

Common Properties

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In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. . . . Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

1.

How pertinent is the use of the first person to refer to the work of an artist in which the emphasis – at least apparently – is on the viewer? Work that seems to try, by every possible means, to awaken the viewer from his contemplative lethargy and incite him to assume a leading role that contradicts even the institutional assumptions of the realms – as much physical as ideological – in which it takes place? Two contradictory impulses literally coexist in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres: a strong autobiographical inclination on one hand, which translates into a recurring series of veiled references to facts, people, and moments of personal significance to the artist, and, on the other hand, a tendency to translate those signs of a specific, singular life into abstract, anonymous marks, open to interpretation by viewers – affections capable of reaching anyone. We see an early example in “*Untitled*” (*Madrid 1971*), 1988, a small work composed of two juxtaposed puzzles. The larger of the two is a photograph of a boy, carefully dressed up, whose face betrays clearly adolescent features. This sepia tinted photograph is placed next to a black-and-white image of an imposing statue of a man seen from below, erected on a frieze of crosses – a Conquistador, perhaps, possibly Christopher Columbus. Explicitly, the puzzle is nothing more than an enigma placed before the viewer. Who is the boy, and who is the heroic figure against whose image he is juxtaposed? Why the reference to the Spanish capital in the title? These questions inevitably lead to a more fundamental kind of questioning. Is not every work of art a kind of puzzle destined to be (mis)interpreted time and again, to the point of weariness or muteness, by a viewer anxious to give it meaning? Is not the meaning of every work of art that very search for meaning, and is it not the artist’s job to incite it tirelessly, and at the same time make it interminable? And if we knew the identity of that adolescent boy, say, a certain Felix, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, photographed at the age of thirteen on the occasion of a three-month visit to Madrid, would we have uncovered the mystery? Does the mystery hinge on the syntax of a name, on a series of names associated with a series of pieces of detailed information – dates and names of cities, countries, and famous figures – or does it remain unattainable, only to escape and persist in turning fiercely against the certainties that seem to have revealed it? The literality of the material puzzle functions then like one box inside of another. In the first place, it induces us to think that the solution to the enigma rests in identifying the sources in the artist’s biography, but when these are not fully illuminating, the structure of the piece itself again takes the leading role, this time as a sign of the work in its totality. The information does not fully account for the secret. Once the enigma has been named, the name itself becomes enigmatic.

2.

However, it is impossible to reach that space of anonymity that the work requires from the outset without a review of the vicissitudes of the author’s life. It is necessary to stop resisting the somewhat fetishistic desire to identify a face, to situate it in time and space, to suppose that these acts imply the revelation of a secret to which the work had always referred. The work persistently invites us to succumb to that temptation, at once necessary and mistaken. One could say that from “*Untitled*”, 1986, (a small Cibachrome

square in which nine circles are arranged in three rows, one above the other, whose central circle is occupied by a photograph of a crowd and the remaining quadrants by clocks) to “*Untitled*”, 1995, (two silver brass circles touching tangentially), the work presents itself as an enigma to be solved by the viewer, and the temptation to equate this enigma with the artist’s biography is clear and present. The result is that the work, in its totality, seems at times to appeal to a kind of mnemonic register capable of making its meaning explicit, as if beckoned by an absent garland of names, dates, and places, which will crown it and at the same time once and for all do away with the provocation of its mystery. It is as if the work’s author had to appear once more and decline the letters of his name and the events of his life so that the hiatus opened by the work could be closed and its silence interrupted. It is the aim of this text to explore this urgency – an urgency that seems bent on contradicting the participatory nature of the work.

3.

In *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art’s Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970s–1990s* (a popular textbook in many art schools in the United States), in the lower right-hand corner of a brief, eight-page section devoted to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, inside a black border we find the description, “A Hispanic, Homosexual Man.”¹ Are these, then, the clues we need to solve the enigma, to fit the missing puzzle pieces into place? The text that follows seems to deny the premises that it simultaneously suggests, somewhat brutally, on the first page. But biographical references persist throughout the text, as they do throughout so many others devoted to the work of Gonzalez-Torres, and despite the insistence on the work’s profoundly enigmatic nature, that statement seems to be contradicted by the obsession to fit him into the framework of a specific life and its particular ups and downs. As if that life could not help but be shaped through the testimony of the work, and the person who lived it could never completely withdraw from the discursive scene in which the work’s present power is deployed. In these texts, the work’s participatory dimension is at once evoked and contradicted. If the point were, as we have stated, to involve viewers in the process of an endless search for meaning that would wind up compromising them by compromising the certainties that allow one to think as a singular and separate subject, then the biographical temptation would only contradict that impulse. In commentaries like the one in *Art on the Edge and Over*, the participatory nature of the work is only affirmed to the degree in which it is contradicted by the insistence on interjecting specific events from a biographical narrative. Confronted with this narrow biographical approach, criticism’s job becomes then none other than to disconnect biography from the work, to prevent biography from becoming a key to reading, returning to the work the anonymous nature it has always demanded. It is less of a matter of denying the intricate connections through which life and work enter into their enigmatic dialogue, but of avoiding a whole field of determinisms that make of that work only an exemplary appendage of a life, a life then narrated and converted into a story, the unpronounceable turned into a *via crucis*² in its original sense as a path that leads to the cross. The insistence with which the author himself has on occasion evoked – as a strategic measure understood in political terms – aspects of that narrative makes the work of criticism at once more laborious and delicate.

