

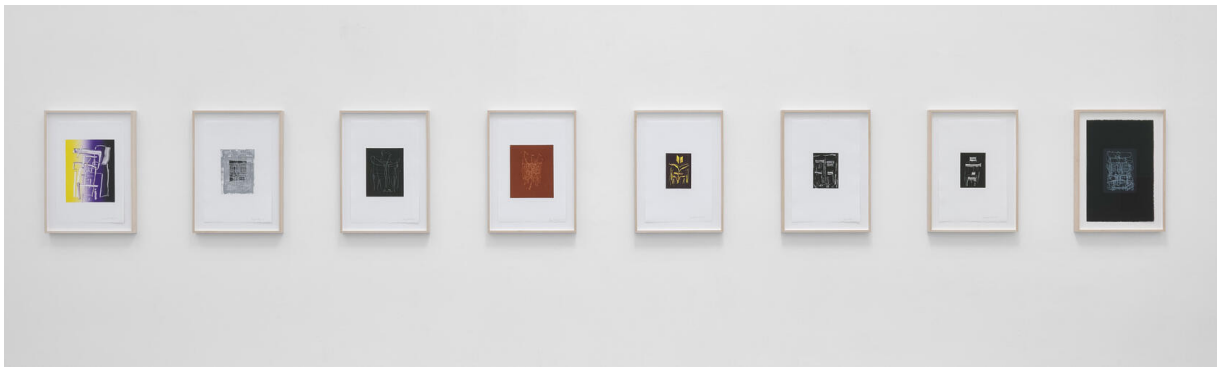
FRIEZE

Gregg Bordowitz: Collaging Life, Poetry and the Politics of Survival

The artist discusses the challenges of survivor's guilt and fostering community through shared experience

By Gregg Bordowitz and Jeremy Lybarger in Interviews | 29 JAN 25

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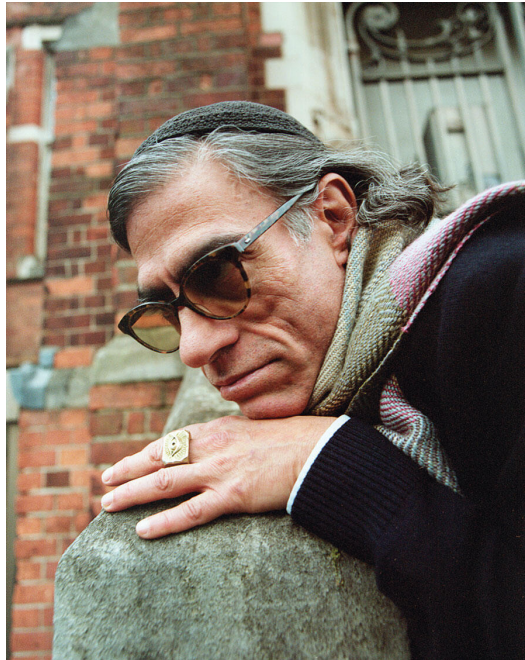
Jeremy Lybarger What should people expect to see at The Brick?

Gregg Bordowitz ‘This Is Not a Love Song’ is centred around the third instalment of a film trilogy that I started making in the early 1990s. The first two were *Fast Trip, Long Drop* [1993] and *Habit* [2001]. The last film, *Before and After (Still in Progress)* [2023], is a kind of anthology of performance works I made that directly relate to the two earlier films. *Fast Trip, Long Drop* was an experimental documentary about me – a Jewish, queer man living with HIV at the height of the AIDS epidemic – which also featured lots of fictional elements and employed many strategies found in poetry; it has a very collage aesthetic. It was almost a decade before I made the sequel, *Habit*, and, although I always wanted to make a third film, it took me even longer to arrive at *Before and After*.

Before and After was hard to make, but it wasn’t the hardest. I was very, very sick in 1993 and *Fast Trip, Long Drop* was really about that period where my friends were dying and I didn’t really know my own future.

Habit was filmed after protease inhibitors – a new set of medications that helped stop the virus from replicating – were approved for use in the US in 1996. I was fortunate enough to be able to get access, unlike some of my friends who did not make it. But, for some of us, it saved our lives. *Habit* developed from my concern about the unequal distribution of these drugs around the world, which is what took me to Durban, South Africa in 2000, for the 13th International AIDS Conference. So, *Habit* was about me and my friends encountering South African activists, such as the filmmaker Zackie Achmat, who were leading the fight for gaining access to high-quality drugs at a cheaper price.

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Gregg Bordowitz, 2025. Image commissioned for frieze;
photograph: Kuba Ryniewicz

Before and After is much more reductionist, in that it emphasizes my relationship to the camera: me as a performer; me as a person who is actually living with HIV; me as a survivor. It has been very difficult for me to discuss the hardships of my experience because of survivor's guilt. My body was really compromised from being on the earliest forms of the drugs. Yet, I'm also very fortunate to be alive and still working. It's very confusing.

