

Exemplar

Joseph Kosuth

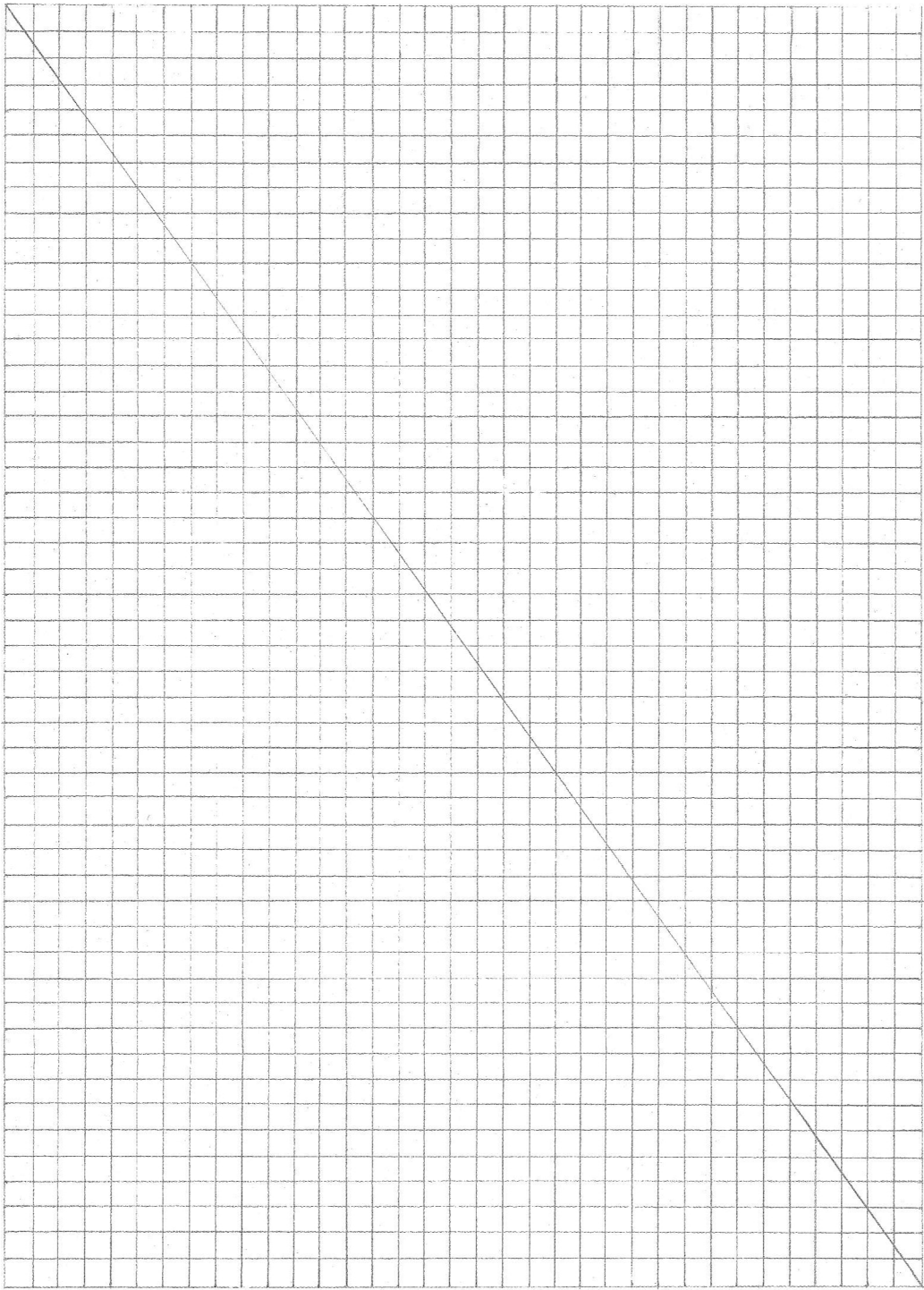
*The eye of the intellect sees in all objects what it brought
with it the means of seeing.—Thomas Carlyle*

Whatever one would want to say about that project called Conceptual art, begun nearly thirty years ago, it is clear now that what we wanted was based on a contradiction, even if a sublime one. We wanted the *act* of art to have integrity (I discussed it in terms of ‘tautology’ at the time) and we wanted it untethered to a prescriptive formal self-conception. Paul Engelman, a close friend of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the collaborator with him on the house for Wittgenstein’s sister, has commented about tautologies that they are not “a meaningful proposition (i.e. one with a content): yet it can be an indispensable intellectual device, an instrument that can help us — if used correctly in grasping reality, that is in grasping facts — to arrive at insights difficult or impossible to attain by other means.”¹ What such questioning directed us toward, of course, was not the construction of a theory of art with a static depiction (a map of an internal world which *illustrates*) but, rather, one that presumed the artist as an active agent concerned with meaning; that is, the work of art as a *test*. It is this concept of art as a test, rather

than an illustration, which remains. What, then, is the contradiction?

