



Nothing But Being Here

GREGG BORDOWITZ
“DORT: EIN GEFÜHL”
BONNER KUNSTVEREIN
21 SEP 2024 – 2 FEB 2025

On the opening night of his exhibition at Bonner Kunstverein, Gregg Bordowitz (*1964) took to a platform at the edge of the large, open space to give one of his signature speech performances, seemingly improvised in charming freeform. “The question has priority over the answer,” was one of the keys he provided to a practice that, since the mid 1980s, has woven together teaching, activism, film, and poetry, playing at the edge of what can be known, or even be said to exist. Towards the end, Bordowitz admitted to “feeling the danger of the stage . . . I am wanting to say something that I cannot say,” his utterance followed by a long silence. That absence of words – both political and existential, almost material in its weight – comes close to defining what “Dort: ein Gefühl” (There: A Feeling) might be said to be “about.”

The outcome of a long-standing conversation between Bordowitz and curator Fatima Hellberg, the exhibition is framed by a red line running along the bottom of the entire inside wall of the Kunstverein: the galleries, the lobby, even the toilets. The line takes the institution’s measure, pointing to a clear inside where art supposedly exists. In an exhibition that feels almost empty, or at least made up of a sort of presence that must be continuously tested and verified, the red line is crucial – it draws the *there* of the exhibition’s title. And yet, since entering means first finding ourselves on one side, *here* necessarily bleeds into *there*, and the line becomes not a demarcation, but its opposite: a marker of instability.

Beside the vacated platform, the main space features a blank advertising pillar, *Säule I* (Column I, 2024), and some plaster clouds hung high on the wall, opposite Paul Celan’s poem “Heimkehr” (Homecoming, 1955), printed at a slant in its German original. “There: a feeling, / blown over here by the icewind, / fastening its dove-, / its snow-colored flagcloth.” To plant the flag of feeling, in Celan, is to defy the weather, that is, to persist, much in spite of the fatal ephemerality evoked by “snowfall, as if you were asleep even now,” “the sledtracks of the lost,” “an I that slid into muteness[.]” Bordowitz’s takes this dove-, snow-colored palette for his exhibition, along with the poem’s quite unmetaphorical insistence on the continued reality of what has been lost: life as what is leftover from survival.

Shown in a black-box projection room, *Before and After (Still in Progress)* (2023) is a seventy-three-minute-long medley of previous speech performances (the artist always impeccably dressed), poetry, and a Yom Kippur address at temple, each segment followed by the same harrowing clip of Bordowitz’s stepfather breathing heavily in a hospital bed. Bordowitz, who has lived with HIV for thirty years, is acutely aware of the precise texture of



Color Field Square Recess, 2021,
 acrylic paint, 150 x 150 x 50 cm

Left to right: *Säule I* and *Baroque Clouds*, 2024
 (both), installation view, “Dort: ein Gefühl”



aliveness, its snow-like quality. In a poem published in the exhibition booklet, he writes: “you walk into a room / and you know / he is gone / what is he gone? / is absence the evidence?”

Elsewhere in the idiosyncratic architecture, mindfully left over from a previous exhibition, a TV monitor screens one of Bordowitz’s best-known works, *Portraits of People living with HIV* (1993). One chapter follows a group of friends on holiday on a sailing boat. In a rare instance, we hear the artist say, from behind the camera, that he wanted to record the trip because he thought there might be some truth at its center,

Photos: Marilke Töcher

which he would be able to capture. Amid the deconstruction, anti-aesthetics, institutional critique, and activism dominant in the art of the time, “truth” was not necessarily in the cards. And yet, already in 1993, it seems, Bordowitz had begun enacting a slow but steady reconciliation between postmodernism and a kind of spirituality. This is a search that we see inching along in the decades documented in *Before and After*, with the hypothesis of art – of feeling – acting as its motor. If the exhibition also



Poem Painted on a Wall, 2024,
 acrylic paint, dimensions variable

Berlin, the KW’s Martin Wong retrospective comes to mind, as does, more acutely, the Neue Nationalgalerie’s show of Andy Warhol’s “quest for beauty”). The strength of “Dort: ein Gefühl” is its minimal curatorial framework – that red line – which allows us not just to hear what is being said, but to register Bordowitz’s true medium: not performance, poetry, or film, but presence itself, with language and, ultimately, art as its faulty witnesses.

Kristian Vistrup Madsen



Tetragrammaton, 2021, monotype,
 58 x 38 cm, 69 x 50 cm

Still from *Before and After (Still In Progress)*,
 2023, color, sound, 73:15 min.



contains a portrait of Bordowitz himself, faith might just be its leitmotif.

Another of the *Portraits* shows a young man who keeps an aviary of budgies all named Sweet as Pie, so that the birds may easily be replaced as they die. Each one is mesmerizing in its mundanity, showcasing the dual commitment professed in *Before and After* to simple “observation and feeling.” Many recent exhibitions that have touched on gay culture and the AIDS crisis have not been able to resist a museological impulse to sentimentalize and politicize, often out-sounding or plainly ignoring an artist’s own language (in