

Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins. Felix Gonzalez-Torres was interviewed by Tim Rollins at his New York apartment on April 16 and June 12, 1993. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Edited by Bill Bartman. New York: Art Resources Transfer, Inc., 1993: 5-31.

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### ***Interview by Tim Rollins***

*Tim Rollins: How long has it been since you've been to the movies?*

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Two and a half years. I used to go to movies with Ross mostly. Nowadays it's so much easier to rent a video; I got used to being able to replay the important parts. At the movie-houses you can't say "Hey Joe," to the projectionist, "can you replay that part?"

*TR: So much of your work seems cinematic -- drawn from films, the movies. The date-works remind me of credits, really great movie credits, and your stacks remind me of an accumulation of frames from a film. You also often integrate photography in the work. The new work with the curtains ... All these ghosts of cinema and screen are living in your work.*

FGT: I think a movie-house is a place of loneliness -- one of the few places where I feel comfortable being alone. It's dark, you can just sit there and watch movies. When I first moved to New York I used to go to movies a lot because I had no friends. It was a nice way to spend two hours alone. Also at that time there were some great old movie-houses -- art movie-houses -- you could see three films one right after the other for very little money. I used to do that a lot. It really was about loneliness and empty frames, it was not about any particular movie, it was just about a place. The movie was an excuse to be somewhere in the dark. Once I met Ross the movie-house had different connotations. It was a place where the *movie* suddenly became important: the movies became part of our dialogue, part of our exchange of ideas.

*TR: Most artists today deal with two powerful traditions inherited from the eighteenth century. There is the realist tradition where the artist simply reflects what's going on in society -- the "vision thing." Then there are other artists like Courbet who transgress that, who create social statements, project something. Which tradition are you from?*

FGT: It depends on the day of the week. I choose from many different positions. I think I woke up on Monday in a political mood and on Tuesday in a very nostalgic mood and Wednesday in a realist mood. I don't think I'll limit myself to one choice. I'm shameless when it comes to that, I just take any position that will help me best express the way I think or feel about a particular issue. Formal strategies are there for your use. When I first made the date-pieces with the empty screens I was working as a waiter. I used to come home very late at night and watch TV to forget the daily specials before I'd work on any art. I'd scan the channels. There's really not much to see. Everything boiled down to the same low level of meaninglessness. Everything was a fragment of a total spectacle: the most horrific news next to the most glamorous gold ring next to the most glamorous celebrity next to cooking oil. News, events, fiction, data, scandals, starving children, etc., are all collapsed into a level of historical inaction-a dark landscape, sterile, meaningless... I feel so anemic tonight, it must be the rain.

*TR: This is something that I've always wanted to ask you: why have you deliberately, obstinately decided for some reason not to have a studio?*

FGT: Do you really want to ask me that?

*TR: Yeah, because it's very curious to me. It's almost like making art on the dining-room table as a hobby. This is an amazing limitation. You don't have the trappings of a studio: assistants, visitors, and all that. Issues of space and light are gone since your work is so sensitive to place and context. How do you determine the pieces? You say you don't do drawings but I know you must do drawings, you must have some idea of what the piece is going to look like, so how do you begin?*

FGT: I really don't plan pieces using drawings. First of all, I usually dislike drawings by sculptors, they're just so academic and expected. I don't follow that prescribed mode. I do make drawings and photographs but they have their own specific function. They are not sketches of the sculptures, these are drawings that represent a parallel set of ideas.

The reason why I don't have a studio... I think that I'm very neurotic. Actually I guess I *am* neurotic. So having a studio would paralyze me completely. Just the *idea* that I would have a place where I *had* to go to work and make "something" scares the shit out of me. The studio is a scary stage set.

*TR: Stage fright?*

FGT: Maybe. The only time I had a studio I didn't make a single thing for six months. I guess that's good, I saved the world from more unnecessary artworks. I've always wanted a studio, a studio that looked like an "artist's studio" with all that stuff: all the lights and the stereo music and the assistants like in *House and Gardens*. I never had a penny so that by the time I got around to having some money I realized I didn't really need a studio. It was a revenge, a sweet one. Now I'm very happy I made that decision because I don't produce objects all the time.

*TR: So let's get down to it, how do you determine a work? For example, Lover Boy: How did you decide how big it was going to be? The dimensions of each sheet of paper? What kind of paper to use and how tall the stack would be? How did you decide on which blue to use?' How did you know it would go against the wall in that certain way?*

FGT: Well, it goes against the wall because the blue reflects on the wall. The paper is a light blue and is a standard commercial brand trimmed to twenty-four by twenty-four inches.

*TR: But how did you know that that would work?*

FGT: I didn't, not until I did the installation. When you don't have a studio you take risks, you change your underwear in public. I'm not afraid of making mistakes, I'm afraid of keeping them. I have destroyed a lot of pieces -- I like the excitement of fucking up royally. Some artists can "rehearse" in their studios before they go into the gallery, I find that too easy. I don't know, I never had anything to lose so I've always done it my own way.

