

ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND METHODS OF RESISTANCE.

**EMPATHY,
ANTAGONISM
AND
ECHOES OF SUBVERSION.**

hear the cries, respond to the pain

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Abstract

Confronting the *spectacle* and undermining institutional and establishment hierarchies is a challenge for artists that embark on that path. “You do not have to imitate bourgeois aesthetes who try to bring everything back to what has already been done, because the already done does not make them uncomfortable” (Debord, 1957, p.100). The initial parts of this essay take as their historical focus the outbreak of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and interrogate the different approaches taken by the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres compared with the activist group ACT UP in challenging Government apathy and societal animosity towards those affected by AIDS.

The nature of audience participation, central to both types of practice, is offered up to scrutiny, particularly as Gonzalez-Torres’ work was co-opted into the fold of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, whilst activist methods have been accused of being too rooted and embroiled in movement politics to assert any critical distance.

To explore any lasting impact of the strategies discussed, the final part offers examples and a critical analysis of my own practice; how it has been shaped by these historical predecessors and the issues that those associations and influences may bring.

However, running through the essay is a disruptive thread which hijacks, as Meirles (1970) would describe, the *ideological circuit* that is the institutional requirements of a dissertation, to address the single most important political issue of our time. An issue which, in my opinion, artists and activists cannot afford the luxury of critical distance, before responding to.

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Finally my father, whose revolutionary spirit still runs deep, seventeen years after his death.

Contents

Contents Page	p. 4
List of Illustrations	pp. 5-6
Introduction	pp. 7-9
Green (Part 1)	pp. 10-16
Red (Part 2)	pp. 17-23
Black (Part 3)	pp. 24-31
White (The Concluding Part)	pp. 32-33
Bibliography	pp. 34-37

List of Illustrations

- Figure 1: Meireles, C. (1970) *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca Cola Project* [Photograph]. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/perspectives/cildo-meireles> (Accessed 18 July 2024) p. 9
- Figure 2: Gonzalez-Torres, F. (1991) “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) [Installation]. Available at: <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-portrait-of-ross-in-l-a> (Accessed 18 July 2024) p. 12
- Figure 3: Gran Fury. (1987). *Silence = Death*. [Poster]. Available at: <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/159258> (Accessed: 16 June 2024) p. 19
- Figure 4: Gran Fury. (1989). *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed And Indifference Do*. [Poster]. Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/out-on-display-11-kissing-doesnt-kill> (Accessed: 26 June 2024) p. 20
- Figure 5: Wojnarowicz, D. (1987). *Untitled*. [Photograph]. Available at: <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/david-wojnarowicz?section=9> (Accessed: 2 July 2024) p. 21
- Figure 6: Pimentel, R. (2024). *Billboard Fetish*. [Exhibition]. The Grand Arcade Shopping Centre, Cambridge, UK. April 19, 2024 – April 28, 2024 p. 24
- Figure 7: McDonald, A. (2024). *QR Stack*. [Exhibition]. The Grand Arcade Shopping Centre, Cambridge, UK. April 19, 2024 – April 28, 2024 p. 25
- Figure 8: Pimentel, R. (2024). *Spent*. [Monoprint]. Available at: <https://ricardopimentel.co.uk/1fd968087e03faeb2e87df1e9849d983> (Accessed: 18 July 2024) p. 26
- Figure 9: Pimentel, R. (2024). *Broke*. [Monoprint]. Available at: <https://ricardopimentel.co.uk/cb16f95325fffb01e3def68e34480a8a> (Accessed: 18 July 2024) p. 27
- Figure 10: Pimentel, R. (2024). *Landfill*. [Monoprint]. Available at: <https://ricardopimentel.co.uk/e8f460ca1cd9f4a03ca1eaf02d2beeb2> (Accessed: 18 July 2024) p. 27

Figure 11: Pimentel, R. (2024). *More Stuff*. [Monoprint]. Available at:
<https://ricardopimentel.co.uk/3c3733620f8305a786258433a28d17c5>
 (Accessed: 18 July 2024) p. 28

Figure 12: Pimentel, R. (2024). *'Untitled' (Broke and Stuff)*. [Installation]. The Grand Arcade
 Shopping Centre, Cambridge, UK. April 19, 2024 – April 28, 2024. p. 29

Figure 13: Pimentel, R. (2024). *'Untitled' (Broke and Stuff)*. [Installation]. The Grand Arcade
 Shopping Centre, Cambridge, UK. April 19, 2024 – April 28, 2024. p. 29

