

GONZALEZ-TORRES, Felix

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Guáimaro, Cuba, in 1957 and he died in Miami, Florida in 1996. After fleeing Cuba in 1971 for Spain and later Puerto Rico, Gonzalez-Torres moved to New York City in 1979, where lived until his death. From 1981 to 1983, he attended the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program and received his M.F.A. from the International Center for Photography and New York University (1987). Gonzalez-Torres joined the artist collective Group Material in 1987 and had his first solo gallery show at Andrea Rosen Gallery in 1990. Works by Gonzalez-Torres often employ everyday objects and materials: a string of light bulbs, an enormously enlarged photograph of an empty double bed, a mountain of foil-wrapped candies piled in a large corner, a full-length curtain blown by a breeze, or two identical black-rimmed Seth Thomas wall clocks placed adjacent to each other. His works also suggest a new relationship between art and the public as they require active participation from the viewer such as taking home pieces of candy or sheets of paper, for example. The extreme sensitivity and openness of his works has turned him into one of the key figures of the art of the '90s. His work has been presented in numerous group exhibitions and he has had one-person exhibitions at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1988); Brooklyn Museum, New York (1989); Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York (annually 1990-93, and 1995, 1997); Museum of Modern Art, New York (1992); Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin, and Museum in Progress, Vienna (1993); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1994); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1995); Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1996).

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This interview took place in Vienna in March 1994.

Hans Ulrich Obrist:

Can you tell me about your Untitled (Passport #1) of 1991, consisting of a stack of blank sheets which viewers are free to take away with them. How is this piece somehow emblematic of your work?

Felix Gonzalez-Torres:

That "Passport piece No. 1," which is a white stack, 24-by-24-by-6-inches high with just white paper you can take—that the public can take—functions like most of my work. I need a viewer; I need a public for that work to exist. Without a viewer, without a public, this work has no meaning; it's just another fucking boring sculpture sitting on the floor, and that is not what this work is all about. This work is about an interaction with the public, or a large collaboration. That "Passport piece" is really about the way we are defined in our

culture, the way our self is constructed through many different channels. One of these channels is that little thing called a "passport," which identifies us as coming from some type of gender, coming from some kind of country, and also being born somewhere at a certain date. To top it all, it has numbers. That's what we are. That number is unique; no one else in America has that number except me. And that again is another definition of who we are, in a very abstract way. One of the things that bucks the hell in the last few years is this whole talk about "body art," which is almost like the criminal system. These people, in order to think about a body, to talk about a body, need to see a body, right? As if you are going to a gallery, you see five bodies hanging everywhere, people say, "Oh, it's about the body." I say, "Well, no shit. But it's not really about the body, it's about wax, or it's about plaster," because the body at this time in our history, at this time in culture, is defined not just by the flesh but also by the law, by legislations, and by language first of all. Therefore, when we feel pain in the body, when we feel decay in the body, when we feel pleasure in the body, all those issues are very much related to the law or to the symbolic order—in that case to the phallogocentric order. Of course, there is our rejection or our acceptance of that order; sometimes we accept certain parts and sometimes we reject certain parts of that. But that functions only vis-à-vis the definition that is based on language. So I think that when you see a passport, what you are really seeing there is a body, because it is about a definition of a body: a body that can travel from one place to another. And it's only based on the fact that there is a passport that defines us, that sometimes can be helpful or could be detrimental.

HUO:

The articulation between private matters and public issues really constitute the thread of your work. I'm thinking here also, for instance, of your project for MoMA ("Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 1992) which consisted first of photographic billboards of an unmade bed displayed in 24 sites around New York City (Untitled, 1991), but also of the installation of an unmade bed inside the museum.

