



Just Say No 1984 Just Say No 1985 Just
Say No 1986 Just Say No 1987 Just Say No

Félix González-Torres *Just Say No* 1987
acelate, wooden frame with glass, 11" x 14"

INSTALLATION BY FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES

"A son brings in a large straw coaster woven with the black, red, green and white of the Palestinian flag. Under an Israeli military order, it is illegal on the West Bank to possess any object with these colors in proximity."

—U.P.I. NEWS RELEASE

The work of Félix González-Torres is unassuming, to say the very least. Its unwillingness to occupy the gallery is everywhere present. Combining text panels, monochrome canvasses, and altered appropriated photographs of crowds, González-Torres' installation startles the viewer by its reticence, its utter lack of interest in the occupation of space.

What is the viewer to make of artwork that refuses to occupy the space of its own installation, in which she meets it head on, looking for the art? (How can she meet it head on when it's barely there?) Is this lack of occupation a device? The text panels, for example, refuse to occupy with images even the eye and mind of the beholder. There is blank space. There is a caption. For the rest, the viewer is on her own, left to her own devices. The device, then, is to leave the viewer to her own devices.

But she is not alone. If art is lurking in the installation's clock, it is barely visible. And yet it is there. The words and dates that seem to caption nothing at all harbor images, ideas, messages, indictments, interdictions, atrocities, whole histories. Prowling in the very letters themselves, and then in their

contiguity, their state of adjacency, are techniques and tools of persuasion whose exercise usually passes unremarked in the ease with which "meaning" is conveyed. In *Forbidden Colors*, the monochrome canvasses hung like laundry in a line, shift their frame of reference away from the art world. In the context of the occupied territories of the West Bank, these colors in proximity take on the syntax of a temporary tenancy in the extreme.

González-Torres' work is about occupation and

insinuation, about domination, about how meaning is effaced and made. In its refusal to occupy space in the sense of domination, it accomplishes two tasks. First, it quietly calls the space in question into question, setting up a situation in which the viewer becomes sensitized to occupation: the occupation of her mind by the media, of her body and mind by the urban environment (its techniques and spaces), of her being by daydreams, fantasies, expectations, and other foreign agents. (Of course, they are not foreign at all.) Facing the texts, she is confronted with a question mark and forced to fork over her meaning and memories, embarrassingly fragmentary and banal as they may be.

The caption reads "Center for Disease Control 1981 Streakers 1972 Go Go Boots 1965"; repressive tolerance as far as she can see. The viewer squirms. Is this an interrogation? Is that a grainy, faded newspaper photo of a crowd? Or is it a diagram of HIV?

Occupation, insinuation, infiltration. The second task accomplished by this artwork is to encourage intervention in the production of culture at a very basic level. If occupation operates by infiltration, to be startled into seeing is to be asked to act. Through its reticence, González-Torres' art points up the discursive maneuvers at work in the fine art of occupation. How can she meet it head on when it's barely there? Yes, it is a grainy newspaper photo of a crowd, but also a diagram of HIV. There is finally a terrible and tender fear lurking in this work which will not go away.

Laura Trippi
Assistant Curator

FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES
lives in New York City