* handles issues of agency that the activism of the 1980s and 90s were consistently troubled by. By establishing a 'vibrant alternative media' (TACIR 230), Bordowitz's treatment of the politics of representation recalibrated the concepts of the 'general public' (69), the AIDS victim and the mechanisms of control in these representations to problematise the non-PWA gaze.

The photographic representation of PWAs as victims was a pernicious means of ghettoising AIDS as a spectacle for the unaffected majority, which Bordowitz and his contemporaries recognised as something that had to be condemned. The sensationalising of the victim and the novelty of PWAs made the discourse around these people carnivalesque when taken out of their control, while also engaging in the kind of scopophilia (pleasure from actively observing and objectifying passivity) Laura Mulvey discusses in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. This troubling relationship between the unaffected, the photographer, and PWAs is discussed sardonically by Emmanuel Dreuilhe:

The camera invariably seeks out the 'victims' of the most spectacular battles. Its instinct for the sensational leads it to prefer the bald and wasted AIDS patient with the feverish haggard look, lying in his hospital bed (preferably with a few tubes up his nose), to his companion who is still able to take care of himself and speak articulately about his condition.... Everyone knows it's best not to give us a chance at the microphone and that pictures deceive us even better than words (122).

One such problematic representation of the AIDS crisis is Nicholas Nixon's *People With AIDS* (1987-88) photography series, where Nixon - a straight white man without AIDS - presented PWAs in black and white as men inescapably subsumed and made helpless by AIDS. MoMA's endorsement, commission, and exhibition of Nixon's work facilitated his acting as an uninvited spokesperson for the marginalised, profiting from pain in a self-congratulatory way. These images are seen to have PWAs 'disclose the stigmata of their guilt' (Watney 78) just as the mass media forced them to in the 1980s. In these cases Nixon removes their agency by constructing a portrait of a victim for shock value, with which Nixon created a campaign to the effect of desensitisation rather than activism. By presenting these men as tragic casualties of their own undoing, Nixon represented a spectacle of guilt-free voyeurism, the perfect victim object in Rosler's terms, since 'with the appropriate object to view, one no longer feels obligated to suffer empathy' (2).

The implication that this is the voice and the image that the PWA community want to perpetuate, as supported by a high art institution, was rightly perceived as damaging to their cause. ACT UP, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, staged a protest against the exhibition and the monetisation of their suffering with an accompanying 'NO MORE PICTURES WITHOUT CONSENT' flyer in 1988, directly addressing the issue of representation:

Ultimately representations affect those portrayed. In portraying PWAs as people to be pitied or feared, as people alone and lonely, we believe this show perpetuates general misconceptions about AIDS without addressing the realities of those of us living every day with this crisis as PWAs and people who love PWAs.

This is included in Jan Zita Grover's 'Visible Lesions: Images of PWA', in which the author goes on to state that these photographs 'reflect no understanding of the complicated history of PWAs to *name themselves*, to assert their rights, or of the accumulated meanings surrounding mainstream media images that PWAs struggle to oppose' (374). They therefore do little more than regurgitate the straight, white, mass media portrayal of PWAs that dehumanised them and presented their condition as something to be observed from a distance.

As a self-possessed and articulate artist, Bordowitz forces the viewer to reassess the public image of PWAs and their representation, when mass media and institutions preferred to perpetuate narratives of victimhood and degeneration, in direct opposition to Nixon's persona and work. A comparable incident between the two works is the depiction of the PWA's family. Nixon's image of *Ginny, Bob and Dr. Sappenfield* (fig. 1) is one of shame. It is terse, uncomfortable and evocative of struggle against the prejudice of a nuclear family, a trope of problematic AIDS representation discussed by Simon Watney. In 'The Spectacle of AIDS' he writes: 'The spectacle of AIDS is thus always modified by the fear of being too 'shocking' for its domestic audience, while at the same time it amplifies and magnifies the collective 'wisdom' of familialism' (82). In Nixon's photograph, the struggle is against the father in particular, who glares and pushes Bob's chest while the mother clings to his back. In sharp contrast, Bordowitz's stepfather and mother, however, are shown to be supportive, thoughtful individuals (figs. 2), with Bordowitz at the dinner table, as much a family member as either of them. *Fast Trip, Long Drop* undeniably presents a model for progressive behaviour compared to Nixon's socially degenerative images. The same assertion of loneliness and rejection is contested in Bordowitz's work by the inclusion of his activist friends and their voices in an HIV support group (fig. 3). By presenting a counterargument to images that present PWAs as grotesque, isolated and pathetic through communicating his experience and that of his contemporaries, Bordowitz uses his platform in a subjective but representational way that is inherently resistant to the previous reductive representations of PWAs and a pitying heteronormative gaze.

