Stills from
Fast Trip, Long Drop
(Gregg Bordowitz, 1993)

by Jon Davies

I was born in 1980, on the eve of the AIDS crisis. Even though I was not yet a teenager when direct-action activism emerged to fight the pandemic, I feel myself drawn to the scores of videos produced by AIDS activists and have a sense of nostalgia for what writer Sarah Schulman has called the "gorgeousness of ACT-UP."[1] The ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) era acts as a kind of popular memory and I find in these videos evidence of the "redemptive potentialities" of their moment.[2] Emotions play a decisive role in what political change we feel is possible whilst the queer past, and our feelings towards it, fully impacts how we can imagine a queer present and future. It is for these reasons that I always return to American artist and writer Gregg Bordowitz's meta-AIDS tape *Fast Trip, Long Drop*.

1 Sarah Schulman, 'Gentrification of the Mind', Activism Symposium, Artery: The AIDS - Arts Forum, www.artistswithaids.org/artery/symposium/symposium_schulman.html
2 Roger Hallas, 'The Witness in the Archive', The Scholar & Feminist Online 2.1 (2003), www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/hallas.htm

The lasting vitality of Bordowitz's canonical 1993 video *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (*FTLD*) lies in its provocative entwining of the conditions of hope and despair that artists and activists against the AIDS crisis were constantly negotiating. Bordowitz produced *FTLD* following a period of intense involvement in the AIDS activist movement, the video emerging from the joint efforts of Testing the Limits and DIVA-TV, two video collectives that were closely associated with ACT UP in New York.[3] In *FTLD* Bordowitz cathartically unleashes all the negative thoughts and grave doubts strategically omitted from his more activist-oriented tapes of the late '80s and early '90s. This gesture suggests that the terrain of Art can be the most fertile ground for staging the contradictions between activism's rhetoric and the messy vicissitudes of human emotion.

These reflections were sparked by comments Bordowitz made in Toronto in January 2005, very soon after the re-election of George Bush Jr., an extremely low point for the American Left: "I'm sick of performing rage, I would rather perform depression and dysfunction." He continued, "This idea that rebellion is impossible is actually a lie that covers up the fact that most of us don't function very well at all. And most of us are not very competent at what we do and we do dysfunction. And if anything, rather than rebellion, we should just be trying to amplify our own dysfunction." This self-consciousness about performing affect runs throughout Bordowitz's work, and *FTLD* reminds us how necessary it is to express feelings like despair in times of great injustice.

In the 1980s, the idea that the great battle against AIDS could someday be 'won' was widely circulated. In 1987, Bordowitz himself concluded his landmark essay 'Picture a Coalition' with the firm assertion: "Picture a coalition of people who *will* end this epidemic."[4] As the years dragged on and this declaration of an end seemed more and more impossible, hope was always tainted by the knowledge of the inequity that for some the crisis *would* end while for others it would only intensify. The introduction of life-sustaining protease inhibitors in 1996 meant that long-term survival could potentially be bought, transforming the disease into a 'manageable condition' for those who could afford them, while millions would continue to go untreated and die, especially in the developing world. Scholar David Román has described North America since the late 1990s as in a state of "Not-About-AIDS" where discussions of AIDS-related issues in North American politics and culture have evaporated and are now unfashionable, or rather retro.[5] Despite ACT UP mastering the art of media visibility, the international movement against AIDS that still exists today – especially the mobilization to fight for safe, effective and affordable treatment for all – is barely perceptible. And while ACT UP still exists nominally, as David Deitcher explains it, the movement's previous incarnation was destroyed by "the many deaths among ACT UP members and the ensuing dissension, exhaustion and frustration among survivors – characteristic signs of the 'burnout' that would only intensify as the years passed without any prospect of an end to the crisis."[6]

