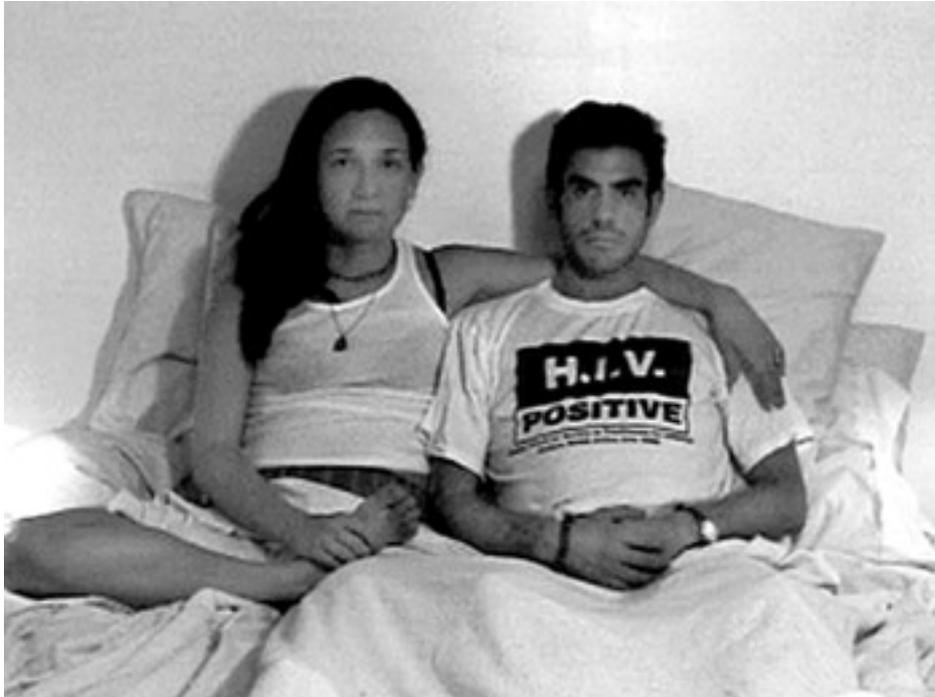


## How might we conceive of Gregg Bordowitz's film *Habit* (2001) as a political work of art?



Gregg Bordowitz and Claire Pentecost, Film still from *Habit* (2001).

In a speech delivered at an ACT UP demonstration in New York in 1988, the LGBT activist and author Vito Russo, declared, ‘ If I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from indifference. If I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from the sensationalism of newspapers and magazines and television shows, which are interested in me, as a human interest story – only as long as I’m willing to be a helpless victim, but not if I’m fighting for my life.’<sup>1</sup> ACT UP was founded in New York in 1987 by a group of people committed to end the AIDS crisis. One of the reasons of its creation was because health officials, government researches, and pharmaceutical company executives were regarded as the ultimate “AIDS experts” in whose hands laid all the power over the people living with AIDS. These, in turn, were made invisible and their real-world knowledge about the changes

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<sup>1</sup> Vito Russo, ‘Why we fight?’, in *ACT UP* website, 28 April 2015, <<http://www.actupny.org/documents/whfight.html>>.

that needed to be made to end the crisis neglected by the dominant culture. This implicated a bifurcation within society: people with AIDS and those who fight for people with AIDS, and the rest of the population.

Within this socio-political framework, Gregg Bordowitz as a young artist and member of ACT UP, began to make videos as a means to explore how, through the counter-hegemonic potential of video, the structures of power defining the status quo could be transgressed.

As Bordowitz has stated, ‘the kinds of representations, or lack of representations, addressing disenfranchised subjects within the field of dominant media can be a primary motivation for making video work.’<sup>2</sup> In light of this statement, this essay will examine the extent to which Gregg Bordowitz’ film *Habit*, might be envisioned as political. First attention will be drawn to the depiction of habits in relation to Henri Lefebvre *Rhythmanalysis* (1992). Consequently, Bordowitz’s concept of political art as capable of producing irresolution by shedding light upon the dichotomy between “here” and “there,” the sayable and the unsayable, will be compared to Rancière’s notion of the distribution of the sensible. Ultimately questions will be raised in relevance to how the film pictures a “commons” and how it potentially allows the audience to be acknowledge as one in turn.

*Habit* is an autobiographical documentary which follows the current history of the AIDS epidemic along dual trajectories which intertwine throughout the entire film. On the one hand it captures the daily routine of Bordowitz - who has been living with AIDS for more than ten years. On the other, it sheds light upon the efforts of South Africa’s AIDS activist group TAC (Treatment Action Campaign), struggling to gain access to AIDS antiretroviral drugs. The juxtaposition of

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<sup>2</sup> Gregg Bordowitz, and James Sampson Meyer, ‘Operative Assumptions,’ in *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings: 1986-2003*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004, p. 79.

these two parallel universes, which, in some way are conjoined, ensues a rigorous working through of ideas concerning privilege, responsibility, futility, solidarity, struggle and hope. Yet the most urgent aspect of the documentary is, in Bordowitz own terms, ‘to do whatever I can to help those who do not have access to the same drugs that keep me and my friends alive.’<sup>3</sup> The tape is organized in three sections: habit, foreignness and intimacy. Habit is conveyed through everyday activities such as waking up, practicing yoga and taking medications. The section on foreignness focuses primarily on the material shot in South Africa depicting the work of HIV positive activists. This unit is characterized by three main figures.

