

Félix González-Torres

In Puerto Rico: An Image to Construct

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The compilation of and research into materials from Félix González-Torres's creative period in Puerto Rico (1978-1985) has unveiled a history that was unknown to many. These works in video, photography, printing—including some art pages in newspapers—letters, projects, and documentation of performances and installations allow us to trace the origin and trajectory of some of the artist's concerns.

We know, for example, that his work was viewed favorably by the critics and contributed to fields like photography and the graphic arts. González-Torres' use of Polaroid technology—of ephemeral printing—, the conceptual base of his work, and his experimentation outside the traditional aesthetic framework (1) resulted in an early recognition.

This essay presents some aspects of the grid of relationships between the artist's formative period and his cata-

logued work. It partially summarizes a research project in progress, but we believe it will be useful to viewers.

In October of 1985, González Torres took part in the II Muestra Nacional de Fotografía Puertorriqueña (Museum of the Universidad de Puerto Rico — UPR—, Río Piedras) with a series of 15 works combining color photography and texts. We are not familiar with these works, but their features can be deduced from the information gathered.

In the catalogue, which included a portfolio, we find *Sin título* (1985), the image of a sculpture—probably a public work—and a poetic text. This is the format used since 1985, when González-Torres published his first "fotonovela" (2). The artists manifesto explains the choice: "It is difficult to separate the image from the text. Our verbal articulation is a logical reaction, immediately upon seeing an image. Even when there is no written text" (3)

The pair image/text is presented in various forms: pages of periodical art (*fotonovelas*), interventions in postal art through printing processes (the image is ready made, mail marks and stamps), photographs showing commercial advertisements. Even in his performances, González-Torres often distributed a declaration. The text was part of the work, and, and the same time, it established a context.

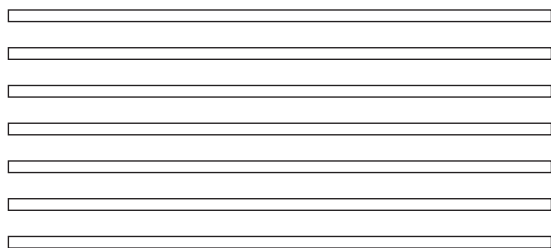
This characteristic was pointed out by the writers in the *Muestra* catalog. According to Nelson Rivera, González-Torres' images mix with texts that refer to the photographic act itself" (4). Liliana Ramos says that "this bad conscience [of the usefulness of the photograph] hardens in the *fotonovelas* the photographs reduced to texts and the texts risen to the level of photographs" (5).

The sculptoric image in the portfolio represents two male bodies, nude and interwoven. It is an allusion to homoeroticism, which appeared already in his earliest publications (6). The text reads: "The place [was] so photographic, he would have said, almost like a postcard. The blue sky, the clouds, the exact moment... Then he aimed the camera. *Click...*"

This ironic counterpoint that results between image and text is common. For example, in *Contaminación ambiental* (1980), six identical photographs show a plant that dumps black waters on the beach. The "speeches" refer to television: sentimental, violent, commercial scenes. A footnote explains: "A long time ago there appeared this bomb that throws its residues on the beach... Night after night my TV does the same" (7).

In other words, "An innocuous object from the material world is allegorized in order to denounce TV's contaminant function [...] We are invited to discover similarities between the excremental and the mediatic..." (8).

The same photograph heads the second insert, *unforgettable Winds* (1981) (9). Here it is a seemingly extraneous element, because it is followed by images of a couple at the beach. The camera avoids their faces, and the



descriptions are impersonal. This contributes to rarefy the sequence, even if the link to the previous one is explicit.

González-Torres recycles motifs from his own work; this can be confirmed by thumbing through the *catalogue raisonné*. He did this already in his initial experiments, which are not recorded by signal the origin of many of his themes.

