

EDITOR'S NOTE

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xxii The AIDS crisis has produced an estimable literature, which has come to be known as AIDS writing. Writing around AIDS records the experiences of AIDS, experiences that verge on the inarticulate and incomprehensible. Much like the fiction of Edmund White, the memoirs of Paul Monette, the confessions of David Wojnarowicz, the plays of Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner, and the poetry of Thom Gunn, the writings of Gregg Bordowitz

explore the salient themes of the genre: living with a disease while witnessing the deaths of loved ones and friends; the prejudice that HIV-positive people face; and the ethical questions that AIDS poses, such as the relations of conduct between the sick and well.

And yet within the idiom of AIDS writing Bordowitz's texts assume a place occupied, so far as I know, by no other. The particular stake of this collection is its proposal of a theory of art-making developed in response to an epidemic. *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous* is a testimony of one person's experience of living with HIV; but it is also the record of a *practice*, a practice organized to address a public health crisis. AIDS activist artists quickly learned that the epidemic necessitates a highly pragmatic approach, a capacity to transform the very terms of one's practice. Bordowitz's early work, produced collaboratively within the ambience of ACT UP, contested dominant representations of AIDS and recorded the movement's actions (Bordowitz filmed the very first ACT UP demonstration at the New York Stock Exchange in 1987). His practice then moved into AIDS education, and then to presenting more nuanced images of people living with HIV for people living with HIV. Other videos and texts have addressed aspects of the epidemic in a highly allusive manner.

This book is an account of an artist's practice, but it is not merely this. For Bordowitz writing is itself a practice, a marshaling and combining of different discursive forms. His texts traverse several modes. The first, following the work of Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Cindy Patton, Simon Watney, and Douglas Crimp, critiques representations of people with AIDS and gays and lesbians, and the political and social institutions that work against their interests; this is the "queer" vein of Bordowitz's project. In the second, formalist mode, the artist's practice becomes an object of reflection. Filmic and video form and issues of spectatorship are foregrounded. Masters of avant-garde cinema and theater, ranging from

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Sergei Eisenstein and Bertolt Brecht to Yvonne Rainer, become key references. (The director Charles Ludlam, whose concept of Ridiculous Theater inspired the title essay of this book, occupies a place between the first and second tendencies.)

The third vein of Bordowitz's writings—inspired by psychoanalytic theory and the media studies work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall—recognizes television as a dominant force in the contemporary construction of subjectivity. Beginning with "Picture a Coalition," Bordowitz posits a counterpractice centered not on the production of art video but *television*, a television that takes as its ambition a dissolution of the traditional, Greenbergian divide between critical and mass media forms (the artist's Brechtian affiliation is also apparent here). The final, "literary" aspect of Bordowitz's writings—apparent in such texts as "New York Was Yesterday" and "Which Is More Powerful, the Word or the Idea?"—may be understood as a response to activism's ultimately limited grasp of the full range of the epidemic's complexities. An imaginative and philosophical literature—texts by Janet Flanner, J. G. Ballard, Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, Nicolai Erdman, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky—are the writer's starting point. The clarion tone of "Picture a Coalition" gives way to confessions of doubt, clear-mindedness to irrationality. Fantasy enters, as well as its converse, the everyday—the space of boredom and habit. The literary enters at the point where the confident discourses of theory and the avant-garde retreat. Much like the finest AIDS writing, Bordowitz's texts in this vein ask questions they cannot answer, questions without answers.

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To see Bordowitz's writings as merely an exegesis of his art, a supplement to his video production, is thus to misunderstand their function and importance. Bordowitz's engagement with these discursive traditions suggests that writing is an equal and integral part of his activity. As

Bordowitz's friend and teacher, Craig Owens observes in the essay "Earth-words," a discussion of Robert Smithson's *Collected Writings*:

The argument which reduces these artists' writings to a secondary, derived position vis-à-vis their work might be diagnosed as one symptom of a modernist aesthetic, specifically, its desire to confine the artist within the sharply delineated boundaries of a single aesthetic discipline. This desire is sanctioned by an unquestioned belief in the absolute *difference* of verbal and visual art.

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Owens instead proposes an allegorical notion of practice: art conceived as a palimpsest of media and forms, a semantic overlapping of image and text. Meaning, no longer tied to medium, is destabilized and deferred. "This eruption of language into the aesthetic field . . .," Owens continues, "is coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism." For Owens, the figure of the artist-writer—the visual artist whose practice traverses language—is paradigmatically postmodernist.

The artist-writer has gone into hibernation since his heyday of the sixties, when Smithson, Rainer, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, and Sol LeWitt (Owens's exemplars) established writing as a central part of their projects. Today, few younger artists write so audaciously—if they write at all. *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous* is a riposte to this anti-intellectual tendency, which has more or less dominated the American art world since the collapse of postmodernism in the early nineties. With the publication of this book the artist-writer returns. For Bordowitz *is* an artist-writer. As his practice suggests, artists need not be inarticulate, "instinctive" thinkers solely concerned with the orchestration of image, of visual form. To the contrary, *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous* reminds us that artists do have the capacity to develop their ideas within the domain of writing, and writing, so construed, may be counted within the domain of the artistic.

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