*TR: But how do you know it will work! You must keep a notebook.*

FGT: Well, no . . .

*TR: Don't lie to me! You have a notebook, you must know how ...*

FGT: I have a notebook! Sometimes.

*TR: All right! There must be some kind of -- it might not be a sketch but you must have the measurements written down. You must have taken some piece of paper and cut it the right size and said, "This is the right size." I know your work isn't completely arbitrary or intuitive.*

FGT: I do like certain uncanny numbers. Things happen to me around certain numbers: five, twenty-four, twelve. Those are the numbers that sometimes determine the height of the stacks and the size of certain papers.

*TR: A mystical minimalism?*

FGT: Well, yes and no. Some of the stacks are made thirty-two by twenty-nine inches because that's also the size of the paper. If the piece is about something that is very distant to me, then numbers like seventeen, thirty-five, and twenty-one sound perfect because they are numbers that I would never use for anything except for a piece that is very uncomfortable. In terms of the height, it's really determined by how it looks installed in the actual space. Sometimes I think, well, eight or nine inches is going to work all right. But once it's in the gallery nine inches really doesn't work, it just doesn't look right. Then I have to increase or decrease the amount of paper sheets in the stack. With the new work, the light-strings, I leave those decisions for others to perform. I don't decide how the strings of lights are installed, I only specify that the piece must have forty-two twenty-watt light bulbs.

*TR: Don't you have to give yourself a lot of installation time?*

FGT: I usually do it in just one day. Some shows just take two hours to install -- that's it, I'm out of there. I think about the work and the installations for a very, very long time. I lose sleep over these things. I -- just came back from Vienna with photographs from Peter [Pakesch]'s gallery and I've been getting up in the middle of the night to write something about how it will be installed in the show so that when I go up there...

*TR: So you do draw?*

FGT: Sometimes, stuff that goes into the trash can once the show is over. These aren't saved, not signed, numbered, or dated. They're just things to help me through the final piece -- which is what I want the public to really be engaged with. The voyeuristic idea that whatever the artist sketches or does is interesting is not interesting to me. That's stuff for *People* [magazine].

*TR: So you don't think these sketches might be interesting or useful to others?*

FGT: No, because I don't want people to be involved with the insecurity that comes with making these things. There's a lot of fear that goes into these things. I honestly think that when I made those stack-pieces I was still trying to understand Walter Benjamin. I read Benjamin for the first time while I was in the Whitney program, and I didn't understand it then because I was so green.

I had just come out of Pratt Institute where I had just wasted four years. Pratt Institute is the kind of place where a teacher can look you straight in the eyes and easily tell you to be "honest and truthful to the space," as if that had some kind of meaning. Pratt is a place where people preserve their jobs by fucking up and confusing young people's minds. They have wasteful courses such as "Space, Form, and Shapes" -- Bauhaus theories without the social commitments or interest. From radical forms to empty styles in four easy steps.

*TR: I would like to talk about theory. I think we both come from backgrounds where books were considered with suspicion.*

FGT: It's a queer thing, I mean, at least from my background.

*TR: I think it's about wanting a larger world. I think it's about wanting to be involved with the world of ideas and it takes a certain amount of courage to really go into that other land. That's the danger of being too involved in theory, you get to a certain level in your education where you equate theory with practice.*

FGT: Tim, I must say that without reading Walter Benjamin, Fanon, Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, Borges, Mattelart, and others, perhaps I wouldn't have been able to make certain pieces, to arrive at certain positions. Some of their writings and ideas gave me a certain freedom to see. These ideas moved me to a place of pleasure through knowledge and some understanding of the way reality is constructed, of the way the self is formed in culture, of way language sets traps, and of the cracks in the "master narrative" -- those cracks where power can be exercised. It is also about influences and role models.

Films-as-texts, such as movies by Godard, have been very influential to me. There is also, of course, Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys from Berlin* and a movie by Sarah Gomez called *One Way or Another*, which is a feminist view of the Cuban revolution, Santeria, and other issues. This movie is very interesting because it's also about the meaning of love during a particular historical period. I saw that movie the same week that I saw *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

*TR: That's a great movie about love.*

FGT: No, it's about meaning and how meaning is dependent on the context. Last but not least, Brecht is an influence. I think if I started this list of influences again I would start with Brecht. I think this is really important because as Hispanic artists we're supposed to be very crazy, colorful -- extremely colorful. We are supposed to "feel," not think. Brecht says to keep a distance to allow the viewer, the public, time to reflect and think. When you get out of the theater you should not have had a catharsis, you should have had a thinking experience. More than anything, break the pleasure of representation, the pleasure of the flawless narrative. This is not life, this is just a theater piece. I like that a lot: *This is not life, this is just an artwork*. I want you, the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved, and informed.

*TR: Some people don't like that.*

FGT: Of course not because they have an investment in the narrative. The artist is expected to be someone who "feels," the idiot-savant. I admire artists that break the rules, that break with the expected functions of an artist, that push the limits of artistic practice; artists that can recite economic facts at the drop of a hat; artists that can tell you how much money has been eliminated from programs for pregnant woman and infants over the last twelve years by the Republican "pro-family" administration; artists that can tell you that even though Exxon was fined a few million dollars the Valdez oil spill, we, the famous taxpayers, will end up paying billions on behalf of Exxon's real crimes.