It is as follows. How can art remain a ‘test’ and still maintain an *identity* as art, that is, continue a relationship with the history of the activity without which it is severed from the community of ‘believers’ that gives it human meaning? It is this difficulty of the project (referred to now as Conceptual art) that constituted both its ‘failure’ — about which Terry Atkinson has written so well² — as well as its continuing relevance to ongoing art production. It would be difficult to deny that out of the ‘failure’ of Conceptual art emerged a redefined practice of art. Whatever hermeneutic we employ in our approach to the tests of art, the early ones as well as the recent ones, that alteration in terms of how we make meaning of those ‘tests’ is itself the description of a different practice of art than that which preceded it. That is not to say that the project did not proceed without paradox. Can one initiate a practice (of anything) without implying, particularly if it sticks, a teleology? Even at the end of modernism a continuum is suggested. This is one of the ways in which its success constituted its failure. What it had to say, even as a ‘failure,’ still continued to be art. The paradox, of course, is that the ongoing cultural life of this art consisted of two parts which both constituted its origins and remained — even to this day — antagonistic toward each other. The ‘success’ of this project (it was, in fact, believed as art) was obliged to transform it in equal proportion to its ‘success’ within precisely those terms in which it had disassociated itself from the practice of art as previously constituted. Within this contradiction one is able to see, not unlike a silhouette, the defining characteristic of the project itself: its ‘positive’ program remains manifest there within its ‘failure,’ as a usable potential. One test simply awaits the next test, since a test cannot attempt to be a masterpiece that depicts the totality of the world; indeed, it is only over the course of time that the process of a practice can make the claim of describing more than the specific integrity of its agenda. It is such work, like any work, located within a community, that gives it meaning as it limits that meaning.

What is the character of such ‘tests?’ As Wittgenstein put it: “In math-



ematics and logic, process and result are equivalent.” The same, I would maintain, can be said of art. I have written elsewhere that the work of art is essentially a *play* within the meaning system of art. As that ‘play’ receives its meaning from the system, that system is — potentially — altered by the difference of that particular play. Since really *anything* can be nominated as the element in such a play (and appear, then, as the ‘material’ of the work) the actual location of the work must be seen as elsewhere, as the point or gap where the production of meaning takes place. In art the how and why collapse into each other as the same sphere of production: the realm of meaning.

As for the project of Conceptual art, we know that what is ‘different’ doesn’t stay different for long if it succeeds, which is perhaps another description of the terms of its ‘failure.’ Thus the relative effectiveness of this practice of art was dependent on those practices of individuals capable of maintaining a sufficiently transformatory process within which ‘difference’ could be maintained. Unfortunately practices begun in the past are subject to an over-determined view of art history whose presumptions are exclusive to the practice of art outlined here. The traditional scope of art historicizing — that is, the definition of a style attributed to specific individuals — is most comfortable limiting itself to perceived early moments which are then dated and finalized. While such ‘credits’ make sense emotionally for the individuals concerned, we’ve seen where it stops the conversation just where it should begin. In actual fact, the continued ‘tests’ of the original practitioners should be considered on their own merit along with the ‘tests’ of other generations, insofar as all are relevant to and comprise their own part of the *present* social moment.

Finally, that which proves to be useful now from this project is one and the same as that which immunized this particular practice from the ravages of a concept of progress. It is the accessibility of its theoretically open ‘methodology’ (if only loosely meant as an approach) that has remained viable to a culturally nomadic (even within late capitalism) set of practitioners. Enter here Felix Gonzalez-Torres, stage left.

That monographic tradition referred to above will, undoubtedly, have somewhat other things to do with the work of Gonzalez-Torres. This text has another purpose. I am writing as an older artist who was there at the beginning of a particular process, yet one who is sharing a present context with younger artists. There can be indices on a variety of levels, some superficial and some not, which connect such diverse practices within a cluster of shared concerns, but occasionally the work of a particular individual is exemplary, and such is the case with Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