Edwin Cameron, a white High Court Justice who testifies to the life-saving role treatment plays in his life and the necessity to shed light upon the moral inequity, which underlies the distribution of medication in South Africa and across the globe.

The second figure is Promise Mthembu, a TAC activist who exhibits the treatment issue by positing that 95% of people living with HIV in South Africa have no access to antiretroviral drugs. Though expressing the difficulty she has obtaining medical treatment she declares that living with AIDS has rendered her stronger and helped her towards reaching empowerment as a woman. She does no longer feel alone, TAC gives her hope and shows her the limitless power that lies within each individual. The third figure is that of Zachie Achmat, the chairperson of TAC, who explains why he has refused not take drugs until they are available to all the citizens of South Africa who need them. He justifies his decision by stating that, ‘I don’t want to live in a world that devalues the life of poor people simply because they are poor.’<sup>4</sup> This statement is powerful in a twofold manner; first of all it delineates, as shown also by Mthembu’s example, an incommensurable sense of community and

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<sup>3</sup> Gregg Bordowitz, and James Sampson Meyer, ‘More Operative Assumptions,’ in *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings: 1986-2003*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004, p. 270.

<sup>4</sup> Gregg Bordowitz, *Habit*, Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2001.

strength. Achmat, as well as his fellow activists, is not depicted as a victim. On the contrary, a sense of powerful solidarity emerges from the words and actions showed in the film. In relevance to this, Achmat himself has argued, ‘I have so many more friends now because they have realized that we are doing something together.’<sup>5</sup>

The hope which emanates from this images is conjoined to another subtle, but equally important message, there is no anger in Achmat’s words but a compelling sense of justice. Bordowitz recalls that at a dinner’s party at Achmat’s house, he invited his American guests to pull out their HIV med and show them to the assembled guests, ‘a bit stunned,’ Bordowitz recollects, ‘we reached into our pockets and laid dozen of pills on the table. (...) Achmat’s gesture was brilliant, demonstrating the gross inequity among PWAs in the room. Without polarizing his guests, he provoked a profound realization in the Americans: our South African dinner companions weren’t angry at us – they simply want meds, too.’<sup>6</sup> This gesture brings forth ideas about how to fight AIDS on a global scale by shedding light upon the fact that those who are more privileged will not be blamed yet their contribution is fundamental for making a change; the sense of community needs to extend beyond the frontiers of TAC. The benefits that people who have access to meds enjoy are the result of a vast global economy; they are impersonal. Thus, each thing, each person, is the same as another in some respect and profoundly different in other ways. According to Bordowitz, ‘one must work not to lose the differences, the novel aspects that can alter and expand one’s consciousness.’<sup>7</sup> The juxtaposition between habit and foreignness funnel into the third and last section: intimacy. The latter is portrayed through images of interiority, the body and spirituality defined respectively by Claire Pentecost (the author’s girlfriend); Yvonne Rainer (the dancer who defines the body as

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<sup>5</sup> Bordowitz, *Habit*.

<sup>6</sup> Bordowitz, ‘What the World Needs Now – South Africa HIVers Counter Doomsday Images with Porfiles in Radical Courage’ in *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings: 1986-2003*, p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> Bodrowitz, ‘My Postmodernism,’ in *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings: 1986-2003*, p. 275.

having a mind of its own); and ultimately Richard Elovich and Danie Wolfe (a gay couple who together enjoy spiritual practices). Through an analysis of the body, Bordowitz is trying to inquire into intimacy and the understanding of the relations between the self and the others; as if to establish an underlying communitarian ideal.

Bordowitz attention on habit and the exploration of the body could be analysed through the lens of Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis*. Lefebvre argues rhythm to be easily misread as a mechanical sequence. According to him, modern society has been accustomed to brush away the organic aspect of rhythmmed movements. Rhythm, he argues, 'reunites quantitative aspects and elements, which mark time and distinguish moments in it and qualitative aspects and elements, which link them together.'<sup>8</sup> Rhythm thus appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws but in contact with what is least rational in human beings: the visceral and vital body. He goes on by stating that the rhythmanalyst, first listens to his body and learns its rhythms in order to appreciate and detect external rhythms. According to Lefebvre, in this oscillation between the external rhythms (i.e. those of the modern city, other people, labor) and internal ones (i.e. the beating of our hearts) the rhythmanalyst, 'will not be obliged to jump from the inside to the outside observed bodies; he should come to listen to them as a whole and unify them by taking his own rhythms as a reference: by integrating the outside with the inside and vice versa.'<sup>9</sup> Only in this way will he be able to make sense of the sensible present. The body, understood as a bundle of rhythms, is the vehicle through which, one can think that which is not thought, namely accesses the world anew, through unstandardized rhythms. By listening to his body, the rhythmanalyst arrives at the concrete through experience. Lefebvre furthers his argument by stating that, 'without claiming to change life, but by