*TR: But you're definitely not Brecht and you're not Althusser and you're not Celia Cruz either. Would you have a heart attack if I asked you if Dan Flavin was a mentor?*

FGT: I would not have an attack at all. It's very heroic and poetic to take a florescent light and make it into something more than a florescent light without adding paint to it! But that is as far as I can go in my admiration of Flavin...

*TR: And to personalize it. What's quite obvious is that you've taken formal strategies from Russian constructivism to minimalism and collapsed all that into artworks that are as industrial as Donald Judd while being as personal as Emily Dickinson.*

FGT: That's true. They're very industrial, you can say that.

*TR: It's obvious that you aren't as interested in the battle between form and content as you are in method: how the work is made, distributed, and shared. Where did the stack-pieces come from?*

FGT: It's really difficult to say. I don't really remember, seriously. The first stacks I made were some of the date-pieces. Around 1989 everyone was fighting for wall space. So the floor space was free, the floor space was marginal. I was also interested in giving back to the viewer, to the public, something that was never really mine to start with -- this explosion of information, which in reality is an implosion of meaning. Secondly, when I got into making stacks -- which was the show with Andrea [Rosen] -- I wanted to do a show that would disappear completely. It had a lot to do with disappearance and learning. It was also about trying to be a threat to the art-marketing system, and also, to be really honest, it was about being generous to a certain extent. I wanted people to have my work. The fact that someone could just come and take my work and carry it with them was very exciting. Freud said that we rehearse our fears in order to lessen them. In a way this "letting go" of the work, this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day right in front of eyes. It's really a weird thing when you see the public come into the gallery and walk away with a piece of paper that is "yours."

It's a riot when I show these pieces in a museum because people aren't supposed to touch the art much less take it with them. At the 1991 *Whitney Biennial* people would ask the museum guard if it was true that they could really take a piece from the stack of paper. The guards got into it. But I had a show once here in a New York gallery and this East Village artist got upset with the work. She just couldn't take it. I saw her take twenty, twenty-five sheets from the stack and dump them in the corner trash can. That was really upsetting to me.

*TR: Because it was rude?*

FGT: Very upsetting because I had never seen so much bitterness with respect to my work. It was very strange, I was really upset. I thought she was taking them because she needed paper to do work on. So at first I was very, very pleased, but then she just acted maliciously.

*TR: I think you're experiencing the underside of democracy.*

FGT: I guess there's a lot of trash on the underside of democracy, unfortunately. Still, I prefer democracy, as faulty as it is.

*TR: Love and fear seem to be the two great themes of your work.*

FGT: It's funny you say that because I was just thinking ... Earlier I mentioned *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, it took me a long time to understand the opening sequence. The female character says, "You are good for me because you destroy me," I finally understand what that means. You can be destroyed because of love and as a result of fear. Love is very peculiar because it gives a reason to live but it's also a great reason to be afraid, to be extremely afraid, to be terrified of losing that love... It's not as if I have different bodies of work, I think I just have many fronts. It's almost like being in drag. I'm in a different drag persona as needed. Sometimes I make the stacks, sometimes I do the curtains, sometimes I do text-pieces, sometimes I do canvases, sometimes the light strings, sometimes billboards or photos... There are pieces that grow and change all the time. There's a piece where I mail the owner something every so often and it goes into this big box. This piece should never be shown. I don't know if you know about this piece.

*TR: Explain it some more. Who gets these things?*

FGT: The person who buys this empty box gets these things in the mail.

*TR: How does this person get the box?*

FGT: They buy it from Andrea. This piece is not meant to be shown. There are other pieces that are not only meant to be shown but are meant to be taken all over the place. I like working with contradictions: making completely private, almost secretive work on the one hand, and on the other, making work that is *truly* public and accessible. As we know, some so-called public art is really "outdoor art." Just because it's out on the street doesn't make it public.

TR: *Getting back to how you make decisions. I wanted to ask you how you chose the blue that you use. What's the difference between your blue, Felix Gonzalez-Torres blue, and Yves Klein blue?*

FGT: First of all, my blue is not an international blue, as Yves Klein's was. Mine is just a light blue that you can get anywhere, in any hardware store.

TR: *It's more specific. It's not just light blue.*

FGT: Actually, I change it all the time. It's a light blue that I change all the time.

TR: *It's close to the blue [the Italian architect] Aldo Rossi uses, that's why I know.*

FGT: Really? It just has to be light blue.

TR: *Okay. Why is it light blue? Is this a baby blue for boys? A robin's egg blue?*

FGT: It's more like a Giotto blue in the Caribbean -- saturated with bright sunlight.

TR: *It's lighter than Giotto's blue.*

FGT: But when you go out in the Caribbean sun the colors get very washed out. It's almost like what Giotto's blue would look like in *Last Year in Marienbad* -- a memory of a light blue. For me if a beautiful memory could have a color that color would be light blue. There's a lot of positive dialectic, you know, in blues.

