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QUEER ART

A Freak Theory

[transcript] queer studies

B the topography of desire (felix gonzalez-torres)

not-showing

In 1990, Felix Gonzalez-Torres began exhibiting a series of works made up of arrangements of small, detailed objects: hard candies. What catches the eye here, though, are not some vaguely yellowish sugary lumps, but the wrappers. In one work, he uses a type of candy that comes wrapped in silver cellophane. Large numbers of these wrapped candies laid out on the floor create a vast, reflective rectangle with a metallic shimmer. The name of the piece is *"Untitled" (Placebo)* (1991). In another work, the candies are wrapped in various brightly colored bits of cellophane and piled up in the corner as a colorful mound. This piece is named *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991).

These works offer no direct political positioning, they refrain from any concrete reference to the events of daily politics and likewise make no clear break with the museum as a bourgeois institution. They forego any signs that might make them recognizable at first glance as an artistic practice contextualized by debates on sexual identity and origins. Contrary to queer photographic works by Catherine Opie, Del LaGrace Volcano, or Sarah Lucas, to name but a few examples, there are no visible bodies that challenge or rework two-gendered and heterosexual norms, viewing regimes, or representational conventions. The work doesn't take on a particular discourse about regulating bodies around sexual or gender politics to reproduce it by means of text, sound, or illustration.

I understand these works by Gonzalez-Torres thus as "embodiment without bodies"¹ (cf. Spector 2007: 139ff.).² Beyond ascertaining that the works avoid visually citing or newly producing corporal norms, and in an effort to extend the basis of what a "freak theory of contemporary art" might be, I would like to consider what exactly makes it possible for a "queer embodiment" to emerge. Since the works themselves make no attempt to represent bodies visually, instead replacing the point of visualization with abstraction, the question arises as to how and where "queer embodiment" takes place and whether the work itself provides any answers at all to this question? Or is "queer embodiment" possibly something that cannot be seen, found, created in careful observation, or isolated by writing analytically?

the collapse of visual and linguistic signs

The candy installation *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* has an ideal weight stated as 175 pounds. According to information provided by the

catalogue and museum staff, this corresponds with the body weight of the person named in the title of the work. The name is a reference to Gonzalez-Torres's life partner, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS in 1991, the year the work was created. There is, indeed, a reference to a body, although this is done only by means of a linguistic sign, the title, which is added to the visual sign, the pile of colorful hard candies.

In order to clarify which form of showing is offered up here and which denied, it might be helpful to establish the art-historical context that Gonzalez-Torres's work is clearly drawing on³ – for instance, a classic work of so-called conceptual art from the 1960s, Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965). This work features three depictions of the same object: the chair as object, a photograph of the same chair, and a linguistic depiction in the form of an enlarged English dictionary entry for the word "chair." Should the work be sold or loaned, it would comprise simply an enlargement of the dictionary entry and written instructions to select any chair as object and to take a photo of it. The work can therefore be distributed and used beyond the art market as well (cf. Buchmann 2007: 37). The aim is to evade artistic gesture and style as well as any possible value they might create, which is further reinforced by the stark refusal of every deviation from the meaning "chair." The three signs refer to one another and can also replace one another. According to this concept, language can take the place of an object or a picture. They are all based on the same social conventions.

Like other works by Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* takes up particular strategies from conceptual art. In this work, much like that of Kosuth, there is simply a certificate with instructions from the artist on which objects to buy for the installation and how then to install the work (cf. also Föll 2006: 105)⁴. Since a title has been chosen that adds an obviously crucial meaning, "(Portrait of Ross in L.A.)," visuality and object here can also not be conceived outside of language. Unlike Kosuth, however, the linguistic and visual signs are in no way modes of depiction that could replace one another. The candies do not bring to mind memories of Ross and Ross does not make us think of candies. The weight of the candies, which refers to the weight of a body, cannot be recognized by appearances: no visual sign is employed that refers to an individual body or produces a similarity to a living or deceased person. In addition, there is a whole series of similar works by Gonzalez-Torres – candies wrapped in colorful or silver cellophane piled up in heaps or rectangular shapes – that all have different titles. *"Untitled" (Lover Boys)* (1991), *"Untitled" (Welcome Back Heroes)* (1991),

and “*Untitled*”(Public Opinion) (1991) for instance all make concrete sociohistorical references, but the connection between the names and the candy objects remains arbitrary. And it is just this arbitrariness that is on display. Rather than using tautological multiplication to prevent other meanings from being added to the visual signs, as Kosuth did, what is demonstrated here is that a variety of changing meanings can be applied to the sign “candies.” And these meanings can be applied in a way that abandons the conventional usage of language.