Figure 14: Gonzalez-Torres, F. (1988). *Forbidden Colours*. [Exhibition] in Ault, J. (ed).
Felix Gonzalez-Torres (2006), p.120. p. 30

Figure 15: Gonzalez-Torres, F. (1988). *Exhibition Statement*. [Exhibition] in Ault, J. (ed).
Felix Gonzalez-Torres (2006), p.121. p. 31

pay attention (an introduction)

To be in the presence of art and experience an unexpected emotional response that defies a rational logic, is something that many of us will have experienced. Of course what we will also have noticed is that this affect varies from viewer to viewer. What is deeply moving for one person is not necessarily so for another. As Barthes (1968) highlighted, this is to be expected and is independent of artistic intent, as the surrender of meaning and intent to an audience implies a work can have a multiplicity of interpretations. What are the implications of this? Engagement and a subsequent viewer's emotional response is hardly a new phenomenon; what were Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, if not to engender a sense of wonder? What was Picasso's depiction of the bombing of Guernica if not to instil a horror of war?

One nine four eight two zero two four

The nature of viewer interaction and engagement however, is no longer regarded as an individual autonomous experience between audience member and work of art. This relationship has, according to Bishop (2022), undergone a seismic rethinking particularly with respect to the nature of audience participation. This is an interesting claim since audience participation within art is not a new phenomenon. One has only to look at the *Fluxus* movement of artists with its earlier roots in *Dada* and also Kaprow's *Happenings* in the late 1950's and early 1960's to see this is the case.

This writing will focus on the artistic intention, viewer participation and institutional or wider societal responses and reactions, to the works of one artist and one activist group whose work emerged at the time of the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These will be one of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *candy work pieces* titled "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991) and the activist group ACT UP, with their visual arm Gran Fury. Both, caught in the maelstrom of the AIDS epidemic, presented the world with different visual and political responses. Both in different ways intimate, provocative, personal, radical, tender, educational, vulnerable, angry, empowering and poetic. They appeared at a particular moment in history

for a reason, they also both elicited different responses from the public, institutions and the authorities as a result of how they navigated the political climate at the time. Both, three decades on can be seen to have helped shaped public discourse and perceptions around AIDS, the people it affected (and still affects) in addition to an awareness that Government failed in its duty to protect its citizens.

The methods they used have subsequently influenced artists working within other fields of interest. This essay will also examine how my own practice draws on these historical precedents and influences whilst also exploring how doing so, not only brings established artistic conventions to my work but also takes on some of its problems and the issues that that can bring.

Despite its ongoing relevance today, focussing on events that occurred three decades ago provides a safe historical distance. Ramos and Snow (2023, p.13 & 14) comment on institutional reluctance to embrace activist practices on the pretext that they are “too rooted in movement politics” preferring instead to avoid “politically challenging proposals when located too close to home”. The discussion around AIDS, I would argue, used to fall in to that category, but now no longer does. There is however, one current issue that dwarfs all others. To relinquish the obligation to bring it into current discourse or practice, simply reinforces Ramos’ and Snow’s statement. In Cildo Meireles’ work ‘*Insertions into Ideological Circuits*’ (1970) the ubiquitous banknotes and Coca-Cola bottles were used as mediums for the transmission of subversive political text (See Fig.1). These *ideological circuits*, despite being tools of the established order and power, became passive recipients of subversive elements. This essay, part of an institutional requirement, despite the stipulation to conform to externally established standards, will contain disruptive elements, which whilst possibly fitting with the text are in fact alluding to a completely different, yet significant event.

look left look right look in front look behind

look up



Fig.1: Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project. (Meireles, 1970)

green (part 1)

“This is not life, this is just an artwork. I want you the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved and informed...” (Ault, 2006, p.69). Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *candy work* piece titled “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) sits within a series, the intention of which was, partly to fulfil the aims quoted above. This section will look at Gonzalez-Torres’ intentions with this work and how it sits both culturally and politically in the time it was made. It will also explore how its referencing by Bourriaud (2002) and the subsequent critical scrutiny directed at his text *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), has muddied the discourse around Gonzalez-Torres’ work, perhaps even weakening its power.