**blue** (bl50) *n.* **1. a.** Any of a group of colors whose hue is that of a sky on a clear day. **b.** Anything of this color. **2. the blue. a.** The *sky*.-*adj.* **blu-er, blu-est. 1.** Of the color blue. **2.** Having a gray or purplish color, as from cold or bruise. **3. Informal.** Gloomy; depressed. **4.** Puritanical; strict. **5.** Indecent; risqué: *a blue joke*. -- **blued, bluing. 1.** To make blue. **2.** To use bluing on. -- *idioms. once in a blue moon.* Rarely. **out of the blue.** At a completely unexpected time.

*(The American Heritage Dictionary, 2d college ed.)*

TR: *It's very baby blue, you know, the blue of your first flannel blanket (if you're a boy). You don't use a royal, rich, velvety blue, you use this innocent blue.*

FGT: That's a good word for it -- an innocent blue.

TR: *Is it a gay blue?*

FGT: No. You know, I really didn't have much of an investment in light blue as a kid because we didn't have that kind of luxury of choice. You just got whatever you got: either blue or pink or whatever. If you got a blanket at all you were lucky -- forget about what color it is.

TR: *You paint whole walls with it*

FGT: Yeah.

TR: *So it's a big deal.*

FGT: I love blue skies. I love blue oceans. Ross and I would spend summers next to a blue body of water or under clear, Canadian blue skies.

TR: *I've heard a lot of grumbling, Felix, about the lack of overt political or Latino content in your work.*

FGT: (laughing) Well, I just want to start by saying that the "maracas" sculptures are next! I'm not a good token. I don't wear the right colors. I have my own agenda. Some people want to promote multiculturalism as long as they are the promoters, the circus directors. We have an assigned role that's very specific, very limited. As in a glass vitrine, "we" -- the "other" -- have to accomplish ritual, exotic performances to satisfy the needs of the majority. This parody is becoming boring very quickly. Who is going to define my culture? It is not just Borges and Garcia Marquez, but also Gertrude Stein and Freud and Guy Debord -- they are all part of my formation.

The best thing for me to do with those people is to ignore them, because I question someone who tells me what I'm supposed to do or be. I always feel like asking them why don't they do it? I think the same thing happened with you and K.O.S. It's very elegant for some Calvinist critic to judge your project. Anyway people criticize some of the contradictions -- as if there are things in life that don't come with contradictions. Everything is part of a contradiction, there are just different levels of contradictions. You decided to do something, something other than just teach art to young kids. You decided to push the limits. It is very exciting to take something that is there in everyday life and create from it something out of the ordinary, to give that ordinary object or situation a new meaning with a great economy of means.

I had a problem just recently in Copenhagen where I went to give a lecture. A man in the audience immediately started talking about winning the battle for multiculturalism. I said: "Look, okay, first I have trouble with that kind of language about winning battles. That's too male-oriented for me. That's too macho, that's too much about war." Then he said something about numbers--a certain amount of women, a certain amount of Hispanics, etc. No, multiculturalism is not about numbers, it's about inclusion. It's about opening up the terms of the argument, opening up the terms of the discourse so that everybody can participate with equal footing. It's not about naming two female, three Hispanics, four whites, five blacks... It's not about quotas. Sometimes quotas are necessary when it comes to concrete things like businesses, but in culture it's more complex. It's about opening up the terms of argument, and it's about re-addressing the issue of quality and who dictates and defines "quality."

It's funny what you said earlier about books, about trying to escape the world, that's very true. Where I come from there were no books. My father only went up through the fifth grade and my mother was a housewife -- there were never books. The first book that came to my house was a Bible. That was the first book I came in contact with.

TR: *"The Text of Texts."*

FGT: That's right, it was an illustrated Bible. And I have to say the illustrations were really beautifully perverse: images of Christians being fried in hot oil and things like that. I mean, people being fried alive in oil! Imagine what that can do to the mind of a six-year-old kid. "Pro-family" values are so perverse; their negation of sex is all about an obsession with it. In other words, it's all about sex. Raw. The sexual thing, the guilt, the fear -- it's very Latino. Which then makes sexuality even more exciting by means of repression.

TR: *It's New England Baptist, too. It's universal.*

FGT: It's universal. But I never really grew up surrounded by those things, as some people have assumed. So I don't know what they look like. I don't know the ghetto, I have never lived in the jungle, and I despise altars. I grew up in San Juan, which is like a small New York City without subways. So when people say, "Oh, you should be doing this, you should be looking like that," I really think that that expectation comes from guilt, it comes from expecting us to wear grass skirts. They don't really know what we're about. They don't know about our experiences, how hybrid we all are. They are stuck with images from National Geographic circa 1950. These assumptions are rooted in ignorance and in a condescending attitude.