For instance, the paper maché masks used in *Sociedad* or *Derretimiento de la sociedad* (1978)—a project conceived by González-Torres and executed in collaboration with students Rosa Balsera and José Pérez Mensa, with a work that consisted of a line of ice blocks placed in the Antonia Martínez square at the UPR, performed in 1978 and reviewed by the local press—reappear in the video *Autorretarto 3* (1979), and still in his series of platinum-on-palladium prints (1983.) But their meaning varies. They refer, respectively, to social conventions that need to be deconstructed, the limits of representation, and the game of veilings of a taboo sexuality.

There are beach chairs in the insert *Unforgettable Winds* (1981) and the performance *The beach is nice* (1983.) Likewise, this element is used in two puzzles: *Sin título*, of 1991 —# 182— (10) and *y Sin título (Paris, Last time, 1989)*, of 1989 —# 55.

Finally, the photograph of the sculpture in the portfolio is recycled as is in one of the puzzles, *Sin título*, of 1988 (# 32). Nevertheless, the text disappears, or follows a different path. This intertextual relationship reveals a change in González-Torres' proposal.

This change can be seen in the comparison between two works. The first was created by González-Torres for the Public Art Bus Show (1984.) The text in question, allusive to militarism, was part of a diptych alongside an image of the sky seen through palm tree leaves: "sometimes he had many nice dreams, mostly about his weapon and his duties. Nice" (11)

Later, in a personal show (Intar Latin American Gallery, 1988), the artist prints only the phrase "I always wonder if men in uniform sleep better after performing their duties". The text



gains independence, becoming itself an image, as in the timelines of the first "paper stack" in photocopy (*Sin título*, 1988, # 26). To "our verbal articulation" (12) of the visual, González-Torres opposes the transit from text to symbol.

In this direction are the press clipping reproduced in González-Torres's posters and his linguistic portraits. Moreover, the photos of inscriptions in the monument of *Sin título (Historia natural)* and the details of the letters. They are forms of the written word, of typography and calligraphy. In the letters, he plays with the ambivalence of the word, which means both a written message and each of the symbols used in writing. The letters join together content and form and reach the artist's

Experimentation in photography and the graphic arts; a close relationship with the media, especially the press; the importance of the text as image; a dialogue with the tradition of the poster; the themes of the beach, memory, the migratory experience, and the family are some of the threads that link the work of Félix González-Torres to his formative period in Puerto Rico.

greatest aspiration: "Content must be integrated into the form, and vice versa." (13)

Why does the artist attach such importance assigned to the letter? A study of the formative period and the history of Puerto Rican art offers some answers.

Poetic expression was what initially attracted González-Torres. His course of study at UPR started there. In 1979 he published several poems and short stories in a student publication titled *Contornos*. Later the visual arts—video and photography—were to replace writing, but he always found a way to incorporate it.

For example, the documentation of *Óxido: sueños sobre una cama de hielo* (1982), was published along with a text in verse and prose. Likewise, the CEPA Gallery bulletin included a poem titled *Fetichism* and information about the project of Public Art Metro Show (Buffalo, 1984).

Another element is the graphic tradition. The modernist renewal in Puerto Rico took place through posters, linked to processes with a political reach such as the work of the DIVEDCO starting in the late 1940s (14). Due to its educational purpose—which required didactic texts—and the persistence of its practice, Puerto Rican poster art opened two paths:

"letter-ism" and the conceptual variant of the graphic arts.

Also, the mass character of this production influenced printmaking, in particular the portfolios that became a popular format with large print runs. The idea was to bring art to the people. In terms of criticism, an analogy was made for posters with the metaphorical expression of "freed sheet."

Well, graphic arts was the first class González-Torres ever took at UPR, marking a turn toward the visual arts. Some of the principles of this discipline were to be assimilated, especially its communicative function—for the effectiveness of which one can bring mass culture to bear—and the possibility of reaching a wide public.

González-Torres used to say that *The New York Times* was his source of inspiration. Indeed, upon becoming a member of Group Material, he took part in an art insert in just that newspaper. His interest in the media has its roots in his Puerto Rican period.