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<sup>8</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

fully reinstating the sensible in consciousness and in thought, he would accomplish a tiny part of revolutionary transformation of this world and this society in decline. Without any declared political position.’<sup>10</sup> Lefebvre’s conception of rhythm could be compared to Bordowitz’s notion of habit. The latter - understood as a set of daily activities that are often rendered invisible by means of repetition - beholds a rhythm; one which responds to our bodily needs. Instead of envisioning it as stultifying and mechanical, habit, like rhythm, could be understood as the backdrop against which epiphany arises. It is precisely by focusing on his own habits, “without claiming to change life,” that new relations, and genuine novelties arise as contingently different from the features of the quotidian. In regard to this Bordowitz argues, ‘the repetitive nature of daily existence allows for the incorporation of new features into our lives through habit. Habit is the medium of experience.’<sup>11</sup> Novelty, the sensible and non-normative present, can be captured only through the net of our habits. Moreover, Lefebvre argues, ‘in order to grasp this fleeting object (i.e. rhythm), which is not exactly an object, it is necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside.’<sup>12</sup> This oscillation between inside and outside is metaphorically explored in *Habit* by the constant juxtaposition of Bordowitz’s quotidian to the South African activist group. This very fluctuation between “here” and “there” bears upon political potential. Like a rhythm analyst, Bordowitz takes his sensations and habits as a reference, as a means to analyse and disclose a parallel yet distant reality. This reality has its own rhythms, which bring wonder and reformation into Bordowitz’s. The linearity of habit allows difference to emerge and establish its voice. As director himself has stated, ‘politics is a matter of habit for me. Through mundane experiences I encounter an incomprehensible perplexity. Exceeding the limits of my worldview enriches my life.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Bordowitz, ‘More Operative Assumptions,’ p.270.

<sup>12</sup> Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Bordowitz, ‘More Operative Assumptions,’ p.279.

*Habit*'s political potential could also be envisioned through Rancière's notion of the relation between politics and aesthetics. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) he argues that a common world is always defined by a polemical distribution of modes of being and occupations in a space of possibility. The idea of the distribution of the sensible is defined by the impossibility of being something else due to the absence of time. This impossibility, Rancière furthers, 'lies at the heart of our conception of community. It establishes work as the necessary relegation of the worker to the private space-time of his occupation, his exclusion from participation in what is common to the community.'<sup>14</sup> This distribution engenders a bifurcation of humanity into two, those who can speak and those who can't, those who are visible and those who are not. This overarching structure can however be opposed through the transversal potential of artistic practices. If politics would consist in the questioning of the very framework in which discussions take place, hence granting those without time a space where to speak out, then art bears upon politics in its ability to displace and reconfigure the relationship between doing, seeing and saying that circumscribe the being in common. *Habit* sheds light upon the moral inequity underlying the global distribution of antiretroviral drugs however without falling into simplistic narratives. It transversally configures a redistribution by means of addressing the problem through an apolitical spectrum, that of habit. As Rancière argues, 'the dream of a suitable political work of art is the dream of distributing the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle.'<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that this film, penetrates the political not by showing political activism but rather by letting the sayable and the visible (i.e. the habitual) reconfigure

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Art and Work,' in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Rancière, 'Politicized Art,' in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, p. 63.

their own structures by means of casual and transversal interruptions from the “there” of South Africa. This film is political in its refusal to reconstruct events and depict linearity as the ultimate truth. It is a flux of future possibilities expressed through the fluctuation between time and space, culture and images of nature, body and mind not a reconstruction of events. In relevance to this, Bordowitz has stated, ‘the politics of my work happen when you watch the film, in the real time unfolding of the film on screen.’<sup>16</sup> Politics occurs in the act of viewing, in the here and now of the audience. One could argue this characteristic to propose and facilitate the creation of a community of sense amongst its spectators. If the film, as Bordowitz has suggested, is the result of the viewer’s own assemblages and conjectures; his position as a passive spectator immediately vanishes. Knowledge is not transferred to him linearly, he/she is invited to question, test, and confront with both his own past and his “neighbour’s.” There is no definite answer or resolution to the questions raised in this documentary and this very openness incites the spectator to acknowledge the subject or individual as a threshold. In this way, Vito Russo’s appeal for the dissolution of society’s bifurcation into people with AIDS and those who fight for people with AIDS, and the rest of the population, can finally be unfolded. Spectators and “actors” are revealed to be linked by a mutual desire to reassess the present and explore its intricate yet hopeful possibilities.

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<sup>16</sup> Rebecca A. Carter, ‘A matter of Life and Death,’ in *FnewsMagazine*, 28 April 2015, <<http://www.fnewsmagazine.com/2002-april/aprilregulars5.html>>

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