

Pauls, Alan. "Souvenir." *Félix González-Torres: Somewhere/Nowhere [Algún lugar/Ningún lugar]*. Buenos Aires: MALBA – Fundación Costantini, 2008: 31 – 37, 89 – 91 [English translation].

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## **SOUVENIR**

Alan Pauls

When he was not particularly inspired or motivated, Gonzalez-Torres would turn to the dictionary. In his 1974 edition of Merriam-Webster, he would look up one or several words; he would ponder the definitions and uses, check which word came before and which came after. It was less a trick than a method. This resource might seem overly theoretical, like a kind of ideal neurostimulant for conceptual artists in case of emergency. But, in fact, it is material, material to the core; it is as determined by a specific weight, height and volume, and as quantifiable, as the candies, light bulbs, voile curtains and sheets of paper in Gonzalez-Torres's most well-known works. At the same time, what object, what portable machine better than a dictionary to stir the imagination of an artist aware of - or, rather, obsessed with - the meaning and use of language, an artist always watchful of the invisible way that politics operates in the forms, orders and institutions that declare themselves immune to its influence? The dictionary is "neutral," cold, formal, scrupulous. It is less a text than a matrix of texts, less a discourse than a body that regulates discourses, less a book than a law. A political artist (in the often antipolitical or at least disconcerting way that this term began to be used in the late 1980s), Gonzalez-Torres was at his most political when he let himself be taken in by objects so seemingly mute, austere and sterile that the mere mention of the word "political" would upset them. A sentimental artist (in the political way that this term began to be used in the mid-1980s, when the HIV explosion turned the intimacy of the bedroom into a battleground), Gonzalez-Torres was at his most sentimental when he staged the supplement of affect exuded by an object, a scene or a situation when it is disciplined by a clear outline. In this sense, Gonzalez-Torres's "need for the dictionary" is the direct heir to Barthes's sentimental celebration of the dictionary, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, which spelled out in alphabetical order the overwhelming superstitions of the lover.

The political and the sentimental artist partake of the same ethics, an ethics of procedure and form. There is no poetic of content: every poetic is a poetic of the silhouette, the border, the frame. Perhaps that is why Gonzalez-Torres's art, rooted in its way in the minimalist myth of presence, has been able to survive his loss and looks so remarkably vivid and elegant in reproductions in art books. Whether the garlands of lights, the stacks of paper, the written portraits or the billboards, what shoots forth is the sharp line, the graphic distinction of an outline. Everything is black on white (or vice versa), the edges are always clear and visible. There is a lot of air between the works. There are no layerings, no mergings, no amalgams, no displays of imprecision. The incessant use of the stark outline—a formal and political, minimalist and Brechtian notion—defines an essential visual quality of his work—cleanliness—and indicates his *bete noire*: confusion. The enemy is vagueness, imprecision, mixing. When he does the portrait of Karen and Andy Stillpass - "Untitled" (*Portrait of the Stillpasses*), 1991 - and installs on the edge of the roof of the couple's house in Cincinnati the words *Watergate 1972 Hitchcock 1973 Turquoise Apartment 1972 E. T. 1982 Fortieth floor 1974 S. de Beauvoir 1980...*, Gonzalez-Torres is not mixing American history with the personal life of the Stillpasses; he is *editing* them, making them coexist on the same "anachronological" plane on which, misarranged but unmistakable, dates and eras coexist.

Gonzalez-Torres liked to boast of his inconstancies. He said, "Sometimes I make the stacks, sometimes I do the curtains, sometimes I do texts pieces, sometimes I do canvases, sometimes the light strings, sometimes billboards or photos." He could be an intimate or militant artist; he could make works to test out the ideas of a philosopher or to say farewell to the love of his life. Sometimes - almost always - he did all of this at the same time, and they called him contradictory. One critic reads his work and extols his "generosity, designed fluidity of the meaning, this repudiation of artistic control." Another observes that his works are "private, inasmuch as they were made for private ownership," and yet public,