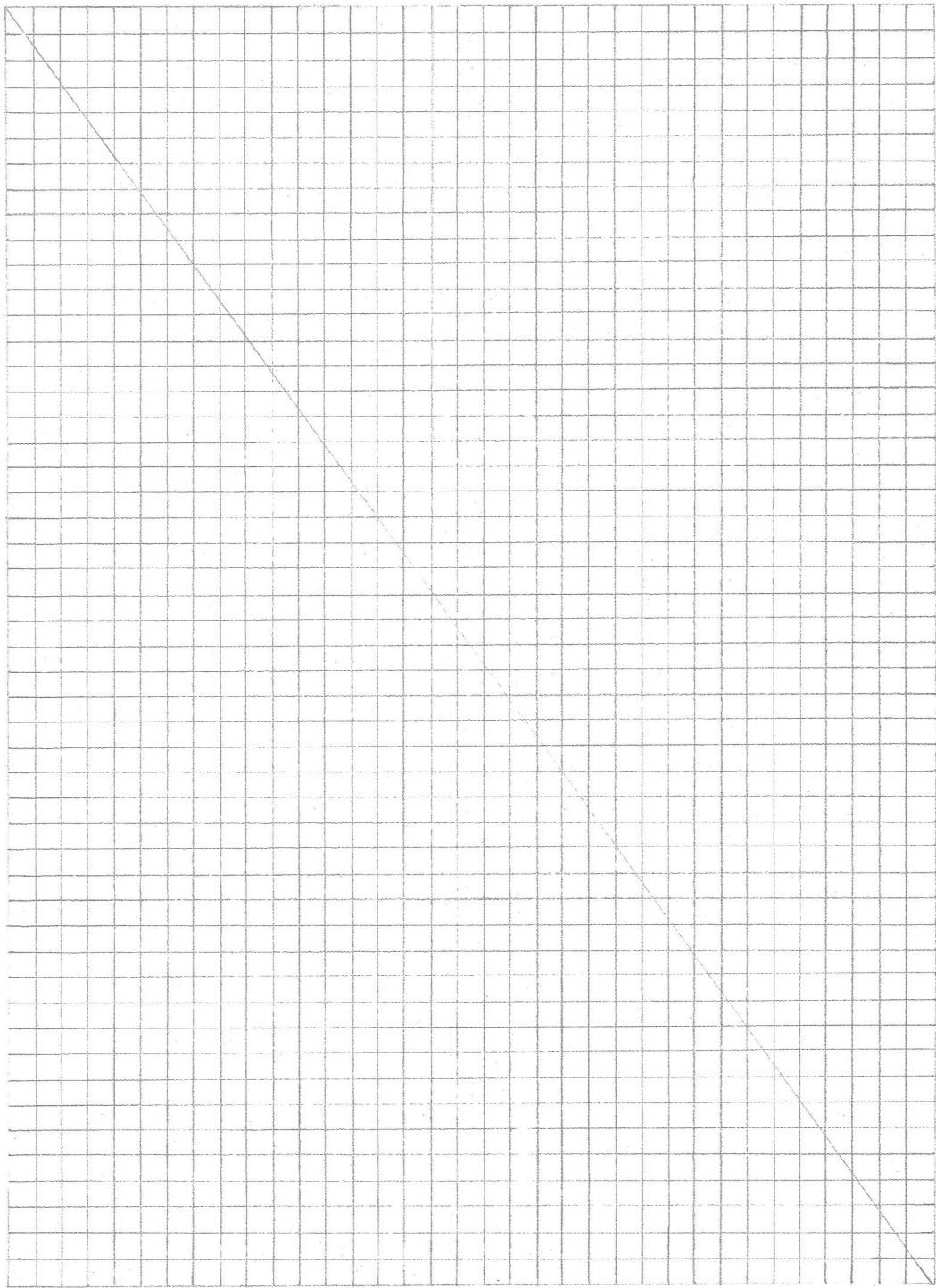
If one looks through the writing on his work over these past five years, the references most often cited have been to Minimal and Conceptual art. Unfortunately, because of the level of understanding of much of the writing on these topics, the use of these terms tends to block the light rather than enlighten. My interest here is to initiate an attempt to describe the intellectual tradition within which Felix Gonzalez-Torres works as an artist, and his importance now to that tradition as a difference.

Minimalism, still functioning (even if in protest) as an art conceived of in terms of form, offered to my generation the possibility of a tabula rasa, cleansed of the prior meanings collected by modernism. Formed in negation as a signifying activity (before it was made into sculpture by the market), Minimalism had much to say about what was no longer believable in art. To this end, Minimal art was a stoppage and clearing out; it cleaned the wall of other marks to make way there for the handwriting that was to follow. All that was a long time ago. The recycling now of the Minimalist glossary by Gonzalez-Torres constitutes its re-erasure of prior meaning in yet another way. If anyone doubts that artists work with meaning and not form, consider the literature on Minimalism at the time, with its criticism of this work as being simply a replication of Constructivism. Constructivism, Minimalism, Gonzalez-Torres: it goes a long way to show the role of context in the perception and meaning of a work of art. The conceptual 'virus' (as Gonzalez-Torres has described his role) that inhibits the corporal presence of his Minimal forms is, of course, that of supplanted meaning. The corpus of his

work is beyond the form his 'host' takes. The basis of a conceptual practice is not what you see but what you understand. It is this process of coming into understanding that links the viewer/reader with the work and concretizes that experience as part of the same event that formed the work, as meaning. The viewer/reader then becomes part of the meaning-making process, rather than being put in the role of passive consumer.

