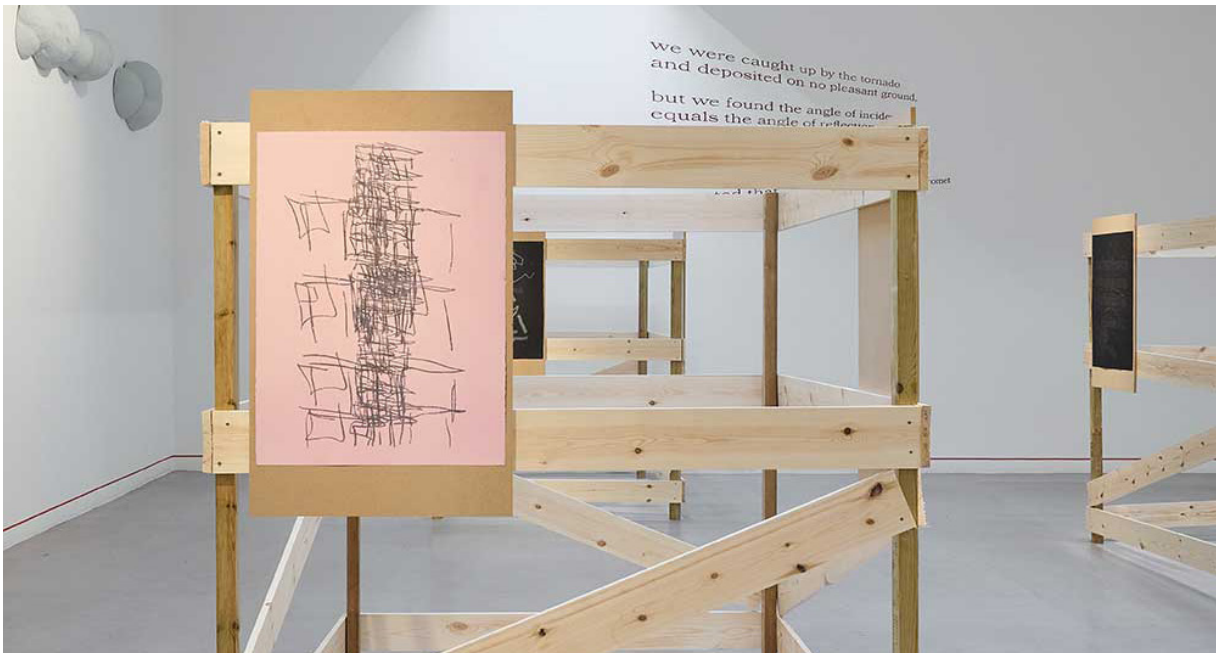


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There: a Feeling | Gregg Bordowitz

Christiana Spens | January 24, 2024

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There: a Feeling | Gregg Bordowitz, installation view, Camden Art Centre, London 2025. Photo: Luke Walker.

Born in Brooklyn in 1964, Gregg Bordowitz came of age at the height of the Aids crisis, losing many friends and living with HIV himself in the decades since. Confronting the crisis head-on over his career, he has created work across film, writing, installation, performance and visual art that records the lives affected by and lost to Aids. His work as an activist has also informed his output: in the 1980s, Bordowitz organised and recorded protests against government inaction in responding to Aids and fought for health education and harm-reduction as part of Act Up, an Aids activist group. His books include *The Aids Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003* (2004), *General Idea: Imagevirus* (2010), *Volition* (2009) and *Glenn Ligon: Untitled (I Am a Man)* (2018). His work across all these disciplines for more than 50 years offers a multifaceted record of the Aids crisis, crossing from the deeply personal to societal and political levels, ultimately sharing the complex experience of living with the uncertainties and heartbreaks.

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In *There: a Feeling*, his first institutional solo exhibition in the UK, Bordowitz presents work from each of the disciplines he typically works with, revealing his observations and reflections on illness and survival in myriad interconnected ways, where “words are gestures are images are letters”. The ideas seem to echo one another, creeping through the rooms of the exhibition, the poetry on the walls seeming to rise from the large wooden structures, titled *Baroque Clouds* (2018-ongoing), as if the words themselves are also vapours. The stories of friends with HIV recorded on old videos play on nearby monitors, the moving images often interrupted and broken, as if the transmission itself is fragile and moving.