The performance *TV Vacío-Vacío* (1979) consisted of two people sitting in front of a TV monitor without signal, while the artist read an ironic text about everyday topics related to television. Around the same time, he published an epistolary short story titled "...querido televisor," a diatribe against

the banality of the mass media. His source of information, he declared, had been the San Juan newspaper *El Mundo*.

In his series of platinum-on-palladium prints, which are sort of still lifes, newspapers appear as background. It is a narrative sequence in which a group of dolls is attacked and devoured by toy caimans. The texts from the newspaper are integrated into the anecdote and work like speech parts ("It is soooo good... and so fresh!").

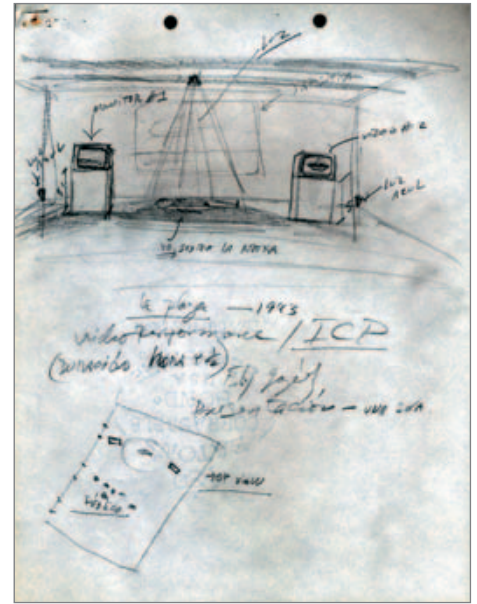
Such self-assurance demonstrates a profound empathy with the graphic medium, where González-Torres recognizes a destabilizing power against the institutional power of art. Taking as example a work by Dionys Figueroa (17), he comments on "these anachronistic notions [of what 'is' and 'isn't' appropriate and elegant with regards to current creative media] make no sense once he dares presenting a few thousand Xerox copies as original works of art. The power exercised by the artist through his use of photocopies of an image as a work of art is for many a very dangerous act." (18)

The newspaper pages, with the comments "Now you too can own an original" and "Printed art is expanded art," prepare the field for an editorial concept. González-Torres planned an "exhibition of printed art" using as his "gallery" an avant-garde publication, *Reintegros*, edited by Liliana Ramos. Unfortunately, *Cinco páginas por cinco artistas* (1984) was cancelled for lack of funds.

González-Torres expressed himself in video-art—seen as an alternative to commercial TV—, photocopy, postal art, and postcards. He was after a typology or medium that allowed him an effective communication and then democratization of art. For the artist, the reproduction of the work of art "lays the ground for an artistic Democracy." Finally, he arrived at the stacks of posters, the first of which was done using photocopies.

The bibliography about González-Torres has reinterpreted this typology in relation with minimalist art. However, documentary finds lead us to 1) the mass reproduction implicit in the





photocopied declarations he distributed at his events; and 2) the poster art tradition.

González-Torres valued the use of photocopies and used that medium. He did artist's books—one of which he exhibited in *1983 Artist's Books*, Franklin Furnace, New York—and his first stack of posters in photocopy (*Sin título*, 1988, #26).

Since the 1970s, Puerto Rican poster art is in crisis. The decline in production, the recognition afforded the masters, and the emergence of an incipient market, among other factors, stimulated a practice focused on technique. Posters became collector's objects, created for the gallery in limited editions, and even signed. In this way, artists gave up the medium's mass potential and political function.

González-Torres' stacks are a parody of those "gallery posters." They locate themselves in a previous moment; they bring to mind the packs of freshly printed posters warehoused before being taken to the streets and stuck to walls. Also, they reject traditional techniques in favor of mechanical means of reproduction.