FGT:

Well, I mean, the billboards for MoMA came from a very specific personal impulse. I needed to see my bed; I needed distance first of all. Let me put it this way for you: I needed distance from my bed, and that bed became a site that was not only the place I sleep in, it was also the place of pain at night. That is the personal impulse. And then

there are also the formal issues as well as other issues that just influence the way we work, right? I was asked by MoMA to do this show, and I am someone who tries to be honest with... I mean with the way I feel; at least I try. So, when I went to MoMA, when I went to see the room—it is such a beautiful room—I said, “Why fuck it up with art? This place does not need any art, it is a very beautiful space, let’s do something outside.” And besides that, they have so much art in there already! So I said, “Why don’t we do something that includes all the possibilities and that is not just this very prescribed notion of having a project in which you just show your wares like in a showroom?” So, the initial idea was not to even show anything inside the museum, not to have any billboards inside, just to have the booklets that told people where to go to see the things in the streets. But of course, they had some problems with that at the museum; it is almost like, you know, they need to see the monetary worth. So, I put one piece there, which I am happy I did now, and then I showed, like you said, 24 billboards of the same image at 24 places in the city.

HUO:

What was particular about this unmade bed that one could find inside the museum?

FGT:

It was an unmade bed in which two people slept, or had left their impression on the bed, on the pillows. At this point, we have to question if there is anything, if there really exists any division between public and private. Recent developments in America—and I can only talk about America, because that’s where I live, that’s where I am—have proven that there is not such a thing like a private space or a public space, especially for certain segments of the population who love people from the same gender, from the same sex. I am referring, you know, to the year 1986, the case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, in which the Supreme Court voted that gay men and lesbians have no right for privacy. They voted that the state could actually go into their bedrooms and legislate and penalize the way they express love to each other. You know the words, “Some people are more equal than others...”—but that’s another story. I think at this point in history, what we are really talking about is private property (and perhaps not even that) and not about private space, because our most intimate desires, fantasies, and stories are intersected by sectors legislated and controlled by the law. And again, when we are talking about public spaces, I always wonder how public it is when Philip Morris and Marlboro can actually pay for these public spaces. When I started making these stacks in 1981 it was

because—it may sound funny—at that time in New York everybody was fighting for wall space. I mean, the walls were all already taken. When you were going to be in a group show, you had to get into a fistfight to get two inches on the wall, right? So I said, “Fuck the walls. I’ll just do something on the floor.” No one was doing sculptures. Now everyone is doing “give-away-stuff.” But I mean, that is just one point; the other thing is that I have always been very interested in the writings of Walter Benjamin, especially at the time I was just coming out of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. That’s where I read Benjamin for the first time. So at some point between 1981 and 1983, I was very influenced by his writing and the relevance of that writing in our time and culture, so I wanted to make a work that took some of those ideas into consideration. What’s important is that the work does not really exist; works are destroyed because there is never an original.

HUO:

Another way of putting this is to say that it’s unlimited.

FGT:

It’s an unlimited issue, you know.

HUO:

The idea that the real problem is not the beginning or the end of a thing, but has to do more with its “in-between” qualities of existence, is reinforced by this issue of the unlimited-ness, I think. It’s unsettling because the work itself, in its production and “de-production” modes, is completely unstable.

FGT:

The work is always extremely unstable. But that is one thing that I enjoy very much. I enjoy that danger, that instability, that in-between-ness. If you want to relate it to a personal level, I think in that case that the work is pretty close to that real life situation that I am confronted with daily as a gay man: a way of being in which I am forced by culture and by language to always live a life of “in-between.” So the work was an attempt—especially at that time, in 1987–89, when we were still at the height of the ’80s boom... you might want to call it “art market,” right?—to deal with the fact that having this stack on the floor that was not an original—you could never have an original—that you could show this piece in three places at the same time and that it would still be the same piece. And it was almost like a threat—not only a threat but a reinterpretation of that art market and the marketing of an original piece, which it really never is, as I said before. And at the same time, the work is almost like a metaphor because you cannot destroy some-

thing that does not exist. The same applies to the billboard; it just disappeared but will come out again in a different cover, in a different cultural, historical context.

HUO:

It was a similar process in Venice ("Aperto," 45th Venice Biennale, 1993): the stack was very small, so very quickly it was not visible anymore, but it could reappear in any other place. You said that it was also a metaphor for human relationships.