The role of family is prevalent in *Fast Trip, Long Drop* through the characterisation of Bordowitz's biological father (fig. 4). The title of the film refers to the newspaper column that mentioned his death, which was brought about tangentially by his daredevil experience – Bordowitz describes how his father died in a car accident on his way home from a death-defying performance by Evel Knievel on the 9th of September 1974. This bears significance to Bordowitz's feelings about his sexual behaviour and living condition with AIDS ('I am my father's absence... The author of this story is already dead.' (*TACIR* 137)). The ancient Greek love and death drives, Eros and Thanatos (Freud 101), are embodied in his thinking about his father in the film, and are extended to his own relationship with AIDS and issues of dying versus surviving. Bordowitz describes his HIV experience as a prompt for questioning mortality:

HIV infection sets into motion an endless set of questions about life and death, pleasure and pain, what is real and what is imagined. You discover there are no definitive answers to your questions, and realise that you can only have a general idea about anything - whatever you know you can only know in general (*Imagevirus* 5).

Footage of a man performing incredibly dangerous stunts with a baby (we assume it is his child) on a rooftop in New York (fig. 5) is intercut with Bordowitz's discussion of his own father, and directly follows

his discussion of how only he realised he could contract HIV after his unprotected sexual encounter, which resulted in his HIV positive diagnosis. This context implies a subconscious awareness of the danger he was putting himself in, and relates itself to the Oedipal narrative that permeates AIDS representation because of its relation to deviant sexuality (Nevelidine 264). He paraphrases Emmanuel Levinas in writing about his own experience in 'More Operative Assumptions': 'Intimacy is an irresolvable dichotomy. One cannot be an 'I' without an Other, yet one can't fully become identical with an other. Intimacy is a paradox' (*TACIR* 278). This dichotomy is present in all of Bordowitz's thinking about AIDS and the epidemic, resulting in a discourse of oppositions, and is echoed in his handling of death and sexuality. General Idea's 1987 *Imagevirus* (fig.6) reworked Robert Indiana's *Love* (1966) (fig. 7) to read *AIDS*, and repeats the word on 'AIDS wallpaper' behind it. This wallpaper pattern resembles DNA helixes representing the abstraction of the virus itself and its social and biological pervasiveness through its replication and domestic setting. This conflation of love, death and culture, is discussed by Bordowitz in his 2010 publication on the work. The effect of such a reconciliation reflects both the atmosphere of empowerment in the late 1980s and early 1990s and Bordowitz's own empowerment: 'If you have the sickness, then the *Imagevirus* is an extension of you. You are the word made flesh, a representative of that virus, and your reach extends deep into the atmosphere' (*Imagevirus* 18). The symbiosis of representation involved makes the artistic iterations of AIDS representation both self and other, and identifies AIDS and its sexual strains and tangents as inherently paradoxical (Nevelidine 265).

Through establishing himself as a representative, however, Bordowitz identifies the unrepresented who are still being addressed, as he does in the previous quote from 'More Operative Assumptions'. The 'general public' is criticised in *Fast Trip, Long Drop* through the film's portrayal of their representatives in mass media, namely through Charity Hope-Tolerance (played by the lauded performance artist Andrea Fraser) and her parodic plea for a controlled measure of sympathy, a picture of modesty and humility in a clean, white, buttoned-up shirt (fig. 8) to perform a contrast against the image of degeneration associated with AIDS. Hope-Tolerance beseeches the audience, but not too much:

Hi. My name is Charity Hope-Tolerance, of the New England Tolerances. I have AIDS. That's supposed to shock you. I look healthy: I'm straight, white, rich. I have privilege. And I have AIDS. Feel sorry for me. I'm placing my privilege at risk so that an audience of people can feel bad for a few minutes. Don't worry, the camera people won't make us dwell on this too long, and that's the way it should be. I have things to do as I'm sure you do. Anyway, I'm glad that we could share this moment of compassion. See, I'm not so bad. And if I'm not so bad then those other people with AIDS - you know who I mean - we can live with them too, can't we? Look, I have AIDS and I'm healthy and I'm strong and I'm going to fight this out to the end. I'm not going to be a burden on anyone. Don't worry. I'm brave. And I have resources. And you just relax. It's a shame, isn't it? I have it all and I have AIDS. Feel bad for a few more seconds... Ok, that's enough. Thank you. (00:53:58, 00:34:45-00:36:24.).

Fraser presents as a member of the PWA community that the general public can stomach. The idea that appropriate sympathy can be felt for grieveable lives is discussed by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*: 'How does the prohibition on grieving emerge as a circumscription of representability, so that our national melancholia becomes tightly fitted to the frame for what can be said, what can be shown?' (148)

Although Butler refers to the treatment of foreign enemies by the American mass media, this rhetoric is relevant to the treatment of PWAs as domestic enemies by virtue of the media and public hostility with regard to their treatment representation. Butler continues, 'We cannot, under contemporary conditions of representation, hear the agonised cry or be compelled or commanded by the face' (151). This 'face' relates to Levinas and the Other as something inherently vulnerable, whose vulnerability needs to be recognised via adequate humanising representation; which is in sharp contrast to the desensitising narratives that are considered fit for public consumption by media executives.

Implications in Bordowitz's narrative of his father and the talk show host Henry Roth extend to issues of this patriarchal oppression and the mishandling of AIDS representation in mass media, which Crimp and Watney discuss extensively⁷. He challenges the gaze of the viewer (and of the media) by confrontationally staring directly into the camera, and his tirade about 'thriving with AIDS' (fig. 9) to Roth in *Fast Trip, Long Drop* shows the power shift that occurs when anger is expressed for the purpose of representation. It does so by highlighting the problem of the PWA that performs their role as representative with the conservative dignity that politicians and the media had taught the public to prefer. This denies the viewer passivity and implicates their gaze as intrinsic to structural objectification without responsibility. Bordowitz rants:

'I'm angry. Very angry and I like my anger - sometimes it feels like it's all I have. And I want it to grow, I want to nourish it. I have fantasies of murder. Not famous people, not politicians, movie stars - a no one, someone I pick up, a trick. I'm fucking him and I'm gonna infect him. The entire purpose of reaching orgasm is to give him AIDS. [...] If our fantasies cease to be compelling even only to us then we've lost. Then we're truly dominated. And I feel that way. I'm no longer a person with AIDS. I am AIDS. [...] I wanna speak to people with AIDS; I know you're out there. Aren't you sick of this shit? And people who are healthy, people who presume themselves negative, how are you living with AIDS? How do you live with AIDS? Why is it my burden? Why is it my responsibility to survive and thrive? [...] Aren't we all living with AIDS? Isn't this a crisis for all of us? [...] some of us are living with AIDS and some of us are dying from AIDS. Why didn't you ask me how it feels to die from AIDS?' (00:27:35- 00:32:45).

Bordowitz was involved in a direct counter to the assignation of propriety to the silent victim/object in 'Let the Record Show...', an exhibition by ACT UP and Gran Fury in 1987 (fig. 10) where the fascist and inhumane behaviour of politicians during the AIDS epidemic is evidenced. Beneath a neon pink triangle 'SILENCE=DEATH' heads the exhibition (the emblematic image of ACT UP, and the slogan on Bordowitz's t-shirt when the audience first encounter him reclined in his underwear in *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (fig. 11) an image embodying both death and sexuality). This parallels the treatment of homosexuals in Nazi Germany to their treatment under the Reagan administration, furthered by the presentation of the people who are being presented as if they are on trial in front of scenes from the Nuremberg rallies. The people and their captions read as follows:

Jerry Falwell, televangelist—'AIDS is God's judgment of a society that does not live by His rules.'