"inasmuch as the individual parts of such works can be freely distributed." Cuban in New York, Marxist and gay, Latin American and conceptual-minimalist, Gonzalez-Torres had a unique skill: that keen "visual power" that Brecht recognized in exiles who, forced to extraterritoriality, always "have a good eye for contradiction." Contradiction, longstanding enemy of the ideological police, is for Gonzalez-Torres a strength, not a deficit. Weakness, the true alibi, is confusion. Asked about his theoretical references, Gonzalez-Torres named Louis Althusser: "I think Althusser started pointing out the contradictions within our critique of capitalism. For people who have been reading too much hardcore Marxist theory, it is hard to deal with those contradictions; they cannot deal with the fact that they're not saints. And I say no, they're not. Everything is full of contradictions." The artist, who was also a teacher, advised his students to read Althusser once, a second time if they encountered difficulties, and a third if those difficulties persisted, but this time drunk and with a glass of wine within reach. But contradiction is a strength, even a method, if and only if the outlines of each position don't budge a millimeter, if what is at stake stands out like a haiku, if everything is equally visible. One of the first *stacks*, from 1989-1990, consists of two piles of printed pages. The sheets in one pile say, "*Somewhere better than this place*," and the sheets in the other say, "*Nowhere better than this place*."

Contradiction is a strength insofar as it opens up discontinuity, encourages distinguishing and creates a sort of air, an inner flaw, that brings to the surface a certain disparity in the homogenous and bares the more or less hidden logic of a voice, a discourse, a work, an institution. When cornered, Gonzalez-Torres translated the ethics of the contradiction into the language of drag: "I think I just have many fronts," he said. "It's almost like being in drag. I'm in a different drag persona as needed." But that chameleon policy is anything but pragmatic: each "character" who the artist dresses up as demands a specific silhouette, a composition, an effort at singularization, distinctive traces that identify it - frame it - and render it unmistakable. Not only a classic of gay culture, the drag model, in this context, is the very incarnation of a type of sedimentation that runs through all of Gonzalez-Torres's work: the stereotype, that is, the height of categorized, pat, exhibited meaning. Only the starkness of the stereotype can rival minimalist formal purity. Gonzalez-Torres's work moves with remarkable skill on the line between those two radical extenuations: form and meaning. We see, for instance, the series that exalts the romanticism of twinship (the pair of synchronized clocks, the duo of lawn chairs, the two silver rings whose circumferences touch but never overlap, even the two pillows on the bed in the famous 1991 *Billboard*) and it's hard to resist its iconicness, its synoptic representation, the laconicism of its eloquent logotype. Graphic and portable like teenagers' pins, the works of twin objects are a true lesson in semiotic productivity: minimal means, maximum meaning. It could be said "all" love is there, concentrated in that impeccable formula (or, much more than love, the "loveness" of love...). Or the black-and-white photographs "*Untitled*" (*Natural History*), 1990, that Gonzalez-Torres takes of the facade of the Museum of Natural History in New York. Each photo (there are thirteen in all, and they are framed) displays a word etched in the building's stone that epitomizes an ideal attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: "Statesman," "Scholar," "Patriot," "Explorer," "Soldier"... The formal framing of each photograph (a frontal shot with the word always at the center) seems to replicate the semantic and ideological value of each word (which crystallizes a facet - a partial stereotype - of the Great North American Man-a total stereotype).

But Gonzalez-Torres is not an "image" artist: everything said about the composition of his works, the form of his objects and the rhetoric of his photographs, any description of the traits or characteristics of his work is inadequate or marred by a strange impertinence. It is clear how much Gonzalez-Torres owes to the ready-made tradition and the extent to which each time he ventures into an already colonized territory the question of the cliché, of the *déjà-vu*, of the stereotype arises. But what Gonzalez-Torres does with that predigested reserve of meaning-his intervention in the stereotype, which is his critical *modus operandi*—is never "in" his works, never serves to contribute to the supposed unity, identity or self-sufficiency of "things in themselves." In Gonzalez-Torres, there is no "art in itself," and if there is it never stands alone or has the last word; one idea of art is never stated unless something else, another idea of art, is at its side, on an equal footing, challenging it or making it vacillate. Gonzalez-Torres isn't too hard on the stereotypes that he uses. His work is not satirical, it doesn't rely on cutting remarks, it never sullies