FGT:

Yes, well, I mean it was not just dealing with the ideas of Walter Benjamin and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) and trying to destroy the aura of the artwork, but also, on a more personal level, it was about learning to let go. When I first made a show with Andrea Rosen—which was only stacks—I mean, the show could have disappeared if you'd have had a lot of people coming to the show, because everything was free for the people to take. Just to quote Sigmund Freud: "We rehearse our worst fears in order to lessen them," right? So, at that time, I was losing Ross, and I wanted to lose everything in order to rehearse that fear and just confront that fear and perhaps learn something from it. So I even wanted to lose the work, this stuff that is very important in my life. I also wanted to learn to let go. The first piece I made, those slides, have to do with America. They have to do with freedom in America, with the desire for freedom in America... and again, it is very important to mention that those pieces are very democratic too, because whoever has them, whoever installs them, decides the installation of the piece: how the piece is going to look, how it's going to be installed. They are all exactly the same, but at the same time they are different in the sense that they are always installed differently. Therefore, they all have different titles. And it's not so important how I install them for the first time. Sometimes I don't even install them for the first time. After that, whoever gets them—a collector, or a museum, or an art handler, or an art installer at a gallery—will decide how this piece is installed. I have no say; once I lose my domains the piece is on its own and it gets installed, you know, any way the person wants it. It can be on, up, whatever...

HUO:

So it is very different from most Conceptual or Minimal art where there are these certificates that are used as control tools.

FGT:

Yes, I don't have that phobia of the two inches... You know: "If a

work is two inches to the left, you have to destroy the work!" No, that's just that big thing from the '60s, that they were, like, constipated. I always say, "Honey, take a bow and relax, no big deal, two inches, three inches..." But it is funny because, you know, when I send this stuff to museums, art handlers and historians have a hard time deciding what to do with these things. They keep faxing us back saying, "What do we do with this thing?" and we keep faxing them back saying, "Whatever you want!" and they just don't believe it. They say, "This cannot be true!"

HUO:

They would rather refuse the liberty that you offer to them?

FGT:

Right, they want the traditional conceptual instruction saying, "Five inches to the left, six inches to the right and then 22 feet down," and I say, "No, you do whatever you want. You are responsible for the piece. You are responsible for the construction of the piece." In the same way, I tell the viewer, "You are responsible for the final meaning of this piece of paper that is part of this stack." And that's problematic on many levels, because what is the piece? Is the piece the simple sheet of paper or is the piece the stack? Well, it could be both, and I never define which one is which. I like that "in-betweenness" that makes the work difficult to define, hopefully.

HUO:

What about the Untitled (A Portrait) of 1991, your video piece without images, but only subtitles giving information on images, which viewers can only invent? Why did you call those "portraits"?

FGT:

I asked people if they wanted to do a portrait of someone. I asked them to give me a list of personal events and public events that have affected their lives, and then I just read them, and I added new ones or went back and asked them for more information. The whole thing is based on the idea of a photograph. In our culture, we read photographs in two ways: what is denoted and what is connoted. What is denoted is that kind of thing that we have very little to argue about, for example: if it is a black-and-white photograph, if it is a photo of a man or a woman, if this man or woman has long hair, short hair, blond hair, brown hair, black hair, curly hair, big eyes, small eyes, whatever; that is the stuff that is denoted, right? The person is wearing a shirt or is wearing a coat or is wearing nothing; that's denoted, right? But what is connoted is the other way of reading the pho-

tographs, which for me is the most interesting, because it has to do with the text that we have in our heads: "This person with the long hair—is that a '60s hair cut or is that a Vidal Sassoon '70s hair cut? Or is the coat just a simple T-shirt or is it a Dolce & Gabbana T-shirt or is it a Pierre Cardin T-shirt? Is that building in the background an Adolf Loos or is it a Corbusier?" That is what is connoted! In order for us to read a photograph, we have to have a language transaction. The only way we can read a photograph is through language. So, I decided to go the other way, to get rid of the image and just use the language. In order to read a photograph, this person who was getting the portrait made gives me a date, let's say for example, "Silverhouse 1964." And none of us had a fucking idea what "Silverhouse" is, but the person does have a very specific idea, you know, as a subject, of what "Silverhouse" meant in his or her life. It is the same when we look at a photograph. The photograph, really, as Barthes said, does not have an index. It just isn't telling us much: "It is just a photograph of a woman." But where was this woman? Was she in Vienna, Berlin, Cuba, Havana? I mean, where was this woman? Where was this photograph taken? There is very little that these photographs can tell us. In a way, the *Portrait of Austrian Airlines* (Museum in Progress production, Vienna, 1993) was related to the same work I have been doing for the last five years on portraits. These portraits are painted directly on the wall in a room, way up high, like a frieze, like a Greek frieze, all around the room.