William F. Buckley, columnist—'Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common needle users, and on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.'

Jesse Helms, US Senator—‘The logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected.’

Cory SerVaas, Presidential AIDS Commission—‘It is patriotic to have the AIDS test and be negative.’

Anonymous surgeon—‘We used to hate faggots on an emotional basis. Now we have a good reason.’

Finally Reagan’s figure has no caption, since during his seven year presidency he managed to evade commentary on an international epidemic to the detriment of his own presidential image and the wellbeing of the civilians under his presidential care and PWAs. Negligence and hostility emerged as the official political response to the AIDS epidemic, all with nationalistic overtones and a rhetoric of absolute condemnation of PWAs. The exhibition proves incontestably that ‘aids is - to employ the stressed Lacanian copula - an anatomy of the unconscious of contemporary sexual politics’ (Nevelidine 269) and stresses the representation and position of PWAs as Other in hegemonic discourses during the 1980s, as well as the historical subjugation of the Other as something infected, infectious, and inhuman.

Bordowitz’s refusal to be silent or silenced in his activism and career addresses the problems of representation during the AIDS crisis: that PWAs’ voices had to be heard, that mass media’s representation of PWAs had to be usurped, and that the uniquely existential struggle of this crisis had to be recognised as a discourse and as a product of a wider discourse of sexual politics. By failing to humanise or platform PWAs by objectifying and othering them, institutions across America contributed to the dissemination of morally supercilious and damaging beliefs about the virus and those it affected. To fail to recognise this and to internalise this institutional gaze results in a disavowal of the vulnerable which serves the socially powerful at the expense of individual. In Tim Dean’s words, ‘we are all PWAs (Persons With aids) insofar as aids is structured, radically and precisely, as the unconscious real of the social field of contemporary America’ (84) and Bordowitz’s work is a testament to that analysis. The sense of intimacy, anger and articulation in Bordowitz’s reflective and responsive work rejects the moralising impulses of the previously ingrained social conditions in order to empower those represented.



[Fig. 1 Nicholas Nixon, *Ginny, Bob and Doctor Sappenfield* Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1988, gelatin silver print, 8x10 inches]



[Fig. 2 Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993, Duration, 00:53:58, <http://ubu.com/film/bordowitz_fast.html> (Representation of family: still taken at 00:16:58 (Stepfather))]



[Fig 3 Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993, Duration, 00:53:58, <http://ubu.com/film/bordowitz_fast.html> Representation of the social and supportive: still taken at 00:23:08]



[Fig 4 Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993, Duration, 00:53:58, http://ubu.com/film/bordowitz_fast.html Representation of his father, still taken at 00:12:07]



[Fig. 5: Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993, Duration, 00:53:58, <http://ubu.com/film/bordowitz_fast.html> Still taken at 00:15:00]



[Fig. 6: General Idea, installation view of two *AIDS* paintings *AIDS (Cadmium Orange Light)* and *AIDS (Lacaux Green Light)* on *AIDS Wallpaper*, Art Gallery of Ontario]



[Fig. 7: Robert Indiana, *Love*, 1966, POLYCHROME ALUMINUM, (365.7 X 365.7 X 182.9 CM.), INSTALLATION on AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS in NEW YORK CITY]



[Fig. 8: Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993, Duration, 00:53:58, <http://ubu.com/film/bordowitz_fast.html>. Still taken at 00:34:48.]



[Fig.9 Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993, Duration, 00:53:58, <http://ubu.com/film/bordowitz_fast.html>. Still taken at 00:32:22.]



[Fig. 10: *'Let the Record Show...'*, ACT UP and Gran Fury, 1987, installation view, New Museum (photo credit: Fred Scrutin)]



[Fig. 11: Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993, Duration, 00:53:58, <http://ubu.com/film/bordowitz_fast.html>. Still taken at 00:03:20]

Notes

¹ See Watney, Simon. 'Media Fabrications.' *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp.126-129. Print. See also Crimp, Douglas. 'How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic.' *October*, vol. 43, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism, 1987, Winter, pp. 237-271. MIT Press, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397576>. Accessed 15 September 2016.

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