JL Can you speak more to your experience of survivor's guilt and why it took so long for the third film to come together?

GB It's the hesitation around talking about being a survivor. It's a very complex, internalized condition. A lot of my work has been about giving myself permission to talk about the issues that I'm facing in my daily life. And, often, what gives me confidence is that I know I'm not alone. I'm only interested in autobiography if I can tell stories that I know other people are experiencing, not a unique story, a story common to many. And yet, I don't want to render them completely universal stories because they have their particularities. I think media – film and video – serve the purpose of legitimation for audiences as well as for the people who make them. I know there's a very large group of people who may not feel addressed if these stories weren't put out.

JL Who do you imagine as your audience?

GB That's an interesting question. I still have the same conception of my audience that I arrived at when making AIDS activist video work in the 1980s. I see it as consisting of concentric rings: the first ring is the people actually depicted in the film. I make it for them. The second ring comprises those who know the people in the film. And the third ring is anyone else who wants to come along for the ride. I still

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Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993, video still. Courtesy: © Gregg Bordowitz and Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

believe that the most radical thing a work of art can do is create audiences or, as I prefer, ‘constituencies.’ I think works of art at their best can bring together groups of people who don’t imagine themselves as sharing a common set of interests or stakes.

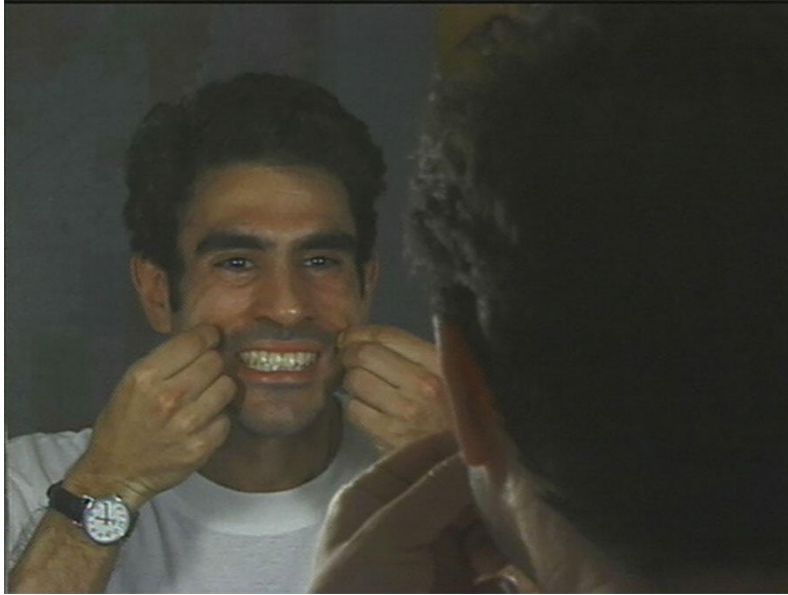
The concerns of my early video works were established in my essay ‘Picture a Coalition’ [1987], first published in *October*. The earliest AIDS activist works were made in collaboration with others. They were about creating an audience that did not yet exist, an AIDS community: diverse groups of people who were disproportionately affected by AIDS, who could sit down and watch these pieces of media and see themselves acting in concert, where it might not have been visible before.

JL Does mediation help you address survivor’s guilt and process it in some way?

GB I think it enables me to make work. I think there’s a therapeutic function to all my work but, by the time it’s art, I’ve completely abandoned the therapeutic process. To make the work that I do, I have to let go of the stories. I don’t tell all of my stories. I only tell the stories that I think are relevant to other people. That’s why it’s not a confessional practice. I am nurturing my own experiences and other people’s experiences to produce works. I don’t own the meaning of my work. I don’t own the way it circulates.

I think about that in relationship to poetry, too. There are different ways of writing poems from the first-person perspective, and it doesn’t necessarily have to be the person who is writing the poem or reading the poem. You can inhabit the first person, plural or singular, as a vehicle. You can write poetry in character. I often write in character or, rather, as an assemblage of many characters.

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Gregg Bordowitz, *Habit*, 2001, video still. Courtesy: © Gregg Bordowitz and Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

JL Is that something that you continue to discover in yourself – a multiplicity of characters?

GB I don't know. I cite and present my selves, plural, as they appear differently in changing contexts. You can tell I'm much more interested in the instability of the self, as opposed to any monolithic idea of a self. And that goes along with collage and improvisation. I feel myself to be walking through my daily life, collaging and improvising, which explains why writing and poetry are methods that inform every aspect of my practice.