HUO:

Again, it triggers travels, at least imaginary ones.

FGT:

With the portrait of Austrian Airlines, I wanted to give the people something very beautiful, and something enabling them to travel in their minds to all these places, and what it's like when they see "Amman," when they see "Minsk," when they see "Moscow," when they see "London," when they see the word "New York." Some of them either had been there or had seen pictures of these places, or maybe want to go to these places, or maybe they don't want to go there at all. But at least these places are there and hopefully when they read these texts something will be triggered in their minds about these places. For me the ideal thing is when something takes place, when there is some action, when there is some movement, when there is some travel in the minds, when the work becomes some kind of catalytic element for something to happen, for something to become possible. Think of the light string at Jennifer Flay that allowed the viewer to go to the dancing, and the public started

to dance, which was a completely new perspective for me because, as you know, I had two couples who were supposed to come and do it, and then suddenly the viewer, the public started doing it.

HUO:

And what's really beautiful is that it kept on going, it exceeded the time-lapse of any performance.

FGT:

Yes, it kept on going! That was a very nice surprise for me. But again, the viewer is something that I love, is something that I need for the work to exist, to happen, for the final meaning of the work. Because otherwise, like I said before, this is another boring Minimal piece of shit sitting on the floor, and that is not what my work is all about. That is a problem when I apply for grants, because they get these slides of these things sitting on the floor, and especially when there are sculptors as part of the panel, they look at this stuff and say, "Oh," you know, "Sculptures!" But this is not what it is really about. This is almost like an excuse to really find my role as an artist, because I see myself almost like a theater director directing a very spontaneous performance. Even with a stack, when the viewer takes the paper from the stack or takes the booklet from the stack, or when the viewer takes the candy and eats it and shits, you know, the candy piece at the end, because that is the final piece when the candy or the sweet gets eaten and then is spilt as shit from the body, that is also, you know, again an ultimate collaboration, because I am actually giving energy to this body to function.

HUO:

And this also echoes what you told me the other day—that you saw yourself as a kind of infiltrator, as a kind of spy.

FGT:

I want to be a spy means I want to be the one that looks like something else in order to infiltrate, in order to function as a virus. I mean, the virus is our worst enemy, but should also be our model in terms of not being the opposition anymore, not being very easily defined, so that then we can attach ourselves to institutions which are always going to be there. And, as [Louis] Althusser said, these institutions or these ideological institutions are always replicating themselves. If we are attached to them as a virus, we will replicate together with these institutions. As we know, these ideological apparatuses are never going away. They are always going to be there, and when we think we have pinned them down, they replicate themselves somewhere else. I think that's a fascinating aspect of being an infil-

trator or working as a virus—being attached to these institutions.

HUO:

So, going back to the beginning of this interview, to the MoMA project with the billboards in the city and the unmade bed displayed in the museum: that's why it is important to operate a constant transgression of the borders between the "inside" and the "outside," the "public" and the "private."

FGT:

Right, absolutely. And there is also the content of that work. I mean, it's not just about two empty beds. It's about the way some people read it in the streets. It was about emptiness, it was about homelessness, it was about, you know, love, man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, whatever; it was about an announcement for a movie that was about to come; it was about an advertisement for a White Sale at Bloomingdale's. It could be about anything. And that is exactly the way I want it to function, because some other readings could always be right. But the reading that I wanted to give to the work is very subtle. It is not about confrontation, it is about being accepted. And then, once you accept these things in your life, then I say to you: "But I just want you to know that this is about this," and then it is already too late, it is already inside the room.