4.

There is, perhaps, a biographical explanation for this representational narrative insistence, wielded more than occasionally by the author and obsessively by many of his commentators before a body of work that tends silently toward participation, shared emotion – at once abstract and dynamic – and anonymity. Grasped within the historical context in which it was produced, the work’s publicity – in other words, its chances of integrating itself as an active element into the public sphere to which it is contemporary – seems to call for those biographical references as a condition of the autonomous affirmation of its political nature. It is important to point out that the work was carried out within a sociocultural context that seemed only to accept a tendency toward the political dimension of aesthetic practice if this tendency was explicitly linked to the life of the author – in other words, a cultural milieu in which the development of bio-politics was historically constituted as the almost exclusive possibility for the search of subjective autonomy.³ The flip-side of this bio-politics – the risk inevitably associated with it – is no doubt the possibility that its political

nature be contradicted in virtue of exalting or elevating the biographical anecdote, thus substituting political argument with the moving representation of an individual life.

5.

But if the anecdote is to be avoided, how then to address life and work, in their always eloquent, but sometimes silent and enigmatic intimacy? In other words, what is it, in a singular life, that does not cease to express itself in a work, in the very act of working? This might ultimately not be so much a question of representation but one that concerns the very possibility of expression. If so, a work (of art) and work in general would be in fact the very expression of life, in a specificity that cannot avoid also becoming generic. Understood in this way, expression is always both singular and collective, and the life that the work expresses is always a political life, the life of a community. The relation between life and work would then be one of pure contradiction.

6.

What ought to have existed as a pure contradiction, however, winds up being resolved through an interpretation which simply reinforces the approach considered to be acceptable. The work, in its totality, ends up being conceived, then, as a complex memorial might be, the tragic monument to the singularity of a name. Few things are as dear to the art market – indeed in general to any monopolistic economic system – as the names that are clearly spelled out in the group of collected objects, canonically referred to as the artist’s “work.” The work as a memorial pays homage not to the artist but to his name, pronounced by various institutional authorities in a system destined primarily to conserve it, transformed into currency. Memory is terribly eloquent, its subtle trickery consists in inciting us to believe that its verbosity is capable of replacing the silence it evokes.

7.

For example, let us consider the “public” work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, that is to say, the works that the artist chose to display in spaces considered “public.” Under this description we find a series of billboards executed by the artist between 1989 (“*Untitled*”, 1989) and his death in January 1996 (“*Untitled*”, 1995). It is worth noting that there is a kind of critical consensus that the aesthetic efficiency attributed to the billboards stems from the way in which their presence in the urban fabric complexifies and problematizes the conventional separation between public and private spaces. Images, or associations of ideas evoked by images and words that seem to belong unequivocally to a subjective, intimate terrain, are exhibited on huge billboards and thus subjected to observation and scrutiny by the anonymous viewer. The point of the exercise would surely be to question the system of conventions characterizing the distinction between the two territories. With reference to the image of an unmade bed that the artist printed on twenty-four billboards shown throughout New York on the occasion of an exhibition of his work in the Projects space at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in May 1992, Gonzalez-Torres cited *Bowers v. Hardwick* of 1986, in which the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that the privacy of individuals of certain sexual inclination did not include the right of those individuals to carry out certain sexual acts.⁴ The bed of a homosexual couple was just another place subject to the mandates of the law. An empty white bed with two pillows still bearing the imprint of the sleepers’ heads, in the context of Gonzalez-Torres’s presentation, is less the shared sign of that exclusive and intimate space, immaculately removed from political decisions – private space par excellence, reserved for rest and sexuality – than a terrain in conflict, invaded by contrasting opinions and branded by repressive legislation. The supposed separation between public and private spaces, then, would consist in a mere rhetorical game destined to disguise the power the State attributes to itself over individual decisions. In a movement to which the work of Gonzalez-Torres returns insistently, the boundaries between the two categories are maintained solely to show how they conflict with each other, and this is done with the help of the viewer’s participation – in this case, the reflexive exercise brought on by contemplating the work. The efficacy of works such as “*Untitled*”, 1991, seems to come from their capacity to make manifest the eminent dissolution of the boundaries between public and private spaces, the invasion of the last residues of an independent subjectivity by the repressive machinery of the