The show also reverberates around Europe: it is the second chapter of a partner exhibition, *Dort: ein Gefühl*, which is at the Bonner Kunstverein (until 2 February 2025) in Bonn, Germany. Conceived as a single project realised across these two galleries, this part at Camden Art Centre is in a sense speaking to its absent other half, its distant twin who is invisible here in London but contains the missing completion of this iteration. That is not to say that the London exhibition feels incomplete, but that it is a microcosm of an infinitely expanding, fluid project, always contingent on something unseen but still present in spirit.

This feeds into the haunting nature of the work, where what is revealed, whether in video, performance or poetry, always highlights what has been left out. By having several disciplines exhibited at once, each concentration, or each mode, reveals by comparison to its neighbouring exhibit the limitations of one particular way of expressing an idea. The large wooden structures highlight a lack of people and language; poetry reveals a lack of colour; video shows us people who have now gone; the artist himself on screen reminds me I missed his in-person performance the previous night.

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Everything feels fleeting, uncontainable, and unpredictable – underlining the feeling of hearing the voices of people on camera, in *Portraits of People living with HIV* (1993), a 30-minute compendium of short video-portraits made for the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, New York. These videos feature Bordowitz’s friends, lovers and fellow activists going about their daily lives as they coped with HIV at a time when there were few treatments available and immense stigma. Together with the sculptural and visual works, Bordowitz’s wider presentation simply and elegantly reveals the chronically shifting nature of living with illness, and how it feels like living in several modes of existence at once, always feeling as though something has been lost or misremembered, always partially living in another part of the show (or time or space).

Drawing so much from his own experience, as well as that of his loved ones, Bordowitz’s interconnected, expanding body of work bears witness to the lives of others while recording his own thoughts. The work, he says, “combines daily quandaries with improvised compositions, together adding up, but never summing up, bits and pieces of a unified field. The singular proposition of an exhibition can only be experienced as qualities bursting upon qualities through overlapping episodes of attention, sensation, and perception.”

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At the heart of *There: a Feeling* is a new film called *Before and After (Still in Progress)* (2023), the third instalment in a trilogy of autobiographical documentaries after *Fast Trip*, *Long Drop* (1993) and *Habit* (2001). Showing the artist's multiple identities, and how they "relate and intersect within a constantly reconfiguring self", we see how illness, especially one that also affects friends and loved ones, changes one's personality and sense of self. Living with HIV for more than 30 years, and with the illness defining his artistic practice, it has determined "the artistic self". This is an extended understanding of what illness is in reality: it is not just a physical affliction but a change in identity, in the course of one's life and art. The physical side of illness inevitably transforms how and when the artist can work, how he thinks, and who is in his life. It entails a continuous grieving for those who have died, a constant awareness of empty space and lost possibilities; the weight of futures that could never come into existence.

Bordowitz fills some of that space with fresh energy, new words. In *Before and After (Still in Progress)*, he presents himself in five "acts" and guides, each one expressing a facet of his identity. These are: a deadpan comedic standup; a lecture; a poetry reading; a song; and a Yom Kippur sermon in which he addresses the congregation of his New York synagogue, dressed in yarmulke and prayer shawl. In each of his identities, he commands the silence around him, addressing those who are invisible along with those who are present, calling us all there together. I certainly feel the absences – absences of people I

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don't even know – in this ghostly but powerful performance that seems to tune into a need for speech, a need to mark the empty space with the commanding energy of a single voice. At one point, the artist says, after some silence: “I am grateful, very grateful that you are here.” It is a statement that, in addition to gratitude, expresses a loss that is beyond words, and yet he expresses it nevertheless.

I leave the dark room where the film is showing feeling quite bereft, turning this into a disappointment with myself that I missed Bordowitz's opening-night performance, now feeling more than ever this desire to hear, to be there. And as I am chastising myself for this (I missed it because I was ill, as it happens), I wander into the cafe below and am delighted to see the artist himself ahead of me in the queue, ordering his lunch. I say hello and congratulate him on the show. And I am grateful, very grateful, that he is here.



Continuous Red Line, 2002 - ongoing. Red splicing tape, dimensions variable. Installation view, There: a Feeling | Gregg Bordowitz, Camden Art Centre, London 2025. Photo: Luke Walker.