In his performance *Óxido: sueños sobre una cama de hielo* (Casa Aboy, January 23, 1982,) González-Torres assumed the role of the tourist. After covering his body in sunscreen, he laid

down, wearing his swimming trunks, on a block of ice. In his declaration published in *High Performance*, he prompted us to "Come and enjoy/ come and forget... You don't have to be involved/ you don't have to know the land..." (20)

On its part, *La playa* (1983), a project that was never performed, proposed an installation/video/performance where the artist was to remain on a sand carpet while a slide showing a blue image of the sea was projected onto a wall (21). Two monitors to the sides and loudspeakers were to broadcast recordings of beach sounds and news updates. "Mi purpose is to show in a lyrical and denotative way how the 'beach' subject is formed by contradictory elements. A metaphorical place of escape (vacation) and a real and literal place of escape" (22). He is referring to the fact that it is a place shared by refugees, immigrants, and tourists.

This kind of work points in two directions. On the one hand, the presence of the personal, incisive in its earliest expressions, such as the short story *Mario* (1978) and the video *10 años, 10 horas, 10 madres* (1979). In them González-Torres explores the fragility of the memory of a child forced to emigrate ("At the age of 10 you are a package sent to Spain", he narrates in the tape).

This fragility takes shape later in the series of puzzles where the artist condenses the visual and the literal with great cunning. The impossibility of remembering is metaphorized in the Spanish phrase "breaking one's head" (in a figurative sense, thinking hard about something without being quite able to bring it to mind). The English word "re-member" is transferred to a physical action (re-remembering) as a construction of memory.

The second direction leads to the fallacy of the innocuous image: "The image [...] is used constantly in an attempt to establish structures of thought to help preserve and reinforce the economic, political, and social status quo. The most innocuous photographs, such as family pictures, contribute to this [...] Through the family picture, cultural roles like patriarchal society are established [...] Everything or almost everything has been photographed. However, printed images still do not occur through spontaneous generation. Who decides what will be reproduced?" (23).

This awareness of an ideology or political force is one of the essential features of González-Torres' work. The tourist's vacations and idleness are later transformed into the jumbles of candy and bon-bons. They both typify society and consumerist habits. Like-

wise, the photographs of symbols taken from the mass media (the Pope's church, the *Supremo's* justice, Klaus Barbie's family,) printed in the form of puzzles, respond to a deconstructive tactic that he artist himself had set as his goal in 1981: "The image is an instrument of codification. It would be facile to use an analysis of the mass media as a pretext for a partial political critique" (24)

Experimentation in photography and the graphic arts; a close relationship with the media, especially the press; the importance of the text as image; a dialogue with the tradition of the poster; the themes of the beach, memory, the migratory experience, and the family are some of the threads that link the work of Félix González-Torres to his formative period in Puerto Rico. The documents gathered in this project allow us to see some of the communicating vessels and demonstrates the need to study this relationship in greater depth.

NOTES

- (1) In his manifesto, he warned: "Many photographers assume the equation of 'injustice and exploitation' with photographic realism, using a conventional means of representation and presentation of the works, which means a simplistic attitude about the relationships between content and conventional form: frames, mirrors, protectors, 'good' photographic printing, etc." (Félix González, "La imagen como producto/poder". In: *El Nuevo Día, Domingo Magazine*, July 26, 1981, p.17).
- (2) *Contaminación ambiental* (1980) accompanied Samuel Cherson's article "El arte como idea," in the *Domingo* magazine of *El Nuevo Día*, August 24, 1980,

p. 19. According to Liliana Ramos Collado, it was an "advertisement for a 1980 video exhibition" (In her essay "Sin título: Retrato de Félix González-Torres en Puerto Rico, 1980-1983". *ArtPremium*, May 2005, San Juan, p. 70). However, I disagree with this assessment, which negates the work's autonomous character. The artist described it as a "page of printed art" in his curriculum vitae at the time. The note that refers to the exhibitions reviewed in Cherson's article —of videos by González-Torres— must have been added by the editors.