Debord (2010) argued that in the post war years, increased urbanisation of the labour force, which in turn was driven by the need of advanced capitalist societies to control further the means of production, resulted in an erosion of community and social interactions between individuals. He states that in this society, the loss of authentic human interaction was replaced by the *spectacle*. The *spectacle*’s central tenet, being to create a false reality through a multiplicity of imagery and the establishing of commodity fetishism, thereby serving and sustaining the interests of power.

drip

drip

drip

drip

A society in which “the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence” (Debord, 2010, p.36) required the subversion of the capitalist *spectacle*. Logically therefore, the re-establishing of community and social interaction is central to this subversion. Art as a personal and private experience, in which the viewer’s attention is directed and guided by either the artist, curator or institution and in which the singular art object reinforces the notion of commodity fetishism has since come under sustained criticism in contemporary art discourse. Viewed as another tool in the canon of capitalist strategies for ensuring the continued power of established hierarchies, the winds of change were blowing.

The dust will not settle

Audience is important here. As a Marxist theorist and philosopher, Debord's audience is clearly the Marxist intelligentsia, which in France at least, would go on to manifest itself in the uprisings of 1968. Gonzalez-Torres, on the other hand wanted "to make art for people who watch *The Golden Girls*" (Ferguson, 2006, p.85). This is not to say that Gonzalez-Torres' work was not cerebral and influenced by writers of note; it was. Transcripts of interviews highlight references to Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Bertolt Brecht. What is clear though is the methods which Gonzalez-Torres employed to engender audience participation were different to those of Debord and the Situationists more generally.

mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters

The AIDS epidemic, was ravaging gay communities in the United States. A new virus, HIV, incurable, not understood and, at the time, a death sentence for those who contracted it arrived at the time where politically the United States had voted in the Republican president Ronald Reagan; a presidency which ran from 1981 - 1989. American society's reaction to the AIDS epidemic, particularly amongst conservative, evangelical Christian groups was extreme and intolerant. AIDS was perceived by many, as God's retribution for the abomination that was the amoral lifestyle of the homosexual community; "The gay plague" (Vanity Fair, 2015, 00:53). As highlighted by Nea (1993, p.165), concerted efforts were made to cut off funding from The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for works deemed morally reprehensible. Artists caught in this storm of bigotry and intolerance included Andres Serrano, Annie Sprinkle, Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin.

freedom of speech and 'forbidden colours'

Gonzalez-Torres, navigating the treacherous McCarthyist style waters of 80s America was, with this work, addressing several issues in a more nuanced form than that adopted by those artists mentioned above. Gonzalez-Torres was a gay artist. His lover, Ross, caught HIV and subsequently contracted AIDS. Despite in his interview with Bleckner (1995) stating “I’m gay. But I don’t make work about being gay...”, the work “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) is on the one hand a personal documentation of the pain and loss he is experiencing, but at the same time also using the viewer, as coined by Barthes (1968), as author collaborating in the construction of meaning (See Fig.2).



Fig.2: “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.). (Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, 1991)

A pile of sweets, wrapped in coloured foil is arranged neatly on the gallery floor. The weight of the sweets start at 175lbs, Ross’ weight before the onset of his illness. The unspoken collaboration between artist and audience is that the viewer is permitted, indeed expected, to take sweets from the pile. The reduction in Ross’ weight, as a result of AIDS, is being mirrored in the reduction in weight of the pile. In the National Portrait Gallery’s video

(Hide/Seek: "Untitled(Portrait of Ross in L.A.)", 2011), it is argued that the pile of candy is both an act of communion in which we the viewer partake in his life but also an act of cannibalism, a reference perhaps to the general public's neglect of people suffering from AIDS thereby causing their disappearance. The analogy is quite a literal one which in itself is not a problem, since, as has already been mentioned, Gonzalez-Torres didn't want his artwork to be restricted to the cognoscenti. There is however on a sociological level more at play. Within this exchange exists a Maussian *gift* (Mauss, 1990) and although Mauss explored gift giving in archaic societies, this action can be transferred to the interaction established by Gonzalez-Torres in this work. The giving and receiving of gifts creates bonds of reciprocity and obligations between individuals and groups. With this work, the gift by the artist has a reciprocal action through the intended creation of empathy, which, at a time of political and social aggression was important.

human too

Herein, however lies what I think is one of the weaknesses with Gonzalez Torres' work. Does the giving and receiving of a gift which is central to this work, necessarily qualify as a positive social exchange? Does artist intention correspond with viewer response? There is engagement with the work, but this does not automatically constitute meaningful participation. It can be equated to selecting a prize won at a raffle, except for the fact that with the *candy works* everyone is a winner. Bishop (2022, p.XIII) argues that "engagement is an ideological reframing of participation – away from collective cultural production and towards marketing and audience development...a matter of audiences dutifully consuming content, rather than challenging the ideas on display" ending with "Engagement, we might say, is where participation goes to die". Ensuring meaningful participation is therefore a different proposition to simply ensuring engagement.