3 Bordowitz was born in Brooklyn in 1964 and studied art in New York in the 1980s at the School of Visual Arts, Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and NYU.
4 Gregg Bordowitz, 'Picture a Coalition', *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003*, ed. James Meyer (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2004), p.41
5 David Román, 'Not-About-AIDS', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 6.1* (2000), pp.1-28
6 David Deitcher, 'What Does Silence Equal Now?', *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems & Philip Yenawine (New York University Press, 1999), p.111

The pre-eminent tool of the AIDS activist movement was video. Activists' primary goals for its use were to fight the murderous neglect and punitive policies of government, and to correct the damaging misrepresentations about AIDS and People With AIDS (PWAs) spread by the mainstream media. Regardless of the sub-genre they were working in – from HIV prevention to protest documentation to memorial tapes – AIDS video activists were motivated by the hope that making images would change minds and thus the world: "eventually the picture will change, and then political and personal realities will change accordingly."[7] However, in his essay 'De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS', Bordowitz's mentor Douglas Crimp critiques what seemed like a hollow optimism and heroising in some of the videos aimed at a general audience:

> What is necessary now is the self-representation of our *demoralisation*. We urgently need resources to help us cope with the consequences of losing hope for a cure for AIDS, of dealing with loss upon loss, with so much hatred directed at us and with the simple and horrible fact, very rarely given voice, that all of us will almost certainly live with AIDS for the remainder of our lives, however long that might be. ... Who is psychically able to accept the consequences of 'forever'?[8]

While PWAs' 'personal' expressions of mourning, despair and uncertainty about AIDS (and AIDS activism) were in many ways discouraged as indulgent if they did not seem to contribute directly to ending the crisis, these persistent bad feelings began to come out increasingly in the work from the early to mid 1990s. Crimp lauds *FTLD* as embodying the demoralising self-representation he calls for, as it both rejects a moralistic discourse and refuses to hide the dejected worldview gripping many in the movement. This is exemplified in one of the most remarked-upon scenes where Bordowitz's video activist colleague Jean Carlomusto speaks about the growing sadness of editing AIDS activist tapes, how so many of the participants are dead or dying and perhaps now only exist on video. Each is now a "record of loss [that] starts to become almost a burden, difficult to watch, because of that it completely changed its meaning." Perhaps perversely, this could be why AIDS tapes have a life longer than the specific, transitory contexts in which most were made; whether intentionally or not, they are all incontrovertible proof of and monuments to the needlessly dead. The ghosts of people who have died of AIDS populate the ranks of the queer community, continually reminding us of our past failures – political and otherwise – and, more broadly, of the fragility and impermanence of life. These are the ones who could not be saved and they aren't going anywhere.

Haunted by death and disaster, and preoccupied with questions of time, fate and the possibilities and limitations of agency, *FTLD* is structured by a tension between Bordowitz's knowledge that he will probably die of AIDS and the risk of an unknown, accidental death, which was the fate of his absent father. Here Bordowitz-the-artist-intellectual uses the very same medium to deconstruct the rhetoric produced by Bordowitz-the-AIDS-video-activist. To that end he employs many different formal strategies including

7 Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Duke University Press, 1995), p.80
8 Douglas Crimp, 'De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS', *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2002), p.267

talking heads, found footage, staged scenes, a fictional alter ego named Alter Allesman ('old everyman') and verité footage of himself, his friends and family. This plurality opens *FTLD* both up to history and to the wider fellowship of PWAs whom Bordowitz is explicitly addressing in their shared demoralisation. As a queer cultural object that has circulated for almost two decades, *FTLD* endures so well in part because it is so explicitly self-conscious about its form and mode of address.