State. And yet, with the same motion that discloses the ideological undertones concealing the progressive disappearance of privacy, the work articulates the promise of a new subjectivity, reflexive and resistant to the attacks of power. The work's apparent aim, which would make its bio-political nature obvious, would be that of contributing, by means of a reflexive exercise, to the future concretion of that subjectivity. But the mere fact that this work exists in a public space seems to suggest that this subjectivity can only occur through contact with others – less an individual project than a collective, community activity.

8.

Here then, we have a reading of Gonzalez-Torres's "public" work that seems to have become canonical, thanks in part to the artist himself advancing it in several interviews. On many occasions, Gonzalez-Torres tended to adopt a paradoxically didactic attitude when referring to his work, and in many cases he gave the impression of wanting to map out the work's subtleties in favor of facilitating a particular reading of them. The explicit, perhaps merely for being explicit, comes off as extremely suspicious in these cases. It might perhaps become necessary, in consequence, to test a different hypothesis in relation to the billboards. It is worth asking if the images on the billboards are really explicit enough for the viewer caught off-guard to think of them in terms of the rhetorical, naturalized – indeed, ideological – distinction between the public and the private. If it is indeed indisputable that their compositional spontaneity and their precarious materiality seem to distinguish them instantly from any immediate association with the rhetoric of advertising, it is also true that this fact alone is not enough to clarify their meaning, which it rather renders even more mysterious. It is not far-fetched to suppose that what characterizes these works, like so many others by the artist, is precisely that apparent promise of meaning that is never fully delivered. The work's so-called "generosity" (a term that has been overused in referring to the work of Gonzalez-Torres, by connecting it mostly uncritically to the artist's biography) would not apply in these cases. In its place there would be less of a donation full of meaning than its concealment in a gesture of interminable reserve. This deferment of the key capable of illuminating a given situation is what we conventionally associate with the workings of secrets. The billboards in part seem to result from the extreme condensation of a secret, and the intimacy their images transmit is perhaps more closely linked to the dubious opacity of desires and semiconscious thoughts than to the terrible evidence of symbols. The meaning of these images – the unmade bed, birds among the clouds, sequences of words and dates – is perhaps nothing but the enigma of its meaning, and the message they mean to reveal that of the profound incommunicability that dwells in the very heart of meaning. The images on the billboards are destined less to unravel the rhetoric intent on separating private acts from political decisions than to emphasize the profound anonymity that beats inexorably at the very core of subjective life – because the only thing that is more common than language is that abstract silence that scans its words.

9.

If the work of Gonzalez-Torres ideally convenes a community formed around its public evolution, a public that becomes a community through experiencing a relationship to the work – and its participatory nature consists precisely in this – it is worth asking what sort of community would gather around a secret. Or, rather, around the secret that presents itself as the incarnation of a promise whose full meaning is forever postponed. It would not be a community of shared signs or signals, nor would the billboards' audience be a community because it shared a group of meanings associated with those works. Consequently, it would not obey the traditional model of the monument or memorial, both of which are based on a particular notion of communication. So it would not be made up of a group of subjects who converse, if by this we understand the more or less routine exchange of signs whose meanings are common to all the members of the group. Since what brings them together is rather their awareness of what separates them (the secret for which there is no single or immediately apprehensible meaning) it would therefore be a silent community or – and this is not exactly the same – a community gathered in silence. That very silence, the silence of the secret, would keep the members of that community together, joined one to the next. The audacity of the work, its true political nature, would therefore consist in proposing, aesthetically, a model for inter-subjective relations

based less on agreement than on dissonance, less on the shared homogeneity of a group of meanings than on the enigmatic and multiple reverse of meaning.

10.