that hackneyed meaning of which his work is made. A good Brechtian, he knows that criticism is a question of distance. As soon as meaning arises and produces the effect of authority, the critical artist takes distance, distances himself from meaning, distances meaning from itself; that is, he *defers it*. Here, distancing operates in both space and time. Brecht's epic theater and Godard's discontinuous film (to cite just two of the critical influences that Gonzalez-Torres always recognized) provided an arsenal of devices for putting quotation marks around the different false natures that intervene in representation, releasing the viewer from the trap of illusions of reality. Distance is the antidote for adherence; criticism, for adhesion. If his proclivity for frames, clear borders and ready-mades give him away as an advocate of distance, Gonzalez-Torres extends this procedure to the domain of time and *impregnates his work with a sort of hereafter*, a posterity, a promise that, beckoned to come true in the future, deactivates now, in the present, the danger that meaning become isolated and crystallized. It is this temporal beyond that both pierces and sustains the work, that "resolves" the two threats that operate in his art (that is, that weigh it down and feed it): the minimalist tautology (Frank Stella's "*what you see is what you see*") and the universal generality of the stereotype.

This is the great invention of Gonzalez-Torres's "temporal" installations: on the one hand, a pair of identical clocks—"Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987-1990—that start off synchronized and, as days go by and batteries wear out unevenly, gradually go out-of-synch, finding individual paces; but above all the series of stack pieces, those piles of rectangular sheets of paper, blank or with texts or images printed on them. Placed directly on the floor, these pieces make the gallery into a sort of "improvised print shop," and the candy pieces, made from candies, fortune cookies or chocolates that the artist spreads on the floor, like rugs or graves, or piles up around a column or in a corner of the exhibition space. Limpid, transparent, innumerable yet enumerated, both the stacks and the candy pieces are "participative": the viewers - as they were often informed by the gallery or museum guards - are invited not only to touch the work but also to appropriate it, to pick up a sheet of paper, a piece of candy, a Baci Perugina from the stack and take it home. As conceptual as the installations themselves, the certificates of authenticity that Gonzalez-Torres Signed included-amidst the detailed specifications of the type of candy, the color of the wrapping paper and the ideal weight of the work-the caption "endless supply" and the prevision, or rather the wish, that "third parties may take individual candies from the pile." "Untitled" (*Lover Boys*), for instance ("blue-and-white candies individually wrapped in cellophane, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight: 161 kg"), has a meaning: the total weight of the candies is the same as the weight of the artist and his lover, Ross Laycock. Conceived when Ross, an HIV carrier, became critically ill, the work "metaphorizes" death's work in progress (as the light bulb garlands metaphorize the drip of weeping and the red bead curtains metaphorize the blood dripping). But as soon as it is presented, the meaning wavers; it is found to be inhabited by something else, something that doesn't belong to it and that forces it out of itself. Meaning is no longer what matters; what matters is *use*. The question is not what the piece means but how it works, what it is for, what "lives" it can have beyond the one granted by the artist, the gallery, the museum, the art institution. Meaning is use. Gonzalez-Torres said:

"Well, I mean it was not just at that time dealing with the ideas of Walter Benjamin and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and trying to destroy the aura of the artwork but also, on a more personal level, it was about learning to let go... Just to quote Sigmund Freud: 'We rehearse our worst fears in order to lessen them.' So at that time I was losing Ross, so I wanted to lose everything in order to rehearse that fear and just confront that fear and perhaps learn something from it. So I wanted even to lose the work, this stuff that is very important in my life. I also wanted to learn to let go."