Gonzalez-Torres' work is problematised further as a result of it being highlighted by Bourriaud when formulating his essays on *relational aesthetics* (Bourriaud, 2002). These according to Martin (2007), were an attempt to reshape the direction of and discourse around participative art practice. Bourriaud's defining essays on *relational aesthetics* presented relational art as "an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions

and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and private symbolic space” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 14). A statement which presented art’s possibilities as an encounter between object and viewer and in which, the viewer’s participation was indeed a necessary factor. Without this interaction the work was incomplete.

The ontological claim of Bourriaud’s *relational aesthetics* was therefore the establishing of a new framework for contemporary art production beyond the material object. “*Relational Aesthetics* can be read as the manifesto for a new political art confronting the service economies of informational capitalism – an art of the multitude” (Martin, 2007, p.371). In other words, that within the context of the social exchange, the manifestation of the relational form subverted, and even dismantled, the commodity form.

subvert to dismantle

The notion of social exchange within relational aesthetics, does however, I would argue, encounter the same problem as the Maussian *gift* in Gonzalez-Torres’ work, in that just the act of social exchange was in itself, unquestioningly, presented as positive, deriving “legitimacy from a (desired) causal relationship between the experience of a work of art and individual/collective agency” (Bishop, 2006, p.12). No attempt was made at providing a framework for qualifying/analysing the quality of the relationships formed. If social interactions are presented as always positive, then I would argue that this is a significant omission, since clearly some social interactions are not positive. Take for example abuse or exploitation, both necessarily involve a substantial amount of social interaction, but few would argue that their effect was positive. I would also assert that exploring the nature and quality of the interactions is important in order to ascertain who these interactions are benefitting and why. If the interactions are nurturing an understanding and developing empathy for a community under societal siege, as surely intended by Gonzalez-Torres, then very good. If however they end up reinforcing established power structures, particularly oppressive ones, then the benefit is more questionable.

A further aim of Gonzalez-Torres’ work in general and therefore too with the *candy* series was to undermine the hegemony of established art institutions as the gate keepers of art

practice. As described by Storr (2006), Gonzalez-Torres in allowing the guards to explain the work to the public and sanctioning the interaction and removal of elements of the work, he was both relinquishing the authority of the institution and simultaneously undermining the “cult of scarcity” (Storr, 2006, p.7) and therefore commodity fetishism. Yet this does also reveal a weakness.

*who controls the past controls the future.
who controls the present controls the past.*

(Orwell, 1981, p.31)

The democratisation of the artistic experience in which both artist and audience are collaborators of meaning does in theory undermine institutional control. Nevertheless as argued by Bishop (2004) institutions have the ability to offer up institutional spaces which merge with the experience economy thereby nullifying the revolutionary act of the viewer. The gallery space, often a white cube, comes with its own cultural capital; an understanding by those who frequent it of how to interact, behave and respond and are generally receptive to demands placed on the viewer by the artist. An institution sanctioned work will therefore generally elicit an institution sanctioned response from the viewer (followed by a trip to the café and gift shop). Compare this to actions not sanctioned by institutions, such as Nan Goldin’s activism directed at art galleries and museums to get them to stop receiving money from the Sackler family (a family whose immense wealth and accompanying philanthropy was derived from the prescription of the opioid Oxycontin for pain relief, a drug which laid waste to whole swathes of American society). These actions, as documented in her film *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed* (2022) involved disruptive tactics such as ‘die-ins’ and these were generally met with the arrival of security guards. Gonzalez-Torres’ work can therefore be critiqued as a non-antagonistic, institutionally sanctioned, participatory work.

the mask of respectability slips

Does Gonzalez-Torres' work even undermine commodity fetishism? Under Marxist discourse commodity fetishism arises as a result of the dissociation of the labour value of producing the commodity and the commodity value. By separating the two, the commodity can, through *spectacle* have an inherent value of its own, divorced from the labour that produced it. It can take on an almost mythical status in which "the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own" (Martin, 2007, p.372). "Untitled" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), has attained reverential status and yet its ability to affect change beyond empathy is limited. Martin (2007, p.371) concludes that in fact relational aesthetics rather than being as heralded a "manifesto for a new political art", can instead "be read as a naïve mimesis or aestheticisation of novel forms of capitalist exploitation" and this can unintentionally be applied to Gonzalez-Torres' work too.