*TR: It wasn't like you were standing in line at Roseland or Casa Galicia.*

FGT: No. Once I started becoming aware of feminist issues I became very suspicious of salsa music. Some of the lyrics are too heterosexual, too pro-family, and too sexist. I never liked salsa much except for Celia Cruz and some other Cuban musicians. I like black music, deep-house music, and rock more than anything else. Salsa never really hit me in the right spot. But I do love La Lupe -- my idol!

*TR: Some artists regress with success. When do you get to the point that you make what you want to make as opposed to making what you think you need to make or what society needs to have out there? This is the dialectic or contradiction that Brecht suffered as well. All artists who are interested in social change labor under the tyranny of necessity.*

FGT: How do I define the need? It could be a personal need and/or a political need. I'm a person who lives in this society and I'm a product of this society and this culture. I'm not only a reflection I'm that culture itself, and therefore whatever I make ... I hope that everything that I make is needed by my culture. I always think that when culture foregrounds something it is because it *is* needed. It could be an idea, an object, whatever. It could have been there for a long, long time but it is only when culture feels that it is *ready* that this object or idea becomes important.

I always tell my students that as cultural producers we should be very aware of what the culture is doing. We must read the newspaper, we should watch the news, we should be finding out what is new, because even if we don't take them on as issues that stuff will affect us one way or another. For example, what is happening right now in Yugoslavia with men in uniform killing innocent people, I think that should also be part of the studio. I think that should also be a part of your "inspiration" the way that the horror of being the homeless person down on the street should also be part of your life. Artists should be well informed.

*TR: Your work reminds me so much of arte povera -- using industrial materials and making arrangements on the floor. On one hand, there's something free and casual about it. On the other hand, it's clean, it's printed, it was farmed out to industrial shops. The workers who made this stuff have no real connection to what you are doing. You buy, let's say, a hundred dollars worth of paper, print something simple on it, and sell it for eight thousand dollars as fine art. So you're involved in that nexus of profit yourself. And even though everyone is invited to take a sheet of paper from the stack there will be a collector who will buy the entire stack and have it in their house where dinner guests are privileged to take sheets. The mechanisms of the market can turn works of art into novelty items. I was curious to know what you thought about that contradiction?*

FGT: For me it makes a lot of sense to be part of the market. It would be very expected, very logical and normal and "natural" for me to be in alternative spaces, but it's more threatening that people like me are operating as part of the market -- selling the work, especially when you consider that, yes, this is just a stack of paper that I didn't even touch. Those contradictions have a lot of meaning, as we know.

*TR: I think your knowledge of manual labor comes from something...*



FGT: It comes from serving too many plates of spaghetti as a waiter, I guess! The contradictory use of hiring manual labor comes from the need to keep a healthy distance from the work. I'm for pushing the limits. I love it when people say: "But it is just paper. It is just two clocks next to each other. It is just light bulbs hanging." I love the idea of being an infiltrator. I always said that I wanted to be a spy. I want my artwork to look like something else, non-artistic yet beautifully simple. I don't want to be the opposition because the opposition always serves a purpose: "Improve your arms against me." But if you're the spy -- always "straight acting," always within the system -- you are the person that they fear the most because you're one of them and you become impossible to define.

*TR: By giving an interview like this are you being a "good spy?"*

FGT: I think so, I think so. I'm always shifting. There is also a lot of power and threat in that. This type of work (the stacks) has this image of authority, especially after so many years of conceptual art and minimal art. They look so powerful, they look so clean, they look so historical already. But in my case, when you get close to them you realize that they have been "contaminated" with something social.

*TR: You are a political person yet you're very concerned with form and you're not apologetic about it.*

FGT: I love formal issues. Actually they have a very specific meaning. Forms gather meaning from the historical moment. The minimalist exercise of the object being very pure and very clean is only one way to deal with form. Carl Andre said, "My sculptures are masses and their subject is matter." But after twenty years of feminist discourse and feminist theory we have come to realize that "just looking" is not *just* looking but that *looking* is invested with identity: gender, socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation... Looking is invested with lots of other texts.

Minimalist sculptures were never really primary structures, they were structures that were embedded with a multiplicity of meanings. Every time a viewer comes into the room these objects became something else. For me they were a coffee table, a laundry bag, a laundry box, whatever. So I think that saying that these objects are only about masses is like saying that aesthetics are not about politics. Ask a few simple questions to define *aesthetics*: whose aesthetics? at what historical time? under what circumstances? for what purposes? and who is deciding quality, etc? Then you realize suddenly and very quickly that aesthetic choices are politics. Believe it or not I am a big sucker for formal issues, and, yes, someone like me -- the "other" -- can indeed deal with formal issues. This is not a white-men-only terrain, sorry boys.

*TR: How do you go about making the "portraits?"*

FGT: As you know, in our culture we read photographs in two ways: by what's denoted and by what's connoted. The denoted is pretty obvious: color or black and white, a photo of a person or of a building, a portrait or a landscape, etc. The connoted are all the other characteristics that we bring to the reading of an image according to our particular historical formation and position. So when you look at a portrait photograph of someone you don't know you pretty much bring your own connotations to a denoted set of characteristics. In other words, from an image you switch to language, which is the only way we humans can "read" an image. In these portrait-pieces, I try to reverse the process. I start with language and then I ask the viewer to provide an image.