- (3) Félix González, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
- (4) *II Muestra Nacional de Fotografía Puertorriqueña*, Museo de Historia Antropología y Arte, Universidad de Puerto Rico at Río Piedras, 1985, p. 2.
- (5) *Ibid*, p. 4.
- (6) For example, in the poems "Drógame de ideas locas" (dedicated to his friend Miguel) and "Hoy soy alegría" (which is read as gay and reinforces it in verses like: "strange germ of madness, / I am a little corny flower"), both in *Contornos* (Vol. IV, #.2, First semester of 1978-79).
- (7) Félix González, *Contaminación ambiental*. Printed art page. *Domingo Magazine, El Nuevo Día*, August 24 1980, p.19.
- (8) Liliana Ramos Collado, "Sin título: Retrato de Félix González-Torres en Puerto Rico, 1980-1983". In: *ArtPremium*, May 2005, San Juan, p. 70.
- (9) Félix González, *Winds Unforgettable. Sunday San Juan Star*, January 11, 1981, p.12.
- (10) The numbers indicated in these works corresponds to the order established in the artist's *catalogue raisonné. Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Text & Catalogue Raisonné*. By Dietmar Elger Germany, Cantz Verlag, 1997.
- (11) CEPA Gallery Bulletin, Buffalo, New York, November 1984
- (12) Félix González, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- (13) *Idem*.
- (14) The Community Education Division (DIVEDCO) was a government initiative. It provided rural communities with the necessary tools for the betterment of their living conditions. Its educational resources were directed towards the development of the concept of self-help. Film, posters, and the publication of children's and

didactic literature were the basic means. DIVEDCO offered employment for many artists in its film and graphic arts, photography, and theater workshops. It was closely linked to the experiences of the Work Progress Administration (WPA), implemented by the Roosevelt administration. For poster art in the context of the DIVEDCO, see Tió Fernández, Teresa: *El cartel en Puerto Rico*, San Juan, 2003.

- (15) Margarita Fernández Zavala, "Inscrit@s y Proscrit@s, desplazamientos en la gráfica puertorriqueña". Catalog: *Trans/Migraciones, la gráfica como práctica artística contemporánea*. San Juan Polygraphic Triennial: Latin American and the Caribbean, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, San Juan, 2004.
- (16) Teresa Tió, "El portafolios gráfico o la hoja liberada". Catalog: *El portafolios en la gráfica puertorriqueña*. Tribute exhibition. 11th San Juan Latin American and Caribbean Printmaking Biennial, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, San Juan, 1995.
- (17) The reference is to the conceptual work *Pieza de declaración* (1980), reviewed in Samuel Cherson's article "El arte como idea". In the same article Cherson comments González-Torres' video-art exhibition at the UPR.
- (18) Félix González: "La imagen como producto/poder". In: *El Nuevo Día, Domingo Magazine*, July 26, 1981, p.17.
- (19) Interview with Liliana Ramos Collado, in San Juan, June 2004. This editorial/curatorial concept is similar to Group Material's insert in *The New York Times*.
- (20) "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Rust, dreams on an ice bed", *High Performance*, Spring-Summer, 1983, p. 83. Coco Fusco says in *Corpus Delicti* that the next year, and over a period of 13 consecutive days, another action took place where González-Torres once again assumed the role of the tourist. The artist himself says that: "The piece was performed right into the 'real' world, and in complete anonymity. No press release, no specific props, actions or text. Only trivia... I simply laid under the sun for the duration of the performance". This *performance* appears as *The beach is nice* (1983) in Coco Fusco's *Corpus Delicti, Performance art of the Americas* (Routledge, Londres, 2000). The location is Santurce, and it must be the Ocean Park beach. We have been unable, however, to obtain more information than what is offered in this book. Dyonis Figueroa, Dominican conceptual artist, acted as photographer.
- (21) The color blue is used constantly by González-Torres as a visual reference to "the beautiful," often in an ironic sense.
- (22) Félix A. González-Torres's file in the archives of the Art Program in the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña.
23. Félix González, "La imagen como producto/poder". In: *El Nuevo Día, Domingo Magazine*, July 26, 1981, p.16.
24. *Idem*.

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