The image-referent of Minimalism succeeds in denying its 'objecthood' and here is where Gonzalez-Torres's work leaves behind Minimalism: he contains it as parody. The meaning made is Felix's. This is ensured by maintaining an instability in the work as object, goods, or material. The illusion of an image or object is the illusion of static representation, since what is seen is a frozen moment of its fragmentation and dissemination (they're often there for the taking). The dynamic of that particular movement is as much the material condition of the work as is whatever formal properties the work shares with what preceded it. Where it comes from (ordered from commercial sources), how long it stays (it sits there, and temporarily behaves as an artwork is expected to), and where it goes (questions arise about the cultural meaning of a fragment, unsigned, which could — perhaps — consign it back to its commercial origins . . . yet only almost, since it retains a trace of Felix's subjectivity and political life).

What is the cultural life that Gonzalez-Torres has added to his 'host?' We can see, in another context, that expression institutionalized into Expressionism created a paradox of impersonal generalized marks intended to celebrate the personal. The signifying role of auratic relicry which we inherited from Christian ritual found another cultural life in the market, but ritual without religion is simply a stage for authority, albeit in the guise of 'quality.' Of course art is a form of expression, what else could it be? Such a truth is truistic, however, and we can thank Expressionism for how 'expressive' all the work now looks that was once called anything but. We know now what Expressionism was expressing: Expressionism. What can really be said about expression itself, as a generalization, once it is in the work?



If it is not a generalization, but specific, then it has a kind of functional ‘content’ which is part of the work’s play, with no role as ‘expression’ per se. The institutionalized expression celebrated in earlier forms of painting seems to pale in relation to this artist’s use of personal experience to ground works made with ‘impersonal’ materials. But it is even wrong to put it that way. This work, like all of the best work in this century, is about meaning, and the value of the work doesn’t reside in the props employed to construct that meaning but in the authenticity of that manifestation which the integrity of one individual can assert. Perhaps the most eloquent demonstration of a difference between Gonzalez-Torres and Minimalism might be to consider — for a moment — the same wrong move twice. In the first wrong move we look to the fluorescent light of Dan Flavin — to the object, with a bulb, bought in a hardware store — and try to find the meaning of this work in its materials. We then look to one of Gonzalez-Torres’s stacks of paper, also trying to find meaning there, in that stack. We know that both have something to say about an activity called art. Is not the important difference between these artists how they arrive at the condition of art: what we learn from that passage of impersonal materials into products of subjective responsibility? What is the meaning that stands in the gap between a pile of Gonzalez-Torres candies and a stack of paper that shapes what we see and organizes our thoughts? What, now, does a fluorescent light by Flavin tell us?

One asks these questions to get beyond the object. In a world of objects, we need to know what separates the ‘objects of art’ from the rest. What the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres suggests to us is that one can have much to say within the context of art without sacrificing the personal connection to one’s work which keeps it within a real social space, and which, as well, gives work a political grounding. Politics, in the case of Gonzalez-Torres, is not an abstract message that reduces work to a passive purveyor of ‘content’ — as illustration — but, on the contrary, is a socially-based activity which makes the viewer/reader part of the cultural act of completing the work.

¹ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Wittgenstein, With a Memoir* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 105.

² Increasingly, after 1970, the intrusion of “the philosophically interrogative subject into the construction of artistic identity/subjectivity” — as Atkinson has put it — began to wind down as a concern. From the point of view of Atkinson and myself (in marked contrast to what now goes under the name Art & Language) the ‘return to painting’ of the eighties was in the main a failure of historical nerve in art practice, a fatigue in the face of the complex legacy of Conceptualism which buckled under the market’s pressure for ‘quality defined’ traditional forms of art. For more on Terry Atkinson’s point of view, see his “The Indexing,” in *The World War I Works and the Ruins of Conceptualism* (Belfast: Circa; Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art; Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1992); *The Bridging Works 1974* (London: Mute Publications, 1994); “The Rites of Passage”, in *Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibilities: Ad Reinhardt, Joseph Kosuth, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (London: Camden Art Centre, 1994); and “Curated By The Cat,” presented as a lecture at the Camden Art Centre, January 8, 1994, and as a forthcoming publication.