

REVIEWS BONN

Gregg Bordowitz

Bonner Kunstverein

By Noemi Smolik

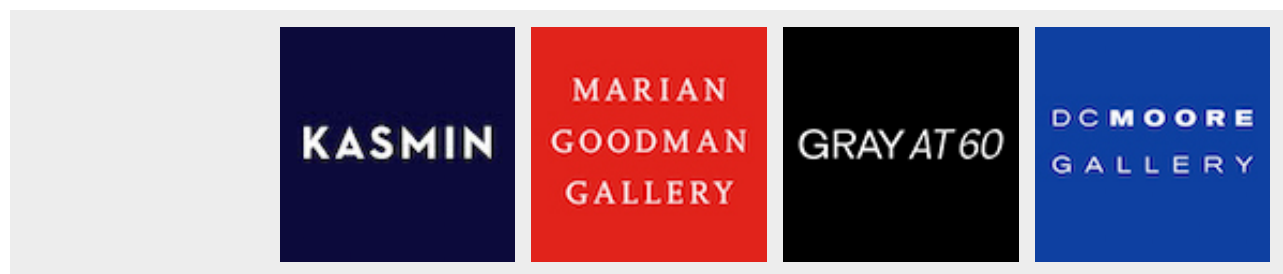


View of “Gregg Bordowitz: *Dort: ein Gefühl*,” 2024. Photo: Mareike Tocha.

One of the most extraordinary exhibitions I’ve seen recently, Gregg Bordowitz’s “*Dort: ein Gefühl*” pulls off something rare: It employs texts,

drawings, and performance as forms of applied thinking. As curator Fatima Hellberg, who has staged the presentation together with the artist, puts it, “Writing is expanded until it becomes drawing, realism is pushed until it necessitates abstraction.”

The entrance to the show is barred, with only a small gap allowing for a furtive glance inside. Visitors instead enter through the room used by the Artothek, the institution’s art-lending library. Entering one of the galleries from the side, audiences come face-to-face with four abstract works (photographs and prints) by different artists from the Artothek’s holdings. Beneath these works, Bordowitz’s *Continuous Red Line*, 2002–, runs horizontally along the wall three inches above the floor. Taking inspiration from the colored stripes showing people the way through American hospitals, Bordowitz has transformed a functional way-finding system into an abstract element in the Minimalist/Conceptualist tradition. One is reminded of Polish artist Edward Krasiński, who in the 1970s made endless lines with blue tape running horizontally along walls his hallmark.



Into these rooms, whose clinical austerity does not altogether dispel an air of the sacred, the artist has then inserted additional architectural elements. Two advertising columns, or Litfass columns, of the type used for advertising and other public communications in German cities, serve as vehicles for Bordowitz’s poetry. Elsewhere, three superimposed squares in the style of Josef Albers adorn the wall of a rectangular alcove with a sitting niche,

converting this icon of high abstraction into a functional interior-design component. In the rear part of the large gallery, black-and-white prints called “Tetragrammaton,” 2021, are mounted on a 1940s modular-display system. “They come out of an abiding interest in contemporary visual poetry and also a centuries-old meditational practice of rearranging the letters”—that is, of the unpronounced four-letter Hebrew name of God—“in one’s mind,” Bordowitz writes in the catalogue accompanying the show.

The title, “*Dort: ein Gefühl*,” or “There: a feeling” comes from Paul Celan’s poem “*Heimkehr*” (Homecoming), ca. 1955, the text of which Bordowitz displays on one of the walls. Feelings, and the question of whether it is possible to share them—is the grief felt by the other the same as my own?—were the subject of “Open Book: Letters, Mark and Politics,” Bordowitz’s lecture/performance during the opening. The most formidable works in the show are films and videos. It is impossible not to be deeply moved by a series of videos, *Before and After (Still in Progress)*, 2023, documenting performances. One of them, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 2018, shows a performance at New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art. In it, we see the artist seated on a stool before a window; dressed in a black suit, he calmly chats about his life’s journey with gentle irony. His charisma, which has no need for self-dramatization, is captivating. I am reminded of Didier Eribon’s book *Returning to Reims* (2009). Like Eribon, Bordowitz was born to working-class parents and suffered because of his sexual orientation, but he also faced hostility from society at large because of his Jewish background. Unlike Eribon, whose persistent feelings of shame and rage prevented full self-acceptance, Bordowitz talks about the human capacity for forgiveness and gratitude. Here is someone who is thoroughly at peace with himself, despite, or perhaps precisely because of, being HIV positive. And his courage is undeniable. In one clip, he enters a New York synagogue, kippah on his head, during the Yom Kippur service to deliver a sermon. He speaks

Angeles, he discusses art's kinship with religion and his belief in its ability to change the world—all ideas that the Western art community, which ostensibly knows no taboos, often either refuses to acknowledge or sneers at.

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

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Ritty Burchfield performance inside the Mirror Dome of the Pepsi-Cola Pavilion organized by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) at Expo '70, Osaka, Japan, 1970. Photo: János Kender and Harry Shunk. From "Sensing the Future: Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.)," 2024–25, Getty Center, Los Angeles.

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