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Don't Omit the Accent Marks.

"As I finish writing this text in Spanish..." Gerardo Mosquera begins, writing a piece in memory of the then recently passed Félix González Torres, "...I feel that the accent marks I have insisted on maintaining in Félix González Torres's name will disappear with the translation, a hyphen will ink his two last names, and it will be like a simile of his work's reception, as well as its hybridity, all over again" (Mosquero qtd. in Ault 207).

Félix González Torres died of AIDS on January 9, 1996. Adoringly received in the United States, González Torres's identity as a gay man even today continues to overshadows his Cuban roots and, if not his impact, then his identity. His reception may have something to do with his admittedly western influence. Drawing from primarily western schools of critical thought in the conceptualization of his installation art aesthetic, González Torres was interested in bringing the private to the public in a way that surreptitiously infiltrated spaces. Regarding himself as a spy of sorts, González Torres used nonliteral representations of himself and his life in order to expose his public audience to his private life. The nonspecificity of his minimalist symbology coupled with his interest in audience participation allowed for a universality that somehow complimented rather than contrasted against the autobiographical themes and details relevant to his pieces. This paper arises out of a personal concern for the potential erasure of a widely known and well regarded artist's cultural identity. I do not mean to suggest a particular interest of González Torres himself in depicting the experience of queer latinidad, nor do I

suppose his works were made with conscientious Latin influence; these are things that cannot be known when not explicitly stated. This paper does not seek to assume the extent of his Latino heritage's involvement in his art, but rather the capacity to and impactful meaning of representing queer latinidad, without altering the theory of his works. However, I believe it remains useful to think of González Torres's works from the perspective of latinidad. While neither the conversations surrounding the work nor the specific markers of the works themselves suggest specific expression of latinidad, it is my argument that the principals of his work—ranging from the contrast between the universality of the public and the privacy of the biographic personal, to performance and transferal between spaces with audience interaction, to infiltration of one unspoken body/identity into the space of another—not only allow for a Latino perspective on his works, but augment the meaning of these pieces of art when read with the perspective of latinidad.

As González Torres scarcely gave explicit explanation for the meaning of his art, conversation surrounding it was often driven by the interests of those questioning him and publishing their musings on his conceptual pieces. What we know of González Torres's pieces is what the predominantly white, classist art world of America cared to know about it. Consequently, there is scarcely any known detail about the artist's personal engagement with his own heritage beyond what one may extrapolate from what little material there is.

González Torres, nor his admirers, did not summarily ignore his Cuban heritage and Latin American upbringing. When asked to provide a standard biography for an upcoming exhibition of his art, González Torres provided instead what he referred to as a written portrait. Following a largely chronological but not entirely perfect progression, the self-portrait detailed

in vague and often intimately obscure flashes brief glimpses into the artist's life. The first third devotes itself very sincerely to his life growing up in Latin America, beginning plainly with "1957 born in Guaimaro, Cuba, the third of what would eventually be four children." The statement continues, "1964 Dad bought me a set of watercolors and gave me my first cat 1971 sent to Spain with my sister Gloria, then went to Puerto Rico to live with my uncle 1979 returned to Cuba to see my parents after an eight-year separation 1981 parents escaped Cuba during Mariel boat lift, my brother Mario and sister Mayda escaped with them 1978 met Jeff in Puerto Rico 1976 Gloria and I moved to our own apartment-small, but full of sunlight 1977 Rosa 1976 met my friend Mario 1979 moved to New York City" (González Torres). This impressionistic view of the artist's life seems to most directly focus on movements and people, landmarks that resounded with González Torres. The outlier to the general focus on locations and loved ones (as well as the occasional editorial comment) occurs in 1964, wherein González Torres makes note of the impression left upon his life by his dad. This gift giving of water colors suggests González Torres's artistic birth in Cuba thanks to his dad. This familial and geographical association, as this self-portrait is so largely constructed by these two concerns, with his artistic upbringing calls to attention the importance of where and with whom this event took place for González Torres to become the artist he did. As a self-portrait, as a means of constructing self, this moment is telling.