right is wrong, wrong is right

Gonzalez-Torres' work "Untitled" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) is still an important piece in the canon of contemporary art. Authority shifts from institution to audience. The artist offers the promise of a gift and the audience takes it. A space for the construction of meaning is created. The seeds of empathy are sown and in some they will grow. It offers so much yet what does it get in return? It shines a bright light, but does it illuminate the darkness?

a bright light, but still there is blindness

I am not ready "for the call for the total annihilation of art, people who were sated with culture could afford such slogans, but we wanted to take over the cultural institutions left unscathed and see which of their contents could be made serviceable for our craving to learn" (Weiss, 1975, p.28)

red (part 2)

Despite, Gonzalez-Torres' good intentions with "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) and his use of viewer participation to engender empathy and the poignant raising of awareness of the suffering and pain experienced by a marginalised community at the hands of the political establishment, its use by Bourriaud as an example of a work which exemplifies the aims of *relational aesthetics*, does perhaps throw an unexpected critical spotlight on its effectiveness. How do we qualify the nature of the social exchanges that took place? How does it explore the dialectic of commodity fetishism and exchange? Does it further arts' autonomy from establishment control or simply represent a newly metamorphosed branch of capitalist exploitation? But if "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) buckles a little under this scrutiny, then what, if anything, succeeds? This section will look at other artists working at the same time as Gonzalez-Torres, also raising public awareness of the AIDS crisis, combatting institutional resistance and Government animosity but opting to work outside the metaphorical four walls of institutional restraint, choosing instead to take to the streets under the activist umbrella of ACT UP.

In their introduction Ramos and Snow (2023, p.12) identify the changing nature of contemporary art practice. In it they highlight several of the issues already raised, giving particular credence to the question "whether institutions have ever adequately assimilated the multiple concerns of activist politics and the wider aesthetics of political art" preferring to rely on "staging interventions in the way narratives are presented and framed to the public" and that as a consequence, contemporary, activist artists are increasingly working outside established cultural sites. A reaction to establishment and institutional hegemony is of course not new. Situationist interventions, the aims of which were outlined by Debord (1957), have at their core the radical dismantling of the established order, which, having been set up by the ruling classes, only serve the ruling classes. "You do not have to imitate bourgeois aesthetes who try to bring everything back to what has already been done, because the already done does not make them uncomfortable" (Debord, 1957, p.100). Weiss (1975, p.27) too describes the strategy necessary for relinquishing the stranglehold of the ruling classes – knowledge. "We too distrusted anything that was definite and solid and beneath the envelope of legitimacies we saw the manipulations that were destroying many of us".

Therefore there was an understanding that the ability to affect change, through activist artistic practice, had at least to occur outside the existing institutional frameworks or at least without their consent. In tandem with this, it was recognised that radical approaches necessarily required, if not an abandonment, then at the very least an expansion of the forms that the art practice took. “In practice, activist art might include teaching, publishing, broadcasting, filmmaking or organising – in or out of the art community” (Lippard, 1984, p.33).

educate

The activist group ACT-UP was founded in March 1987 in New York as a result of the AIDS epidemic which at the time was decimating (although not exclusively affecting) the gay community. It was in response to Government and institutional apathy to addressing the growing crisis, an apathy borne from Republican and evangelical Christian dogmatic hostilities towards people of the gay community. The name itself AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, was in itself a proclamation of intent. ‘Conflict was an essential component of our collaborative voice’ (Finkelstein, 2022). In addition to the direct action it took, key to ACT UP’s profile and success was its use of imagery.

The SILENCE = DEATH poster used by ACT-UP, designed by the collective Gran Fury, was central to the visual profile of the movement (See Fig.3). The simple graphics of the pink triangle and direct message, more akin to strategies used within the advertising world, proved hugely influential, yet underneath the simple design lay deep historical roots. As described by Crimp and Rolston (1990, p.46) the emblem of a pink triangle was appropriated from its historical use as identifiers of gay men in Nazi concentration camps. Its inversion of having it point upwards rather than downwards signifying that the way forward was to fight the oppression and silence.