JL I wonder if you can talk more about that, especially in relation to poetry and how it influences the visual work that you do.

GB That's changed quite a bit throughout the years. I've been interested in poetry, and writing it, for a long time. As a teenager in the 1970s, it was the Beats, Allen Ginsberg. In the 1980s, I was very interested in the New York School. I was in my 20s, so discovering Frank O'Hara's collected works and seeing Ginsberg walking around town was hugely influential. I heard Ginsberg read numerous times. He was older, but that experience was available to me. Younger New York School poets such as Eileen Myles, for instance, who was/is an enormously important figure to me, and David Trinidad, they were reading around regularly.

Poetry informs all of my work. Methods of syntax, grammar, enjambment inform my filmmaking, visual art and performances. The recent show at Bonner Kunstverein in Germany was titled 'Dort: ein Gefühl', after a line in Paul Celan's poem 'Heimkehr' [Homecoming, 1961], which speaks to the overwhelming loss and displacement experienced by Holocaust survivors. Celan figures very prominently in this show and there's actually a wall painting of the poem.

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Gregg Bordowitz, 'There: a Feeling', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: Camden Art Centre, London; photograph: Luke Walker

I quote 'There: A Feeling' as the title of a poem I wrote and read appearing in *Before and After*. In the gallery pamphlet for the exhibition in Bonn I composed a text that juxtaposes Celan's poems with quotations from Mahmoud Darwish, regarded as Palestine's national poet. The way they both used a divided self, two 'I's' addressing each other in their respective poems to tackle themes of exile, displacement and wandering – Celan the poet, survivor of the Shoah and Darwish the poet, survivor of the Nakba.

The Camden Art Centre exhibition in London, which opened in January, is considered to be a second iteration of the Bonn show. Called 'There: A Feeling', it's not identical, but it's an unfolding of the same ideas. A lot of the works are site-specific: in Bonn, I was responding to the enormous former flower market that houses the Kunstverein; in London, I'm responding to the much smaller Victorian rooms at Camden Art Centre. But, in both instances, I'm still very interested in poetry that approaches catastrophe, that responds to things which are very difficult to describe.

American modernist poet Hilda Doolittle [H.D.]'s *Trilogy* (1944) is key to my show at Camden Art Centre – in particular, excerpts from 'The Walls Do Not Fall', which is the first poem in the trilogy. She wrote it when she was living in London during the Blitz in the 1940s. And Edmond Jabès is a very important figure to me and in some ways is underneath all of this. Jabès was an Egyptian Jew who was forced into exile in 1956 and fled to Paris where he thrived as an author in the face of being subject to discrimination as an Arab Jew. The complexity of identity as it arises for poets and artists in their works, as a structuring feature of composition, that has my attention. My upcoming show at The Brick is not intended to be the third iteration of 'There: A Feeling', but it's very much where I am starting from.

JL What is it about this 'poetry of catastrophe', as you call it, that appeals to you?

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Gregg Bordowitz, *Poem Painted on a Wall*, 2024, acrylic paint, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Bonner Kunstverein; photograph: Mareike Tocha

GB Well, I love all kinds of poetry, but I’m very much interested in how poetry gives us access to talking about difficult feelings, such as the pain of loss and grief that came to identify the AIDS crisis. I’m thinking about friends like Pamela Sneed, whose work – particularly her book *Funeral Diva* [2020] – is terrific. She’s an important chronicler of the HIV epidemic. A lot of my work is about being queer, having HIV, being Jewish, masculinity, and the ways in which those things – and many other things – rub up against each other. Poetry just lends itself to that.

JL I’m wondering if you’ve ever had a moment where you’ve questioned the use of art or the purpose of art making?

GB I have always felt that art can change the world, and I make art to prove it. Sometimes, I think that’s the tension I’m riding out. I embarked on a series of performance lectures, titled ‘Testing Some Beliefs’ [2011– ongoing], where I would improvise and address audiences in galleries – not at my own shows but at other people’s shows – trying to convince them that art could change the world.

JL And are people easily convinced?

GB No – though some people fervently want to believe otherwise, which is a position I do understand. A significant part of my work revolves around the structure of belief. I hold that belief is fundamentally structural. That has profound relevance to art. An entire apparatus operates within galleries and museums to establish the credibility of an object as a work of art: the blank, white walls; the precise methods of installation; the gallery labels; the surrounding discourses; and the machinery of the press. In many ways, art relies on a constellation of activities that produce its credibility and appearance. This interplay interests me deeply.

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Gregg Bordowitz, 'There: a Feeling', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: Camden Art Centre, London; photograph: Luke Walker



Gregg Bordowitz, *Tetragrammaton (Non-Binary Sefirot)*, 2021, monotype, 76 x 56 cm. Courtesy: the artist; printed at 10 Grand Press