The texts in this book and all to which they refer are informed by the AIDS crisis. Though I have endeavored to lead a rich intellectual life, and I possess many interests, the threat that the epidemic has posed to me and everyone around me has filtered my thinking. The only text in the book that does not bear the burden of AIDS at all is the first essay, “Geography Notes.” Written before my awareness of the disease, it provides a glimpse into the preoccupations that preceded my involvement in the crisis. These
concerns were specifically tied to art and aesthetics. They were never abandoned in the work that followed. Rather these interests were given focus and urgency.

There are texts included here that do not directly address AIDS. However, the epidemic animated the ideas from the margins. So total was the burden of illness—mine and others’—that the only viable response, other than to cease making art entirely, was to adjust to the gravity of the predicament by using the crisis as a lens. Indeed, AIDS touches every issue imaginable: sex, love, death, economy, drugs (recreational and medicinal), morals, ethics, representation, and culture.

This collection starts with essays that address formal concerns in a straightforward manner: “Geography Notes,” “Picture a Coalition,” “The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous,” and “Operative Assumptions.” For the most part I have left the earliest writings in this collection untouched, minimally altering only those formulations I now find insufficient. In some cases I have appended footnotes to add new thoughts to an old text. I wanted to retain both the youthful exuberance and the palpable sense of fear in the writing.

A shift occurs toward the middle of the book. The writing takes on a more experimental character, as the prose itself becomes a subject of the texts: “Boat Trip,” “Dense Moments,” “Present Tense,” and a selection from my columns written for the journal Documents titled “New York Was Yesterday.” The columns mix fiction and fact. The writing evolves entirely into fiction in “Which Is More Powerful: The Word or the Idea?”

The last third of the volume extends themes that were explored in the beginning. Current events regarding the global AIDS pandemic compelled me to reformulate activist concerns in “What the World Needs Now” and “The Effort to Survive AIDS from the Point of View of a Race-Car Driver.” Invited by Artforum to revisit the eighties for their fortieth anniversary issue gave me an opportunity to reexamine the underlying...
ideas of my practice and the history that formed them in “My Postmodernism.” Finally, I wrote the concluding essay—“More Operative Assumptions”—specifically for this book, in order to sum up my theoretical concerns as they have developed to the point of this publication.

There is another point of entry into my writing apart from AIDS. From the beginning of my mature practice—the moment “when I found my voice”—I’ve been engaged by the problems of autobiography. The films of Yvonne Rainer were most influential in this regard. I recall an epiphany watching The Man Who Envied Women. I realized that to describe the world around me I had to “cut across” my own subjectivity and submit the “slice” to close scrutiny; kind of like counting the rings of growth on the trunk of a fallen tree. I adopted the method as my own.

Having a disease defines my world, and the disease is a global problem. These are two very different concepts. The first clause describes a subjective condition. The second describes an objective condition. The two clauses can only be bridged through language by using a conjunction. Can the two conditions be joined in the realm of practice? This is no mere exercise. I believe that the key to understanding and fighting the AIDS crisis depends on the conjunction of the subjective experiences of people with AIDS and the objective conditions of the crisis. I have an enormous expectation of prose. I continue to believe that if it can be written then it can be realized.

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