The convention that the title of a work – as with Kosuth’s One and Three Chairs – doubles or explains the visual sign being presented is thus broken with. The series of similar works with a wide variety of titles produces a reference to the process of assigning meaning as a social practice – an indicative gesture further emphasized by the prefix “Untitled” added to the name of all of the works. The evocation of the social practice of assigning meaning also alludes to the fact that this is organized by institutions, power differences, and authorities that produce the acceptability of a particular setting (or indeed do not) and that allow for an arbitrary process to appear as natural or grounded. It also makes clear the degree to which “drag” – here, for instance, the appearance of candies as both the lover Ross and also as a group of celebrated war heroes – relies on communication with the viewers and their competence in breaking with conventions (Schirmer 2010: 163ff.).

By foregoing any visualization of Ross, gay men, or people with HIV/AIDS, the work does not allow us to take a voyeuristic position and ask, for example, if the body of a person named Ross showed traces of illness, if he seemed desperate or relaxed, or if he was an attractive, loving partner to the artist. Instead, a different topography is proposed: the space that the work “*Untitled*”(Portrait of Ross in L.A.) creates can be seen as a heterotopy, as a site at which the syntax, which Michel Foucault claims “causes words and things [...] to ‘hold together’” (1986: 42), is shattered. At issue is a process of visualization that, precisely in the act of producing visibility, allows for a collapse in the signifying conventions. I would claim that staging such a collapse of syntax in this installation as “abstract drag” makes it possible to produce a distance that interrupts the performative repetition of social norms. Before possibly bestowing meaning again, (conventional) meanings are first withdrawn.

no palm trees, connoting identity

What is it that enables Gonzalez-Torres’s work to be understood as an example of *queer* artistic politics? The withdrawal of signifying con-

ventions initially means that the artist’s own statements, for instance made in interviews, take on a particular weight and become part of the work. For example, Gonzalez-Torres states in a commonly quoted conversation that he doesn’t fit the role of token very well. He thus positions himself critically in relation to the possibility of finding esteem in the art world as a representative of a marginalized group (which always goes along with the unspoken condition – often supported by granting or withholding resources – of representing this group by means of one’s work as well). As Gonzalez-Torres stated in 1993: “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. . . . Who is going to define my culture? It’s not just Borges and García Márquez, but also Gertrude Stein and Freud and Guy Debord – they are all part of my formation” (quoted in Muñoz 1999: 165-66).

José Esteban Muñoz has remarked upon Gonzalez-Torres’s strategy of not explicitly taking up identity in his work: “By refusing to simply *invoke* identity, and instead to *connote* it, he is refusing to participate in a particular representational economy” (ibid). What does it mean not to invoke identity but instead to connote it? Muñoz explains this by referring to the opaque character of the works, which make it impossible to understand it without asking: “What is that?” Any rational understanding or direct knowledge that could be derived from what is shown or said is thereby displaced. Yet this type of opacity is characteristic for a number of so-called avant-garde works, which means that it does not necessarily clarify whether and why the work might be pursuing a *queer* politics or a *freaky* politics of denormalization. It is precisely the abstraction, the de-enabling of unmediated identification, the interruption of connections to typical representation and to a usual understanding of bodies in artistic practice that paradoxically allow the work, as I see it, to make a claim to incomparability and singularity. Since the conventions of meaning are withdrawn, specificities – potential conceptual representations of art, AIDS, homosexuality, and so on – are replaced by the possibility of linking up with singular narrations, aesthetics, and biographies.

The question arises, however, of how such linkages could occur, and what role the viewers play with respect to a non-random formation of these linkages.

Teresa de Lauretis (1994) introduces the term “fantasy,” in reference to Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1992), in order to develop a concept of social change that might do justice to the power of pu-

blic images while at the same time make it possible to change them (cf. also Lorenz 2009a: 144ff.; Engel 2002: 35ff.; Engel 2009: 77ff.). In doing so, she relies on the fact that both public and individually meaningful images, as well as both conscious and unconscious processes, flow into the scenarios of fantasy that she describes. And that these include ideas and images as well as daydreams and nocturnal dreams, and that their complex, sometimes contradictory repertoire provides material for possible restagings (Lauretis 1994: 94ff.). Precisely because Gonzalez-Torres's work produces an arbitrary connection between various signs and a momentary consensus with the viewers about this connection, the object of the candy (which cannot be understood in isolation as representative of queer experience) becomes linked through the work with fantasy to a singular queer history in the context of AIDS.

Thus "connoting" an identity rather than securing one – Muñoz's description of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work – would be the work of productive fantasies that allow, in defiance of social conventions, for the possibility of connecting signs with various and even contradictory aesthetic, emotional, and affective meanings. The pile of candy, there for the taking, points to the idea that it is not any individual story that is at question here, even if death and mourning affect individuals in particular ways. This facilitates on the one hand a link to collective moments in queer history and their social contexts, forms of resistance, and emotional states. And on the other hand, it makes possible a future moment of collectivity through taking and sucking on the candy.