The meaning of the work is its use: the visitor sinks his hand into "Untitled" (*Lover Boys*) and takes a little art with him, a little of Gonzalez-Torres home, a bit of the bodies of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock to his mouth, tongue, stomach. And the theory's only aim is to take us "somewhere less dark." As Gonzalez-Torres remembered when he told his students to read Althusser with a glass of wine in hand, Benjamin (and his reflections on the original and the reproduction, the loss of the work of art's aura, etc.)

only has something to tell us if his ideas serve to "construct realities that help us live better." This tension between meaning and use is one of the keys to Gonzalez-Torres's conceptualism. It's not that meaning caves into use (as if before a greater instance), nor is it that use "goes beyond" meaning (as if artistic value surrendered to a social dimension). It is, rather, a true vacillation, a relationship of reciprocal threat that upsets but does not wound, and from which neither comes away unscathed. In Gonzalez-Torres, *meaning and use make each other tremble*. It is not ludicrous to imagine that that mutual disturbance was what the artist, forlorn by inspiration, was looking for in his 1974 Merriam-Webster. The dictionary is precisely that theater where meaning and use (definition and way of employing, sedentary meaning and nomadic contexts) never cease to disturb each other. That is why, for the Brechtian minimalist that was Gonzalez-Torres, no object was more irresistible than a dictionary.

The question is: what does this trembling do to the aura? Annihilate it? To what extent does a critical art like Gonzalez-Torres's demand capitulation, the banishment of that archaic sensitive exhalation? After accepting that there was aura even in minimalist art, where it was thought to be banned, Michael Fried, who called it "theater," accused aura of being the unbearable and antimodernist component in this sort of work. Gonzalez-Torres, let alone his art, was not so susceptible; it stood in that slippery terrain from which orthodoxies flee. It's easy to question the vitality of the aura in works like the stacks or the candy pieces, calls to a gradual but inexorable disassembling that condemns disuse and even mocks the prohibition to touch on which art's magic was based. (*Please do not touch. Even clean hands can damage the fragile surface of works of art*, warned recently a sign in MoMA. But, for Gonzalez-Torres, the fragile is the opposite of what must not be touched: the fragile is what needs to be touched, what demands it). It seems, then, that all distance has been abolished (and aura, according to Benjamin, was above all a "power of distance"). Nonetheless, we stand before those candy tapestries as if before something we are seeing for the last time, something that is dying down and chooses us not only as witnesses but also, perhaps, as accomplices or executioners. But that - the thing that we are seeing disappear, to whose disappearance we contribute when we put a piece of candy in our pocket or put a rolled sheet of paper under our arms - that is, we know, something that can *reappear* at any moment, anywhere. *Endless supply*: the work is infinitely reproducible. If, like Ross Laycock, it is doomed, its fate is double and extremely paradoxical, because the very death sentence that condemns it also resuscitates it. Where? Somewhere, sometime. *In the distance*: in the same both spatial and temporal beyond where the 100 percent auratic experiences in which Gonzalez-Torres's art is steeped "take off": desire, dream, mourning, amorous rapture. Distance is the very concept of the stacks, the candy pieces: in the moment they seem abolished they are reborn and deepened. Disappearance operates by contact; maximum presence confronts us with loss. Approaching the work, touching it, tearing out a sheet is placing it in another scene, the dimension of distance where it turns in on itself and comes back to life. Thus, though the work does not stop being what it is, a simulacrum of death and an anticipated form of mourning - there can be no illusion here - there is something at its core that only thinks about survival and the hereafter, something that works towards the future formula of reproducing life. "The absence of illusions and the decline of the aura are identical phenomena," said Benjamin. To "reactionary" illusion, Gonzalez-Torres opposes enthusiasm and hope, two forces without which there would be no criticism and, perhaps, no art. But enthusiasm and hope might be the two most "aurogenous" factors we have.