The assumption that Félix González Torres had strong personal and artistic associations with his Cuban upbringing is all but confirmed by the previously quoted editorial written by fellow Cuban artisan Gerardo Mosquera. Written as a eulogy of sorts for his recently deceased friend, Mosquera's piece is one of the only accessible, though still very difficult to come by,

sources that insists upon a strong personal connection to latinidad motivating González Torres's work. From the onset of the piece, Mosquera affirms that González Torres is inextricably tied to the Cuba he himself writes from, stating "I remembered a sort of curse that weighs heavily on Cuban culture: its most brilliant figures seem to die young" (Mosquero qtd. in Ault 204). Mosquera provides the warm intimacy in his descriptions of González Torres that only a friend could. "Félix possessed an almost Caribbean warmth and sense of humor. He felt himself to be as Puerto Rican as Cuban, and he loved being involved in New York's Puerto Rican community," a puzzling statement, as González Torres's time spent in Puerto Rico, where he began art studies at the University of Puerto Rico, is again a hardly discussed aspect of his life.

Mosquera goes so far to admit that though he had ties to the community, his art rarely visited the Southern Hemisphere, nor were they typically thought of as part of a Latin American artistic body. All the same he furthers that in addition to influencing his humor and good nature, his background affected his art. "There are times," he would tell me, "when you need your grandma's black beans," and he would take off to Miami. His art was nourished by the same beans: the indigenous, private experience making its unexpected appearance in the context of broader social and artistic issues... His education in rural Cuba and in Puerto Rico, along with his participation in the Latino community in New York, doubtless conditioned his highly social and subjective reworking of conceptualism" (Ault 204). Mosquera insists upon a very personal connection with latinidad affecting González Torres's work. How exactly it does that is less clear, and Mosquera himself admits that the aforementioned "beans" are not so readily evident. No, Mosquera suggests that González Torres entered himself and his latinidad surreptitiously

into the heavily western art world, intentionally disengaging the private as a way of accessing the public.

This suggestion is both consistent with and also complicated by Félix González Torres's discussions of his own personal artistic ideology. "I want to be a spy..." González Torres said in an interview. "I do want to be the one who resembles something else... We have to restructure our strategies and realize that the red banner with the red raised fist didn't work... I don't want to be the enemy anymore. The enemy is too easy to dismiss and to attack" (González Torres). Here, González Torres is speaking about how a conservative audience would find difficulty in finding the homoeroticism of two side by side clocks. Mosquera's thinking that latinidad could be present or instead *found* in González Torres's work is validated by this merging of interest with methodology. This quote illustrates not only González Torres's ability to engage the private by means of the public, but also his artistic interest in depicting this distinguishing between the private from the public as the subject of his art. Selective meaning is thus transferred to a discretionary audience, one that would only pick up on the cues of the artwork should the symbology or inherent significance be apparent to them. Homoeroticism is invisible to his conservative audience and even his shrewd critics. Perhaps latinidad would be invisible to a white-centric art world. This does not preclude the possibility that they, all the same, remain there or can be seen in there, whether they were intentionally placed there or not. This point of view also brings to light González Torres's concern with occupying the space of the other. In a rare moment speaking to his latino heritage, González Torres said:

Who is going to define my culture? …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 our experiences, how hybrid we all are. They are stuck with images from National Geographic circa 1950. These are assumptions rooted in ignorance and in a condescending attitude (Rollins 90-2 qtd. in McNamara).

Having finished his artistic studies in New York's Whitney Independent Study Program and the Pratt Institute before studying in Venice, much of González Torres's formal introduction to philosophy and art had especially western influence. His exposure to the artistic world as it existed in New York at the time could have ingrained in his otherwise political artwork a need to be palatably accessible to his peers and would-be critics. A self-described Brechtian artist with an interest in Marx, González Torres cited western influence in not only the aesthetic but also the methodology of his works. His western minimalism, he asserts, is what he knows, and functions to his benefit as it is at odds with how society wishes to perceive him.