Fig. 3: SILENCE = DEATH. (Gran Fury, 1987)

Is appropriation of other images and references problematic? Not from an activist's point of view. "When stumbling upon a text or a painting in a magazine, a museum, we would usually test it to see if it could be used in a political struggle, and we accepted it if it was openly partisan" (Weiss, 1975, p.27), in other words, the deciding factor for activists is not whether it infringes the commercial sensibilities of the establishment, but solely whether it is effective in conveying the primary message. An example of another major artist that does this is Barbara Kruger who successfully appropriates the language of advertising in her artwork to convey her key messages around power, consumerism and gender. In the case of the SILENCE = DEATH artwork, the first line of the small print asks "Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the center (sic) for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration and the Vatican?" (Gran Fury, 1987), the primary message is therefore crystal clear.

Despite the possibility of a problematic association with the holocaust, the pink triangle became a symbol of resistance embedded within the activist movement and recognisable within the wider society.

no ambiguity in the words that are spoken, only in those that are heard

I would argue therefore that part of ACT UP's strategy was to use elements of the tools of state control, in this case the *spectacle*, back on to the state itself. A society that is captivated by the *spectacle* is likely to be more responsive to similar modus operandi, in this case the counter spectacle. This in addition to the need for commercial information outlets to compete for viewers and readers, increases that society's susceptibility to the activist counter spectacle. A particularly good example of the use of the appropriated image and the counter spectacle was with ACT UP and Gran Fury's play on the Benetton advertisements. Whereas Benetton's advertisements were advertisements disguised as political messages, Gran Fury inverted this and using the, by then instantly recognisable Benetton advertising aesthetic, produced political messages disguised as advertisements and had them paraded on the side of New York's and San Francisco's buses (See Fig.4).

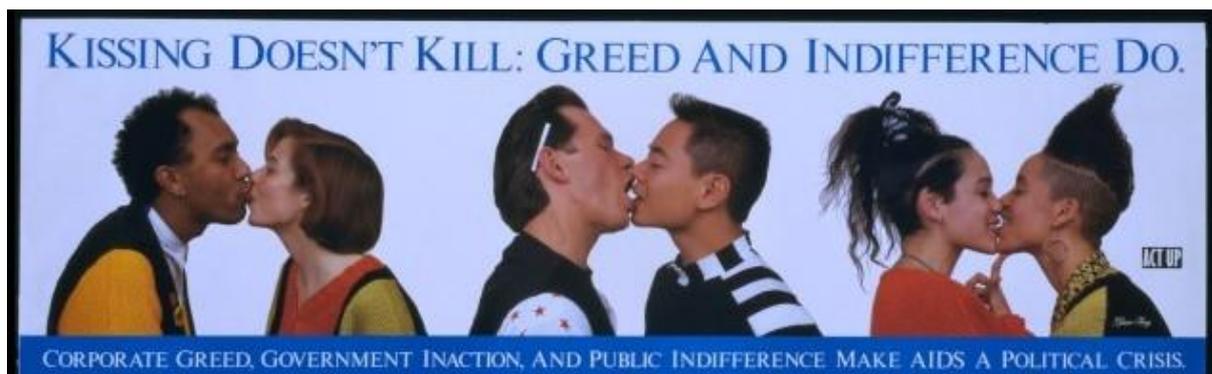


Fig.4: Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed And Indifference Do (Gran Fury, 1989)

Once again it is the secondary line of text, as with the Silence = Death posters, that drives home the political point.

By contrasting this work by the activists of ACT UP, with the piece by Gonzalez-Torres, we can start to build a comparative picture of institutional response and effectiveness.

"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) was first exhibited at the respected Luhring Augustine Hetler Gallery in Los Angeles on 19 October 1991 (The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, 2024), at the height of the AIDS crisis. ACT UP did have some gallery exposure with the exhibition titled *'Let the Record Show'* in 1987, in which an installation set out, with reference to the Nuremberg trials, a catalogue of the failings of Government in addressing the crisis. Nevertheless, the institutional heavyweight of MoMA, holding an exhibition in 1988, titled *'Committed to Print : Social and political themes in recent American printed art'*, soon after *'Let the Record Show'* failed to include any work which referenced the AIDS crisis, citing that the reason why no work about AIDS was included was because they "knew of no graphic work of artistic merit dealing with the epidemic" (Crimp and Rolston, 1990, p.48). The subtext to the exclusion was therefore clear. In contrast Nan Goldin's curated exhibition at Artists Space in 1989 titled *'Witness: Against our Vanishing'* attracted a different type of attention. Goldin selected artists that she knew, who were affected by AIDS or who were living with AIDS. Artists, to name a few, such as Peter Hujar, Greer Lankton, Mark Morrisroe and David Wojnarowicz, whose photograph below (See Fig.5) is of fellow artist Peter Hujar on his deathbed.