In order to inspect this artistic strategy more closely, I would like to come back to the idea that Gonzalez-Torres's installations can be seen as direct reworkings of famous avant-garde artworks in terms of form and discourse. For instance, "*Untitled*" (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*), from 1991, a light-blue cube that is furnished with a row of light bulbs on the top outer edge and on which a go-go dancer occasionally performs, allows for a reference to Robert Morris's grey cubes, in particular, to Morris's cube entitled *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961), from which one can hear the sounds of the workers making this very wooden box. Meanwhile "*Untitled*" (*Placebo*), the rectangular grouping of candies wrapped in silver cellophane, takes up the heavy metal sculptures of Carl Andre – all works from the 1960s. One could say that these Gonzalez-Torres works "pass" as progenies of minimal art. Given this, the term "abstract drag" no longer only refers to the fact that the visualization of bodies is replaced by non-human objects, but also that this artistic practice appears "in the costume" of non-object art.

In a conversation with Tim Rollins, Felix Gonzalez-Torres makes his relation to minimal art quite clear: "Forms gather meaning from their 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 become 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 matter 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, et cetera? Then you realize 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. . ." (Rollins 2006: 74-75)

Gonzalez-Torres's candy works consist of materials that from a distance resemble steel, but that also allow other connotations and can be used in different ways. They can be eaten, sucked, or taken home. Process, objects, and bodies are thus detached from their usual meanings, shored up by the direct relation to art history. It is at least as much a break with this history as it is a citation. Rather than liberating the material from all social gesture, as Carl Andre claimed for his own sculptures, the placing together of objects and titles in Gonzalez-Torres's work suggests that materials are linked, after the detachment from and destruction of the usual contexts, with other social discourses and practices, such as the so-called AIDS crisis or gay sex. The formal quality produces a connection to the knowledge about and the experiences with works of conceptual art and minimal art (while simultaneously breaking with them), thus calling up the past and present of artistic practice as an appropriate context in which to rework the questions addressed.

what a body can do

As José Esteban Muñoz has noted, when Gonzalez-Torres lists his cultural references, he includes certain artists from Latino culture, from

queer culture, and also from the avant-garde art tradition, all of whom became part of his experiences, his image production, and his thinking. As is clearly shown from Muñoz's text and through the example of Gonzalez-Torres, we live belongings not as "specificities" but as "singularities" (cf. also Probyn 1996: 9). Gonzalez-Torres, for instance, doesn't refer to "Latino culture" but to Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, not to "queer culture" but to Gertrude Stein. The artistic works that he produces are social due to the fact that they continue certain other visualizations or actions, compete with them, and break with them.

Is a "queer embodiment" that cannot be made visible, then, one that reaches beyond the individual body, that links itself to historical moments or to other bodies, and that takes up Donna Haraway's question from her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), "Why should our bodies end at the skin?" Does a "queer embodiment" put a network of various singular belongings in place of clearly articulated identities? As I have argued elsewhere (Lorenz 2009a), the ability continually to "cross" different social positions is no longer only a liberating political demand. Instead, it has become a laborious requirement of neoliberal politics that indeed represents a new *dispositiv of power*.⁵

Elsbeth Probyn accordingly problematizes the concept of a network of singular belongings by making it clear that, as soon as the issue of belonging is raised, it is always already precarious, called into question by the knowledge of its impossibility: "Processes of belonging are always tainted with deep insecurities about the possibility of truly fitting in, or even getting in" (1996: 40). Therefore, instead of "belonging" she speaks in the plural of "outside belongings" (ibid: 8; my emphasis). As she shows, belonging is not what is there and is connected with an individual body and its placement in the world (even if complex), but rather belongings are lines of desire, "desires for becoming-other" (ibid: 5).

For this reason, the term "desire," which she draws from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, is central for her notion of an "outside belonging." She proposes a spatial arrangement of things, actions, and bodies that come closer or drift apart by means of desire. Desire is thus not individual but social, and "it is a method of doing things, of getting places" (ibid: 40). "Outside belongings" accordingly present a challenge to visualization and description since they are constantly found in movement and in the process of being produced. Probyn extends Haraway's remark: "To replay Donna Haraway's question, 'Why should our bodies end at the skin?', I also want to ask, why skin should end at our indivi-

dual bodies? [...] Belonging expresses a desire for more than what is, a yearning to make skin stretch beyond individual needs and wants" (1996: 6). If we follow this, then Gonzalez-Torres's silence about identity in his work is less about refusing his own identity (as a gay man, as Cuban, as an artist, etc.) than it is about extending the individual embodiment: not *my* body but a body (ibid: 49); not what a body *is* but what a body *can do* (ibid: 41).