I start a portrait by asking the person to give me a list of important events in his or her life -- intensively personal moments to which outsiders have very little knowledge of or insight into. Then I add some relevant historical events that in more ways than one have probably altered the course of and the possibility for those supposedly private or personal events. These portraits are always changing, and whoever owns them can alter, add, or take out information. They usually get painted directly on the wall, way up close to the ceiling all around the room like a frieze.

*TR: What is the function of duplication and repetition in your work? The stacks of paper or piles of candies that through accumulation comprise a work are internal forms -- each individual piece of paper or piece of candy exists as a piece on its own. But they also exist as external forms when you place identical pieces in different sites and contexts.*

FGT: All these pieces are indestructible because they can be endlessly duplicated. They will always exist because they don't really exist or because they don't have to exist all the time. They are usually fabricated for exhibition purposes and sometimes they are fabricated in different places at the same time. After all there is no original, only one original certificate of authenticity. If I am trying to alter the system of distribution of an idea through an art practice it seems imperative to me to go all the way with a piece and investigate new notions of placement, production, and originality.

In terms of different contexts, well, that's a very complex issue that needs to be nailed down to a more specific example. As we know, context gives meaning. The language of these pieces depends, to a large degree, on the fact that they get seen and read in art contexts: museums, galleries, art magazines.

*TR: Are the works a metaphor for the relation between the individual and the crowd?*

FGT: Perhaps between public and private, between personal and social, between the fear of loss and the joy of loving, of growing, of changing, of always becoming more, of losing oneself slowly and then being replenished all over again from scratch. I need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without a public these works are nothing, nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in. I tend to think of myself as a theater director who is trying to convey some ideas by reinterpreting the notion of the division of roles: author, public, and director. Your question is more puzzling to me than I had previously thought because, yes, an individual piece of paper from one of the stacks does not constitute the "piece" itself, but in fact it is a piece. At the same time, the sum of many pieces of the identical paper is the "piece," but not really because there is no piece only an ideal height of endless copies. As you know, these stacks are made up of endless copies or mass-produced prints. Yet each piece of paper gathers new meaning, to a certain extent, from its final destination, which depends on the person who takes it.

*TR: Do you attach sentiment to your mass-produced materials? For example, your works are often untitled, but then you go ahead and make some evocative reference that becomes part of the piece's "titlelessness."*

FGT: No, I don't attach sentiment to mass-produced materials or objects, they already have it. I just make them obvious. Sometimes I feel very democratic about the stacks -- things you can take -- but sometimes I feel very stingy. Sometimes I want the thing to hang on the wall and I don't want anyone to touch it. I just want this pristine, beautiful object that is just there. Sometimes I do have the desire to be democratic, of affecting people, of moving people to a different place with knowledge, pleasure, love, inspiration...

*TR: Do you think that has a lot to do with distribution?*

FGT: Absolutely. For me it's very beautiful when the work changes by being placed in different contexts. A page or stack in a gallery reads differently from one you see in an artist's studio or one you see in a home or museum. I once went to the employees' toilet in a museum in Germany and found one of my pieces, *Death by Gun*, pinned to the door of the toilet stall. The employees told me that they loved reading about all those people's violent deaths while they were sitting. It helped them "go."

*TR: A laxative.*

FGT: That's another function of my work that I hadn't really ever envisioned, you know!

*TR: You've had your revenge on Benjamin, in a way, because those individual works do have an aura. Benjamin claimed that a reproduction of a work of art could not have the aura if the original, one-of-a-kind piece, but you made a work of art that is an original reproduction.*

FGT: I never agreed with that. The reproductions or facsimiles of the original always point toward the source of emission -- the "real" thing. And as signposts to the original they become desirable.

*TR: Isn't the stack the original in a way? It's the book instead of the page?*

FGT: It's always the original because in my case there is no original -- the stacks are endlessly reproducible editions.

*TR: You know, celebrities deal in aura. The pop star, the person, becomes the original object. They don't call them stars for nothing. It's about this light that they generate. People rush to a concert even though they've heard the record a million times. They go not so much to hear the music but to see the words coming out of the mouth of the human "star." The stack is a "star" in a funny way.*

FGT: I never saw it like that. That's interesting.

*TR: Engels thought it was a law that any increase in quantity necessitates a decrease in quality. The great challenge to our generation is to find a work that's popular and democratic but doesn't kiss butt, doesn't pander. It's a supremely difficult task.*

FGT: It's a very tight rope, and I think one way of going about it is by being flexible and by saying, okay, sometimes I'm going to be democratic. Sometimes I'm going to do a billboard that is just text about health care, and the next time I just want to do a billboard that is about something perhaps more obscure that I need to see in public. I do have a political and personal agenda with this work, and in a way they are very interrelated but I haven't been able to find a perfect union for both. So in the meantime I do both things. It feels very satisfying, in a perverse way, to be working on different fronts: not to have a style, not to be easily defined, not to be easily named.