In *FTLD*, Bordowitz looks to the past for a means of making sense of the day-to-day routine of the present and for comprehending an uncertain future. Bordowitz intercuts the present with the past by mixing archival material with original footage, such as the images of a man precariously walking a tightrope edited alongside video of himself in bed taking his temperature wearing a 'Silence = Death' T-shirt. He also explicitly links his own experience of disease to the *shtetl* epidemics of typhus that plagued his ancestors in Eastern Europe. AIDS makes him one with a history of sickness and, as Bordowitz says, what is different is how it is talked about: "What's not so new is the misery. Can one become resigned to the fact of misery without losing one's hope, one's will to live?"[9]

Overwhelmed by the weight of cultural and personal history, Bordowitz often refers to Walter Benjamin's words on the Jew's experience of time as an anticipatory present: "'Each moment,' he wrote, 'is the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.'"[10] Any and every second holds the possibility of redemption:

> [T]he Jew has a different sense of time. Throughout his struggles and wandering, he holds out for the possibility of change, always in the present. And this waiting creates a kind of character, a kind of living, a kind of way of thinking about possibility. ... Relating this to AIDS activism, I wanted to wrest all conclusions away from the nihilism that could result from the recognition of our 'failure.' I'm interested in the notion of failure, because I don't believe that we failed because of anything we did wrong. ... Struggle is never fully realised in the terms that it articulates for itself as the fantasy of success.[11]

While upholding a "fantasy of success" may inspire and galvanize the ranks, believing wholeheartedly in the certainty of a fully achieved state of freedom can only lead to the feelings of disillusionment that Bordowitz expresses so poignantly. *FTLD* satirises (and perhaps mourns) the mythic revolution each time a car is driven over a cliff or a man jumps into a fire, each found-footage stunt eroding our faith in reason.

When telling the story of being fucked for the first time by a man who did not use a condom, Bordowitz juxtaposes his words with a man being shot out of a cannon, the two experiences united in their acceptance of risk and potential disaster, then cuts to himself at his father Leslie Hugh Harsten's grave, where he speaks of how troubled and indifferent his father was. The older man had been hit twice on a highway immediately after watching the daredevil Evel Knievel's failed jump over Snake River Canyon

9 Román attempts to answer this question of the meaning of hope in his 'November 1, 1992: AIDS/Angels in America' chapter of *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Indiana University Press, 1998)
10 Gregg Bordowitz, 'More Operative Assumptions', *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003*, ed. James Meyer (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2004), p.257
11 Bordowitz in James Meyer, 'Art of Living: James Meyer talks with Gregg Bordowitz', *Artforum* 33.10 (1995), p.128

in Idaho; Knievel survived but Harsten did not. Bordowitz did not know his father but the man died at age 30 and Bordowitz was 29 when he made *FTLD*. His father's death pulls his fate in the direction of uncertainty ("I don't want to die the victim of some freak accident...") while AIDS pulls him towards a diagnosed end, one that would fulfill the disease's destiny that all of his activism had struggled to stop. Footage of Knievel's craft coasting through the air, its ultimate fate still unknown, recurs as an evocative metaphor for Bordowitz's own indecision and trepidation, while the video's title is taken from a newspaper article about Knievel's plummeting failure that also mentions his father's bizarre doom. The artist uses archival scenes of a stuntman precariously balancing a baby over the edge of a skyscraper to represent his fraught relationship with his absent father and the legacy of peril that the man left him.

An important aspect of AIDS video activism was the creation of positive images of PWAs 'surviving and thriving'. By the mid 1990s, however, activists were burnt-out, exhausted and discouraged and Bordowitz scathingly expresses the burden that performing 'surviving and thriving' exerts. He refuses to present the PWA as hero, victim or anything more or less than a flawed, complex individual like anyone else. Putting on a brave face to make others comfortable is a hypocrisy that Bordowitz resists with every frame of *FTLD*. In the 'Thriving with AIDS' segments, satires of the TV show *Living with AIDS* he produced with Carlomusto for Gay Men's Health Crisis, Bordowitz appears as the cranky, downright vituperative long-term PWA Alter Allesman, Bordowitz's id. As the host awkwardly tries to toe the optimistic party line, Allesman ignores his line of questions and revels in negation. There is a powerful moment of uncomfortable silence in the film when Allesman refuses to answer the host's query, "What is it like for you getting up every morning knowing that you are living with AIDS?" *How can one even begin?* After the host lauds him as a "powerful model of a person surviving and thriving with AIDS," Allesman breaks his silence and his polemic turns even more nihilistic. Allesman orders the camera to move in closer, taking control of his own representation to address PWAs in the audience directly and to viciously condemn the host's presumptuousness and the onus that is put on them. Importantly, Allesman's speech is interrupted very briefly by a shot of Carlomusto and Bordowitz directing the proceedings from the control room, as they did for the show's real-life counterpart. They collude with Allesman, moving the cameras in as he requests and allowing him to continue even after deflecting the show's ostensible focus on thriving. Early in the film, Charles Barber offers a fanciful alternate definition of AIDS to an audience of fellow activists: "Acquired Internal Doubt of Self." Bordowitz performs this 'doubt of self' toward his activist past when he takes advantage of the possibilities of video editing in *FTLD* to re-enact the moment of his 1988 public 'coming out' as a PWA. First we see the documentation of his earnest and empowering public confession as it actually took place, then later we see it staged again, a do-over[12], in an ironic attempt at re-imagining that primal scene with all that he knows five years later:

12 Another more existential do-over occurs at the end of the video where we see Bordowitz hit by a bus in the kind of freak accidental death he feared. This death proves just to be a trick, however, because after the credits Bordowitz is still alive. He laughs, "Death is the death of consciousness and I hope that there's nothing after this," sparking a giggling and coughing fit, then finally announcing, "Cut" as the film ends for real. An alternate title for *Fast Trip, Long Drop* could be 'Rehearsals for My Own Death'.

> I've decided to run for political office in this nation of the ill and dying. My platform is simple: Causal relationships – none! [*cut to cheering crowd*] Historical conditions – maybe! [*quiet boos*] Reasons – none! I will not be held accountable for my emotions; as for my actions, survival is my only concern here [*cut to cheering crowd again*]. I seek a candidacy for a constituency of the burnt-out, the broken-hearted and you, all of you, the profoundly confused [*cheers*].

Is this what activist rhetoric might sound like if it allowed for an individual's pain and bewilderment to rupture the united front? I'm reminded here of the potent confusion and diffusion of the recent Occupy movement, and how their hold of public spaces introduces dysfunction into the day-to-day operating of a capitalism that only benefits the 1%. Casting the downtrodden as 99% of the world begs the question of how many of us are actually 'thriving', or even just functioning, as Bordowitz suggested in his talk.

In a 2004 editorial, playwright Tony Kushner announced, "Despair is a lie we tell ourselves."[13] The thinking goes that despair is a negative obstacle to be surmounted rather than a force to be reckoned with, a sentiment that begs for a transformation of how activism typically performs. Why am I and so many others emotionally compelled to dwell not just on the past with its 'bad historical memories' around AIDS, but on 'bad feelings' in general? The scholar Heather Love describes the motivation succinctly:

> in their attempt to create a positive genealogy for queer existence in the present, critics have tended to focus on the positive and to ignore the more painful episodes from the past. ... I argue that backwardness is central to modern queer community. ... Mainstream society has shown itself perfectly willing to take on particularly attractive, fun or marketable aspects of the gay lifestyle. Now that gays are offered the opportunity to be like everyone else ... it is important to make a claim for the less presentable and more embarrassing aspects of the gay and lesbian past.[14]

FTLD ultimately proposes that despair's ghosts – of loved ones long gone, of past failures and unfinished business – are the open wounds we must suffer in order to be ethically engaged with the present and the future and to perform the dysfunction that is both true to our feelings and throws a wrench into the smooth functioning of a corrupted world. Though they send us veering off the forward march of progress, the unexpected detours engendered by negative attitudes, dark fears, nagging doubts and despairing moments may be the ruptures in history through which the Messiah enters.

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13 Tony Kushner, 'Despair Is a Lie We Tell Ourselves', AlterNet, September 14, 2004, www.alternet.org/election04/19867/

14 Heather Love, 'The Art of Losing', *Lost and Found: Queerying the Archive*, ed. Mathias Danbolt, Jane Rowley and Louise Wolthers (Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 2009), pp.71–2