This results in an understanding of the body that is also social and not individual: "Bodies are defined not by their genus and species, nor by their origins and functions, but by what they can do, the effects they are capable of, in passion as in action" (ibid: 49). What would the corresponding queer embodiment then be that is made possible by abstract drag?

If "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) is viewed as a spatial staging in which elements are arranged closer or further away, then this work does not show bodies without bodies but rather *bodies without bodies in space*, a moving topography into which viewers are also inserted. Viewers are expressly advised to eat the candy and thus to reduce the (body) weight of the work – even to the point of the work disappearing. For those who are informed about the weight of the work and its meaning for the artist, eating the candy refers to the disappearance of the dying body. By sucking on the candy and reducing the weight, the viewers find themselves in the paradoxical situation of both enjoying and taking part in the disappearance of the person named by the title. However, according to the certificate, the work requires an "endless supply" of candies that should be constantly replenished so that the act of sucking does not, in the end, become an activity that is visibly recorded in the work.⁶

The paradox of doing something possibly taboo and at the same time of enjoying it is perhaps the reason that different commentators have associated sucking the candy with (gay) oral sex (Storr 2006: 8). The situation that the viewers find themselves in, then, is that of a randomly selected group involved in diverse desires for belonging linking themselves up with a work made of small parts, individually but also collectively, by sucking. They may follow the suggestion to fantasize the pile of candies as a gay body and connect their visual impression of the work and their shared activity with elements of their knowledge and experience.

As I have mentioned, Probyn calls queer desire a "method." Accordingly, desire that is not reterritorialized in a heteronormative way would here be a particular way of joining up the signs "Ross" and "can-

dy” with other signs and images, thus “queering” them. By sucking and viewing, the linkage with the candy, bought in a shop, is probably dissolved, while the colorful wrappers of “Untitled”(Portrait of Ross in L.A.) or the reflective surfaces of “Untitled”(Placebo) take on a connection to a bar scene, to Andy Warhol’s silver helium balloons (*Silver Clouds* (1966)), to a demonstration against government inaction and homophobia, to camp aesthetics, or to the artificial-looking AZT pills by the artist group General Idea (*One Day of AZT* (1991)). The names “Portrait of Ross in L.A.” or even “Placebo” allow us to make connections with our own vulnerability through the dependence on others (Butler 2004: 17ff.); to real or possible mourning; to the experience of another’s death; and to the fear of our own. They enable us to perceive that skin is in fact stretched over our own bodies.

What becomes possible is a mode of putting-oneself-in-connection that is not organized individually but rather socially and in the plural.⁷ Queer embodiments thus emerge in the moment of connecting. They are neither visualized in the work nor do they represent the artist. They are equally not produced solely by the viewer. They do not so much invoke a category or a specificity by which consensus could be created in a society and which stabilizes and locks down the image of the other. Instead they allow for lines of flight made up of different singular images.

C respeaking (sharon hayes)

A performer, the artist Sharon Hayes, sits at a table and quietly reads one text after another, occasionally taking a sip of water or looking up at the audience. The performance bears the title *My Fellow Americans* (2004). The texts being read are all 36 official speeches that Ronald Reagan gave as an “Address to the Nation” between 1981 and 1989. The performance lasts ten hours.

For another performance and video work, *The Interpreter Project* (2001), Sharon Hayes worked with the spoken texts of guides for tours through the historical homes of famous women. In the US, those who offer such tours are often referred to as “historical interpreters.” For such a tour, guides generally create their own texts in which they bring knowledge taken from books and other research together with anecdotes that partly draw on unusual or notable events from earlier tours. They thus refer their spoken texts to audiences that have already been there; they present what previous audiences found notable or funny or what happened once and only once. And they leave other things out. For her performance and video work, Sharon Hayes recorded and later read out the tour scripts through the historical homes of Clara Barton (1821-1912, founder of the American Red Cross); Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955, who was active in the struggle for the rights of African-American woman and civil rights); Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962, representative of social feminism, suffragette, and first lady); as well as Maggie Walker (1864-1934, first African American bank director). Hayes made no attempt to imitate the voices but she did maintain the rhythm of the spoken texts – the pauses and occasional laughs – so that the newly spoken text shows a similarity to what is heard without copying it.

For the performance’s video work, the performance was shot on the street, that is, in “public space,” in front of homes in Los Angeles chosen at random. The text of a 15-minute tour was spoken four times in a row, so that the act of repeating, speaking conceptually, set up possible aberrations from the audio recording and a possible selfactualization of the text both over the course of the tours by the guides as well as over the course of the performance.

For another performance, *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29* (2003), Sharon Hayes took up the subject of the abduction of Patty Hearst on February 4, 1974 by the Symbionese Liberation Army. The SLA had Patty Hearst speak audio reports to her parents and the media on tape. On the fourth and last tape, Hearst an-