Gonzalez-Torres always took pains to point out that a candy is not a candy piece, that a piece of paper is not a stack: what we, turned into official looters by the work itself, take home with us, is not the work; it is its elements, units, "members," and it is the very discrete nature of these components - which authorizes quantitative excess but hinders confusion - that enables the work to join production and consumption, illustrating with crystal elegance the classic *dictum* of Marxist political economy. Because if there is something surrounding the work of Gonzalez-Torres, it is economy. Economy in the strictest terms: the macro version that can be read between the lines of the press (in 1990, when he was invited to participate in a group publication on the artist Roni Horn, Gonzalez-Torres opened his intervention by spouting data about the tripling of the national deficit that had made the "economic boom" of the Reagan era possible), but also - and mostly - the specifically artistic economy, insofar as his work - like the work of Brecht - never stops asking decisive questions about the means and modes of production, about private

property and common property, about the circulation of artistic goods, about the logic and values of the art market. Works like the stacks and the candy pieces are small aporetic traps in the institution of the market. What is a person who buys a candy doormat destined to run out, come apart and vanish in the pockets and mouths of others actually buying? What sort of good is appropriated by the person who buys a work like the billboard of the unmade bed with two pillows ("*Untitled*", 1991), whose certificate of authenticity stipulates that the person who buys it must exhibit it in public places?

But there is a third economy at stake in Gonzalez-Torres's art: a strange economy, at once domestic and social, private and communal, primitive and utopian, one regulated by a logic that challenges even the most egalitarian exchanges: the logic of the gift. The photos of the installations with people capture the tone of the archaic ceremony to which they summon; especially one of "*Untitled*" (*Revenge*), taken in 1994 at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. A number of children are at the edge of a large candy rug. Two of them are stepping on it as if they were rehearsing dance steps, two others are busy unwrapping the candies, three or four are putting a handful in their pockets, five or six are squatting to gather candies. The image has an air of urgency, voracity and delight; it portrays an almost tribal scene, one of those trances both communal and self-absorbed that art rarely incites in ten-year-old kids. If not as the fruit of a singular generosity or a joyous drive to loss, how can we conceive this exuberant distribution of wealth that crowns a party? Taking candy from a stranger - classic prelude to a dreadful sex scene - is here the basis for a painstaking communion, both euphoric and focused. The fact that everyone in the photo is a child reveals two things that were there all along, waiting for us: the banal, prosaic, wholly common nature of the wealth given out - it is not stone, not steel, not metal, it is candy, paper, light bulb, plastic, bead curtain. The use of these cheap, everyday materials that can ensure an *endless supply* is another of the specific traits of Gonzalez-Torres's democratic minimalism. And the likeness that binds this scene to children's birthday parties, especially the *piñata*, that apotheosis of domestic waste, and to party favors, plebian variation on the gift. And, come to think of it, even Gonzalez-Torres's most circumspect work has a touch of twilight, something of the brusque and sentimental end-of-the-party: things and people begin to thin out, the space expands, a tired but happy silence where before there was laughter and music. Everything is slightly inherited, the ghost of what just happened. That is, in a way, the theatrical, intensely auratic setting that underlies Gonzalez-Torres's art. Candies and sheets of paper are party favors, the both exceptional and everyday booty that the artist releases, places in the hands of a community that begins to exist at the very moment it takes something home, something that might perhaps survive beyond, in settings and worlds that the artist never imagined. Candies and sheets of paper are that perfectly senseless thing that the work of Gonzalez-Torres renders perfectly plausible: a *basic luxury*. Tourism - another plebian practice - has a specific name for those trivial and joyful treasures, that only seem to be embodied in the most common gadgets of mass consumption: *souvenir*. Unlike the tourist photo, that always steals or violates something of what it sets out to cherish, the *souvenir* (like a birthmark, a scar, a loved one's wrinkle) is part of the memorable experiences; it belongs to that experience and, at the same time, represents it, takes it on the road, introduces it to other lives; maybe, in the best case, makes it change... That is, most certainly, a "generous art": an art that is not limited to remembering (even though Gonzalez-Torres's work has much at stake in memory, the memorial, *in memoriam*), an art that dares to give, to let memory go.