Fig.5: *Untitled* (D. Wojnarowicz, 1987)

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) under pressure from conservative and evangelical Christian groups, withdrew its funding for the exhibition, the Chairman of the NEA, John Frohnmayer, citing “What really happened is that the artistic focus of the show really was lost and what turned out to be the show in its present form was not and is not sound artistically” (All the Beauty and the Bloodshed, 2022, 80:16).

watermelons

Yet, despite institutional resistance, to say that ACT UP and Gran Fury didn't have some institutional support is disingenuous. Gran Fury exhibited at the 1990 Venice Biennale, an event which gave them a lot of publicity, due largely to their choice of ‘*The Pope and the Penis*’, a billboard which highlighted the Catholic Church's complicity in the death of men and women due to its dogmatic stance against the use of condoms. This in the country home to the Vatican, ensured mass tabloid coverage, once again reinforcing the argument that to counter the *society of the spectacle*, a subversive counter spectacle is needed. Finkelstein (2022) acknowledged this too; “The art press covered the controversy, but how extensive would that have been if it hadn't been fanned into a blaze by the tabloids?”

But did ACT UP achieve anything? Was the strategy of employing *spectacle* to counter a *society of the spectacle* effective? It has already been argued earlier that Gonzalez-Torres' work, despite its intention to engender empathy, did in fact possibly reinforce existing power structures. Was ACT UP any different? I would argue yes. By definition, being an activist group involved working outside establishment structures. Fuelled by anger it harnessed the antagonism needed for effective social interaction as stated by Bishop (2004). Whether changes that happened were as a direct result of ACT UP's action, it's not possible to prove. However the Food and Drug Administration sped up its years-long drug approval process. The Center (sic) for Disease Control, in their description of AIDS symptoms, incorporated the symptoms that largely affected women and drug users, ensuring they too could access social security and disability benefits (ACT UP, 2024), would suggest that if not directly responsible, ACT UP's actions at least applied an uncomfortable pressure on government institutions.

take to the streets

By comparing the works of Gonzalez-Torres with that of ACT UP and Gran Fury regarding the same issue, one can start to assimilate the similarities and differences; not only with regard to their methodology but also with regard to how wider society responded. Despite some overlap, Gonzalez-Torres worked largely within the existing framework of art institutions, whereas ACT UP operated mostly outside it. By exhibiting within galleries Gonzalez-Torres encouraged participation by tapping into an artistically pre-conditioned and cooperative audience, ACT UP on the other hand, by taking to the streets adopted a more confrontational and antagonistic approach, something Bishop (2004) argues is necessary for effective participation. Nevertheless, despite their differences, they both have legacies and the following section will look at my own practice and what the overt associations with these historical predecessors provoke.

history lessons

black (part 3)

To undermine the *spectacle* with a counter spectacle was a strategy employed by ACT UP as argued earlier. Similarly to subvert commodity fetishism, Gonzalez-Torres offered his audience sweets to take and ingest; a gift designed, as stated, to engender an empathetic collusion between viewer and artist. This section will look at those influences in my own current and recent practice and whether they raise similar questions regarding effectiveness.



Fig.6: Billboard Fetish (R.Pimentel, 2024)

An installation, comprising the works *'Billboard Fetish'* (2024) and *'QR Stack'* (2024) and supported by a flurry of *'untitled' (broke and stuff)'* (2024) stickers was exhibited in a group show in an empty commercial space in The Grand Arcade shopping centre in Cambridge on 19 – 28 April 2024. *'Billboard Fetish'*, consisting of a décollaged image of an abandoned advertising billboard placed inside a shopping trolley (See Fig.6) stood next to a stack of unsigned, mono-printed, QR codes (See Fig.7). The QR codes themselves, when scanned, directed the viewer to one of four freely downloadable, screen-printed artworks; *'Spent'* (2024), *'Broke'* (2024), *'Landfill'* (2024) and *'More Stuff'* (2024). Visitors were encouraged to take one of the *'QR Stack'* pieces away with them.