As we see when we consider works such as those of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, participatory art is not art that calls for a specific kind of activity from a particular subject or group of subjects, but rather art that is capable of imagining, through its very materiality, a potential community through which the work may be made complete. When tracing a genealogy that may account for the specific relationship between expression and work, life and politics in this kind of work, that genealogy should not only include Oiticica and Clark, but surely also Cildo Meireles. It is hard, in fact, to conceive of this work without referring in particular to Meireles's *Insertions in Ideological Circuits* of 1970. *Insertions in Ideological Circuits* is less a work conceived as an object than a proposition. What Meireles proposed in this piece is in fact an alternative system for the circulation of information, secretly inscribed in an empty bottle of Coca-Cola or explicitly but inadvertently stamped on a bank note. Once the bottle is refilled and sent back into circulation, the white-lettered message becomes legible on its surface, in contrast to its dark contents. The message, "Yankees go home!" for example, or the very instructions for the execution of the piece inscribed in the anonymous media of the bottle and bank notes are not only intended to express a certain political truth, but also to become the expression of the group of people that become their users. They will become a community by sharing that which is expressed in the work or proposal, or – ultimately the same thing – by making explicit that which is hidden in the message. A message is only made explicit by being disseminated. Similarly, the anonymity evoked by works like "*Untitled*" (*Madrid 1971*), 1988, and "*Untitled*", 1991, does not correspond to the absence of a subject or theme identifiable as the content of the works, but on the contrary, to the presence in the works' semantic structure of a possible community to which they are destined in the first place, the community of their potential viewers. In contrast to what happens in the case of a traditional monument, and similarly, of a memorial conceived as the singular incarnation of a unified ideological project, that community does not come together around a common meaning. This is not a community brought together through some sort of consensus, be it spontaneous or imposed. On the contrary, what this community shares is the enigma in the work, which is literally inscribed in its structure. Once again, the work's profoundly political aspect lies in the fact that its reception is dependent on the staging of this form of commonality, which is based less on consensus than on dissent, less on property than on the improper, less on the identical than on the alien.⁵ The work is political in that it is participatory, and vice versa. The "public" work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres constitutes the clearest attempt to literalize the forms of that community.

11.

That community does not exist beyond the name of that child where adolescence appeared to bud, resolutely announcing itself like a season. But that name is not enough to distinguish it, to define its contours and vocation. That community of the improper (of that which is not, and will never be, anybody's property) that can only exist in dissent and active ignorance of identitarian narratives – inevitably founded in the myth of origin – is located precisely in the margins of that child's name, in the firmness of a gaze that condemns the impetus of adult life, in the friction between that profoundly human figure and the paradigmatic coldness of the monument juxtaposed to him. The very possibility of the community that the work so insistently imagines lies just there, between memory and desire.

12.

To liberate the work from the events of a narrative that seems ultimately to have neutralized it does not mean depoliticizing or taking it out of the context of the truly historical ups and downs in which it took place. The point is precisely to avoid the neutralization of its political nature through fetishization associated with the poignant narrative of a life. The point is to resist the memorializing impulse that insists on reiterating a tragic figure in the work that is continually associated with the author. These are the tragedies of exile, illness, and death, which are nothing but cruel metaphors of the tragedy of being but one, identical to oneself. Only one and no more in the normative delirium of a name that reveals itself to be a veritable

ideological straight jacket in the context of a society that seems to accept difference only insofar as it is susceptible to classification – reduced, therefore, to the translatability of the exchange rate, to the homogeneity of repetition and sameness.

13.

It is impossible to remember “*Untitled*” (*Madrid 1971*) and forget the identity of the adult child that appears perpetuated in the sepia puzzle. But one can think of everything that the work still means after his name has been pronounced, of what is still implied once the apparent mystery has been solved. Of what it means precisely because the apparent mystery has been solved. The work calls out to us beyond the vicissitudes of a name in an appeal that is not extrinsic to it, and which is not contained by any narrative. An appeal that no monument can possibly memorialize once and for all.

Translated from Spanish by Linda Phillips.

¹ Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art’s Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970s–1990s* (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, 1996), 109–16 (109).

² Via crucis is the original Latin for “stations of the cross.” Literally it means “the road to the cross” or “the way to the cross.”

³ The notion of bio-politics was initially theorized by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*. In books such as *Remains of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, and *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, Giorgio Agamben gives what is possibly the most comprehensive and profound reformulation of the term.

⁴ Anne Umland, *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), brochure. In this volume, pp. 241–45.

⁵ The word proper derives from the Latin, *proprius*: (one’s) own. According to the Latin root, improper would be that which does not strictly belong (to a person or situation). The association between identity and property in reception of Gonzalez-Torres can be subverted by pointing to the relevance of the “improper” in the constitution of the “imagined communities” that his work seems to propose.