



Theory and Practice

*A Discourse
With the Editors of
Uncontrollable Bodies*

By **Fred Dewey**

Picking up where recent debate on identity and "the body" leaves off, *Uncontrollable Bodies* (Bay Press, paper, \$16.95) is an assemblage of original texts and images edited by Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings that bridges the gaps between academic and artistic practice, political work and daily life. The compilation includes pieces by *Reader* contributor Luis Alfaro; fiction writers Dennis Cooper, Leslie Dick, and Lynne Tillman; photographer Robert Flynt; film maker, videographer, and critic Alan Sondheim; ACT-UP activist and writer Gregg Bordowitz; film maker Trinh T. Minh-ha; sex worker Carol Leigh; film theorist and cultural critic Vivian



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Sobchak; writer and performer Carla Kirkwood; critic, editor, and curator Scott Bukatman; and installation artist Louise Diedrich.

How did *Uncontrollable Bodies* come into being?

Rodney Sappington: To blur lines between so-called fiction and cultural criticism, we asked, "How does one include oneself in critique? How is personal experience engaged?" Popular culture was integral; we didn't want a highly specialized discourse on the body. So the title, this notion of "uncontrollables," came quickly.

Tyler Stallings: Rodney and I use the word complicity. That's central. When I read theory, I read it as literature. It doesn't exist outside the individual who wrote it. The idea is to bring back vulnerability. Gregg Bordowitz's distinction between testimony and confession, that really clicked for us. The subtitle of the book is "Testimonies of Identity and Culture." With confession, you expect an ending, you expect exoneration, a reduction, and you're trying to head toward it. With testimony, there is no resolution, you see yourself in a larger context.

RS: The question is, when do you take on the issue, and when do you become the issue? When does experience that might not be public discourse — on an intimate level, a closeted level, a silenced level — become political? When it reaches the street? When it becomes an organization? When it becomes a piece of fiction or criticism? Or when one realizes it? We were asking people to dig to the point that helped formulate their political consciousness. Something transformative, a new direction.

In Leslie Dick's piece, gender and category cause the rupture of identity, they aren't its origin. That's an important distinction, and it reverberates throughout the book.

TS: Yes. [Like] with Vivian Sobchak. There was reluctance, but she felt there was an absence of discourse on the aging female body. So she talks about a new relationship to her prosthetic. She'd just had her leg amputated and saw herself as a cyborg woman, which relates to her focus on science-fiction films. She starts talking about contradictory emotions: She lost a lot of weight because of the amputation, yet she feels great about that. With Alan Sondheim, it's a male heterosexual problem: He's interested in male objectification, male abjection, heterosexual male hysteria. It's *immersion*. All his emotions are right there on the surface.



Tyler Stallings and Rodney Sappington

RS: Loss is a point of departure. A lot of the writers start from being robbed of conventional political agency. There is struggle with lack of mobility, rage at social inertia around AIDS, a silencing going on about forms of violence and trauma in society.

TS: Luis Alfaro, for example, is testifying. You have a territory out there. Something you trust or distrust. You relate to it, you have to test the ground, you go step by step. As you go, that begins to contribute to your identity, but other forces come in.

Identity as the process of overturning, as vertigo ...

RS: Not reduction. For Gregg [Bordowitz], as a gay man with HIV, [and] an activist combating ignorance around AIDS, not to identify his sexuality with the disease is stepping out of a category he himself helped create. We wanted to take a micro-lens to those moments. If you tie them together, you find something. Once the authors get around to asking "What is an uncontrollable body?" and "Am I uncontrollable?", there is a spinning, a sense of motion, a velocity, no matter if it teeters

on chaos. There isn't this sense that I am secure, I know my destination.

TS: The authors haven't taken on that sense of loss, that recognition of trauma, as an identity. They've recognized not that you create a condition for yourself, but that, in very roundabout way, you're part of this web of forces. Decenteredness can be liberating because suddenly you can expand your identity, you can believe in things coming in from all sides. The problem is, you need identity politics to gain a voice, to come together. You need to reduce yourself for that moment to get out there, to let people know you're there. Language is not private, language is public.

Where is heroism in relation to the abject? What if power's final trick is to decenter us?

RS: In *Uncontrollable Bodies*, the idea of the hero seems shattered. I don't think anyone heroically moves toward trying to unravel their abject self. They're saying, "This is about some points of departure that have touched my life, and I'm giving you the context."

TS: To think of this differently, abjection could be [represented by] the unwillingly decentered person, the hero, the voluntarily decentered person. The body will always disperse meaning. You can never completely define it, or a person, or an identity. Anything that's projected onto that is going to be continuously dispelled.

RS: The issue is, if you're engaged in political activities, how do you use discourse, how do you apply it? How does discourse inform your idea of the world around you? That's why the body is the really vital part of cultural and social discourse. ■

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