While few others wrote on the potential for Latino readings of Félix González Torres's works, those that did seemed similarly in tune with the concerns González Torres had creating art in a society that expected and prescribed otherness. Theorizing a complicated form of survival and resistance, José Esteban Muñoz, wrote a compelling work entitled *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Muñoz's complicated idea of disidentification revolves around strategizing responses from disenfranchised peoples in order to dispel social phobias. This is achieved neither by "[assimilating] within such a structure nor strictly [opposing] it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant

ideology." Muñoz further explains "disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather... a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life" (Muñoz 11-2). Anticipating and repurposing bigoted expectation, disidentification immediately seems helpful in alleviating the pressures González Torres identified in the artistic community as a gay Latin American. Muñoz asserts that González Torres achieved what he warily calls a disidentity wherein conventional means of expressing identity were rejected while still self reflexively applying a reformed identity politics, in the interest of disidentificatory performance over cultural expression. On the pluralistic experience shown or in fact hidden from display in González Torres's work, Muñoz writes:

What is evoked is a "structure of feeling" that cuts through certain Latino and queer communities

> but is in no way exclusive to *any* identitarian group. I am suggesting that the image connotes a *disidentity*, a version of self that is crafted through something other than rote representational practices, produced through an actual disidentification with such practices and the public/private binary (Muñoz 170).

As an AIDS activist and someone who had personally suffered loss as a result of the pandemic crisis, González Torres executed in his work a quiet rebellion that acceptably encapsulated in public spaces his grief for his community. His *Untitled* billboards scattered throughout New York City in the 90s—and later other major cities including the heavily Hispanic populated San Antonio, as noted by writer Joshua Javier Guzmán—showed plainly on these large canvases a photo of an notably empty, unmade bed. The sensitivity and intimacy of this piece was undoubtedly most striking for communities afflicted by loss for its absence of bodies.

José Esteban Muñoz then proceeds to discuss Félix González Torres's striking use of bodies in his more interactive installation pieces. It is in González Torres's self-described Brechtian installation art that it becomes particularly useful and surprisingly simple to apply Latin American performance theory. This happens because it is the art's engagement with the space and demographic of the predominantly white art museum setting, as well as González Torres's own inextricable identity as a gay Cuban immigrant, that creates a relationship between González Torres and his audience that exists beyond markers of identification or himself, and instead resides in and informs a larger cultural significance. The way González Torres inserted bodies into museums ranged from conceptual to literal. Further, the way these bodies were exhibited both indirectly and directly engaged Latin American performance theory. First, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* from 1991 represents one of González Torres's most heartbreaking works. A pile of brightly wrapped candy, weighing in at 175 pounds to approximate the 'ideal' male weight and the weight of his longtime partner Ross—to whom he dedicated the entire body of his work, and who died of AIDS in 1990—is poured into the corner of the museum. Audience members are invited to take as much candy as they'd like, complicity contributing to the deterioration of the marginalized diseased body. The act of ingestion further connotes prejudiced fears towards the gay community in the wake of the AIDS pandemic, as well as an almost Eucharistic ceremony of engaging what is acknowledged to be a body.

Félix González Torres describes himself as Brechtian, whereas I find there to be very little by way of conscious separation in this piece. No character stands in morally or literally for a detached audience member. It may not even dawn upon an audience of *(Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* what their action has constituted. However, their participation and acting fits well with

Agusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed, and his distinguishing between Brechtian ideology and the ideologies that drive oppressed aesthetic: "the spectator no longer delegates power to the character either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action" (Boal 135)! Boal minces no words in his conclusive sentence. The spectator in González Torres's piece agrees to become an actor the instant they gaze upon the work. Regardless as to whether or not the would-be spectator takes a candy or not, the action of taking a choice is made, and acknowledging the otherwise untitled piece—most all of González Torres's pieces were untitled—as explicitly a portrait of the artist's dead gay lover makes even the decision to abstain a political one. An audience member gets to choose whether or not to kill this body. Approaching this piece with a Boal-informed perspective renders it substantially more powerfully than a Brechtian reading, and enables an audience to consider the intersection between race, queerness, and tragedy, and how they themselves are complicit in institutions that create marginalization. Understandably this is uncomfortable territory for a typical museum goer.