*TR: What about the situation where you have somebody like Sigmar Polke whose stylelessness, like Picasso's becomes a style. How do we deal with that?*

FGT: That's a good point. I was just thinking about the fact that I don't like to be photographed and how suddenly that becomes a persona, you know, the artist that doesn't like to be photographed.

*TR: Works like a charm.*

FGT: Right, I know. Still there are contradictions within everything but I think that I would rather live with that particular contradiction: the "not-photographed" persona. To have a "non-style" is risky but at the same time it's more liberating for me. I just can't get up in the morning and do the same goddamn work.

*TR: Do you see a correlation between minimalism and Vietnam?*

FGT: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. That work could only have been made because of the extreme positions that Vietnam created. Cultural or, in this specific case, artistic production is not only related to cycles of fashion but to larger social situations. The horror of the Vietnam War was being brought to American homes nightly via television. There is no way one can evoke that inferno through any other means of representation, perhaps film can come slightly closer. The minimalists' answer to the social, political, sexual, and cultural upheaval of the time was to produce rather shocking objects of art that even today don't look like art at all.

In another example of social movements affecting artistic production: during the eighties, parallel to the vital and progressive cultural critiques of artists like Louise Lawler, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holtzer [sic], Cindy Sherman, and Sherry Levine, we had a very scary return of the bohemian painter, as if twenty years of an intellectual and conceptually based artistic practice had never existed. This was a very dangerous, anti-historical, anti-intellectual movement that served, very clearly, the needs of an artificially wealthy new clientele who wanted some art to decorate their new lobbies, apartments, and (now empty) offices.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that a Holtzer [sic] or a Kruger will not improve business. You don't want to remind stock traders about moral issues; you want to give them some color, to make them feel good so they can commit crimes with a happy face. And so they did. Unfortunately we will end up paying for all that. Cultural production and socioeconomics are intertwined, either you do work for it or against it. There is never such a thing as an apolitical or inert artwork. Art always serves a function -- it either furthers and helps the master narrative or it tries to disrupt it. And it should also be underlined that the reactionary forces that ruled us for the last twelve years are still very active, just waiting to strike back and impose once more their agenda of homophobia, sexism, racism, and divisiveness. Their exclusionary practices are being perfected as we speak. We should never underestimate their vicious power and violence. By the way, Tim, I always say that Group Material is the best kept secret in the art world.

*TR: I think the problem with Group Material is that they operated outside of the art market. A lot of people claim that they hate the commercialism of the art galleries, but if you're not visible in those mainstream venues you're invisible.*

FGT: That's why I make objects, otherwise I would be doing performances. But aside from the objects, I love the process more than that final product. That's what I love the most. But I understand the rules of the game: you have to circulate an object in the market in order to have a more direct access to power... I've been waiting for the revolution for a long time and it hasn't come. The ones that have come have done very little to change our ways. Therefore I don't want a revolution anymore, it's too much energy for too little. So I want to work within the system. I want to work within the contradictions of the system and try to create a better place. I think revolutions were a really nice idea in the nineteenth century and in the early part of this century, but we must take into consideration the technological advances that are being made right now. These technological shifts are happening in a world that has become very fragile and also very small.

*TR: I know you consider teaching to be an important element of your work. What would you like to see come out of your students?*

FGT: I'd like them to be generous. I don't know what I'd like them to be. I know exactly what I don't want them to be -- I don't want them to be self-indulgent. I would like to see them involved with the *process* of working in addition to being involved in the final product. More than anything, I would just like them to be happy.

*TR: That is the philosophy of a good parent.*

FGT: I think happiness comes from knowing what you want to do. I don't want to discuss the objects that much. I think the issues, the processes, the needs, and the pleasures around the works are more important.

*TR: You've taught at several colleges, right? Doesn't it disturb you that there are so few Spanish speaking students?*

FGT: When I went to art school at New York University there weren't any Hispanics around except for the elevator man. When I started to teach at N.Y.U in 1987 I used to joke that the elevator man's name got onto the teacher's list by accident. On the list of fifty-five teachers, I had the only Hispanic-sounding name.

*TR: So obviously that bothers you.*

FGT: Of course it bothers me. As a young man I didn't think that being an artist was a viable thing to do because there were not many role models. Now that has changed, and it is great to see the variety of voices. I see the practice of teaching as an integral part of my work. Teaching for me is a form of cultural activism, a form of creative change at a very basic level, and it is a way of redeeming the profession of art teaching. As a student you always got these teachers telling you what is right and what is wrong without any doubt or questioning. I want my students to learn the tools of critical thought and to always doubt, to learn how to doubt themselves and to be self-critical. Only through acts of self-criticism are we able to discern which work is better or worse, hopefully. It's based on the Brechtian model. It is not about good or bad. You try to give them the ability, the tools, to see for themselves what is important, what is needed, what is moving, and what is not. I also make very clear to them that they should not trust me -- I'm not the voice of authority. I make mistakes, I might be wrong. I do have a very clear agenda and that is a desire to make this place a better place, and I'm an artist, that is the position where I speak from. But I'm an artist who tries to redefine the role of the artist. I see myself as an instigator, someone who questions not only the function of the art object and the practice but also the act of teaching art. Is it valid to teach art in the late twentieth century? I constantly question my voice, my opinions, my suggestions. What do I know? I don't give my students the comfort of expecting me to be the voice of knowledge, the father, the master narrative. Even if I wanted to I couldn't.

I had some Hispanic students at CalArts and at N.Y.U. Some were great and some were not. I expect more from them than from other students. Coming from that background, you know, there is a lot of struggle, a lot of fights, things are not easy but you shouldn't let those temporary things stop you. You should work harder. It's very easy to say, "Poor little me." It's just too easy to feel sorry for yourself, that's what some folks want us to do. They want us to roll over. The only thing they want to hear from us, through our art, is how difficult life is for us, the "others." Hawaiians had to wear grass skirts in "Hawaii 5-0" to make white folks happy. Never mind that our lives are more complex than altars, palm trees, colorful landscapes, and gangs. Never mind that we already had universities when some of your ancestors were sitting at a table thanking God for pumpkins and turkeys.

I also want to make sure I'm not romanticizing the "American Dream," especially now after twelve years of "trickle-down economics" in which 1 percent of the American population owned as much as the bottom 90 percent. All I want to say is that I always expect much more from my minority students. I always tell them we have to work against two negatives: First, we have to prove we're not bad, but that's not enough. After that, we must prove we are good. When we come into a room we are automatically *bad*. When someone like you, white, comes into a room you are given the benefit of the doubt. We don't get that benefit, we are already suspicious-"bad."

*TR: I keep thinking that if we were doing this dialogue ten years from now I honestly think we would be doing it in Spanish. That would be real progress because everybody would be able to read it.*

FGT: I had a problem with the idea of making this book bilingual. Why does *my* book have to be bilingual? Why not the other books in this series?

*TR: I think we're more interested in making America bilingual. Making art is obviously some sort of offering to somebody somewhere. Would you agree with that? Would you agree that to make a work of art is to assert a belief in meaning? Maybe even assume the presence, existence of God?*

FGT: Let's get out of the area of God quickly! I have a major problem with the cultural traps and constructions of *God*. I think that it is a good excuse for us to accept any kind of situation as natural, inevitable. Once we believe that there is no God, that there is no afterlife, then life becomes a very positive statement. It becomes a very political position because then we have no choice but to work harder to make this place the best place ever. There is only one chance and this is it. If you fuck it up this time you've fucked up forever and ever. Therefore God becomes a kind of lollipop you give people: "Look you are suffering now in this life, I'm making you feel and live miserably. I'm making things really horrible for you, but in the next life things will be better -- believe *me*, and believe in God."

Once you agree that there is not any other life, that there's nothing except *here* -- this thing, this table, you, me -- that's it. That becomes a very radical idea because you have to take responsibility to make it the best. By the way, just recently -- 350 years after Galileo found that the earth moves around the sun -- the Vatican accepted their "small mistake" and admitted that the earth really does move around the sun. Galileo, after all, was right. It only took them 350 years to get rid of this dogma! Pity, it could be so funny except that they have so much power, hate, and dogma.

*TR: So what role does art play in that?*

FGT: It leaves a mark. It leaves a statement that you were here, that perhaps it is possible to have a different view of life.

*TR: Why bother?*

FGT: I think one of the reasons that I made artwork was for Ross.

*TR: And/or your audience? the public? the people that come to see your shows?*

FGT: I also make art to describe how I feel about other issues that are outside the so-called private sphere.

*TR: I've rarely seen an artist that loves his audience as much as you do.*

FGT: You have to start by loving what you have at home. You don't go out and preach if your house is not in order-you cannot preach a new social order. And going back to the question of why make an art object, I must also add it is a way of working out my position within this patriarchal culture. I recently saw a very traumatic photograph of a Yugoslavian soldier beating and kicking the bodies of two dead Muslim women. This soldier is a man who probably has a god, a man who performs his duty, a "family man," a hero. And of course these are all my connotations of this photo based on the preconceptions of our own Western, judeo-christian culture. How do I process that picture?

Another reason why I make works of art is to try to get that out of my system in a healthy way. Here is a "family man" who has the kind of respect that I as a gay man will never have. How do I deal with a culture that will give him a medal of "honor?" How? In a way I'm trying to negotiate my position within this culture by making this artwork. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to feel? Who am I supposed to identify with? And finally, above all else, it is about leaving a mark that I existed: I was here. I was hungry. I was defeated. I was happy. I was sad. I was in love. I was afraid. I was hopeful. I had an idea and I had a good purpose and that's why I made works of art. Maybe given enough time I'll think, yes, well, maybe it has to do with the denial of God: the fact that I tried to negotiate the fact that there is no God. Right now I don't think that I'm consciously involved in any notion of God. I hope.

*TR: It's a big problem, you know.*

FGT: Really?