Félix González Torres pushes that envelope of comfort with his *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, 1991 piece. For five minutes, unannounced each day, a male go-go dancer in a silver lamée bikini dances on a white wooden platform lit with light bulbs to music played into his earphones of his own choosing. It's an aurally quiet, but visually deafening performance, particularly as this queer body with direct evocations of Latino queerness and its influence on gay culture at large infuses eroticism into the supposedly 'respectable' space of the gallery. While the act is certainly a spectacle, the performance, in how unexpectedly it occurs and how baring and genuine a reaction it demands of both performer and audience is somehow evocative of Boal's idea of invisible theatre. This prepared scene happens upon people, perhaps aware they

are an audience or perhaps not, who otherwise are unaware of their participation in the scene and happen upon it merely by chance (Boal 147). Whether or not they are participants, again, is left to their discretion. Arguably the walls of the invisible theatre come down when a self-conscious audience member becomes aware of this spectacle's non-belonging in a museum. This continued participation in the unspoken social contracts of a manicured museum space may however represent the most honest response and performance of societal norms an invisible theatre could ask for though, unaware that discomfort or spectatorship may itself be a subject of this eccentric piece. There is almost a voyeuristic quality, what I often colloquially refer to as white tourism, to a cultured audience peering into gayness and gay latinidad, worlds they may not encounter or might even actively avoid. This feeling is augmented by the music playing privately into the headphones of the dancer. Some dancers have even expressed a desire for privacy as reason to wear a hat and further blind the performer from an audience, so as to give the most authentic performance possible. Awareness of the museum setting and audience could certainly affect the way the body communicates and the transferal of knowledge. Performance and the body in conjunction with one another carries political weight. The act of transferring knowledge through performance is itself political, as Diana Taylor observes. While meaning may be invisible to a daft audience, "recognizing performance as a valid focus of analysis contributes to our understanding of embodied practice as... a way of knowing as well as a way of storing and transmitting cultural knowledge and identity" (Taylor 278). Even with the limited interaction between performer and would-be spectators, this scenario creates deep seated connotations of gay culture and how it has been tabooed. Further, the invasion of this body, with its political associations in a space typically reserved for whiteness mirrors a larger erasure even amongst the

gay community of latinidad's contributions to queerness in America. It is through this presentation of the body, embodying a very specific vocabulary, that meaning beyond simply González Torres's intent is created.

The potential and ease with which Félix González Torres's work can be read with the perspective of latinidad and intersectional marginalization makes it even more of a tragedy that his heritage is so often relegated as a footnote to his work. In too many sources pulled specifically for this paper, authors would briefly mention his being born in Cuba, or vaguely reference a Latin influence to his work without caring or knowing how to elaborate upon these points. A deafness to the importance of intersectionality in construction identity, as well as more disappointingly the convenience of simply erasing these forms of identification create an artistic landscape wherein this self-identification, for González Torres and others, feels more like a trap than a mode of self-expression. While the artist's theorizing of infiltration and infusing of western aesthetic with personal experience ingeniously enabled him to bring queerness and, whether intentional or not, latinidad to a larger, hesitant culture, it is frankly sad that he was incapable of merely expressing these facets of himself openly and without filtration. If this were the case, he easily could have been remembered for more than simply what a close-minded 20th century mindset chose to valorize him as. While his direct engagement with latinidad was limited, its potential interaction with it seems limitless, as his interactive and evocative pieces inevitably call into question ideas of the body and identity.

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