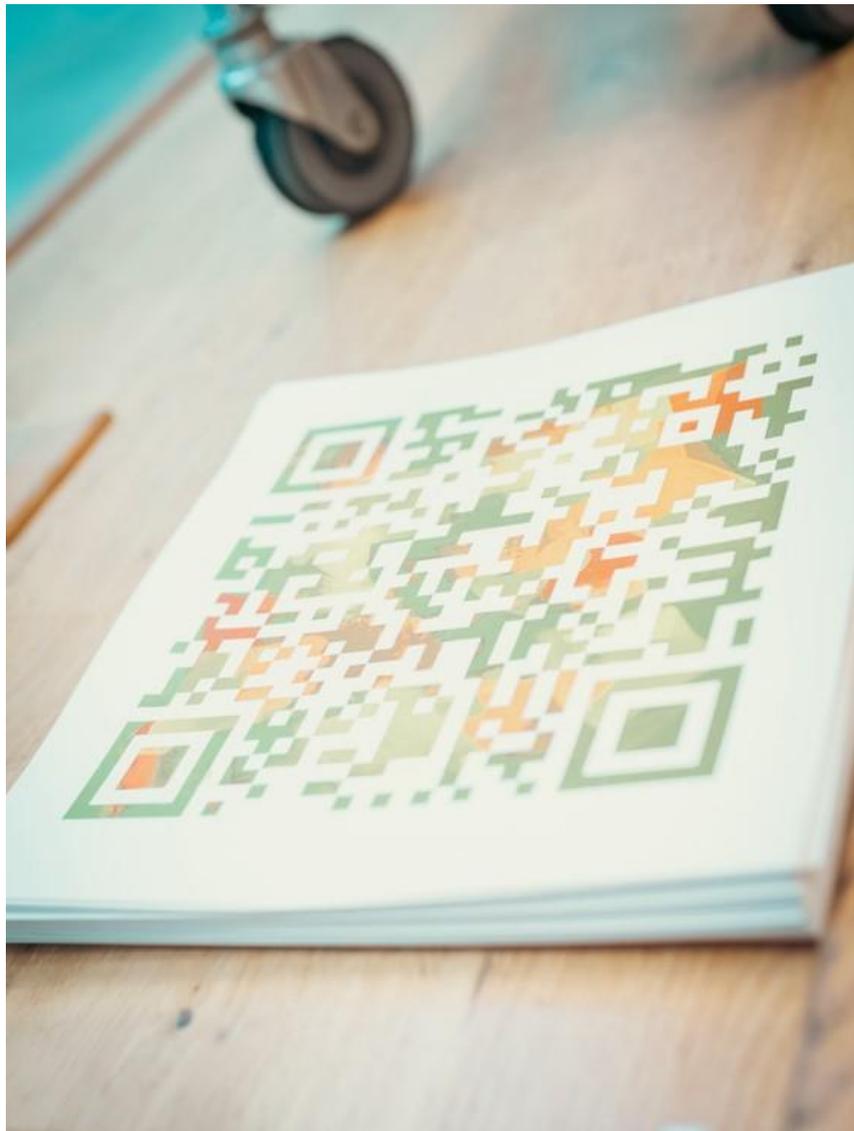


Fig.7: QR Stack (A.McDonald, 2024)

'Billboard Fetish' was intended as an indictment of commodity fetishism. Sited in a shopping centre or “distribution factories, enormous shopping centres ... these temples of frenzied

consumption” (Debord, 2010, p.174), it undermined the narrative of the all-conquering spectacle and commodity fetishism. However, just as Gonzalez-Torres enlisted the participation of the audience to complete the work, here too viewer participation was central to the work’s realisation thereby involving a degree of *relational aesthetics*. A prerequisite for promoting commodity fetishism in art is the construction of the artifice of scarcity, therefore taking a work from the stack undermines this notion of scarcity. Yet to encourage viewers to take a piece from the ‘*QR Stack*’ the works had to give the appearance of commodities in themselves. The viewer, in thrall to the *spectacle*, is more likely to succumb to a counter spectacle. This strategy was employed both by Gonzalez-Torres’ use of colourfully wrapped candy and also by Gran Fury’s appropriation of advertising visuals. By taking a work from the stack, viewers too unwittingly agree to the act of reciprocity of accessing further artwork therefore, as with Gonzalez-Torres, the Maussian *gift* (Mauss, 1990) is at play here too. It is however only when the QR codes are scanned that the full intention is realised. Each of the four possible works ‘*Spent*’ (2024), ‘*Broke*’ (2024), ‘*Landfill*’ (2024) and ‘*More Stuff*’ (2024) subverting the commodity fetish (See Figs.8 – 11 respectively) .



Fig.8: Spent (R. Pimentel, 2024)



Fig.9: Broke (R. Pimentel, 2024)

detached timbs and severed heads



Fig.10: Landfill (R. Pimentel, 2024)



Fig.11: More Stuff (R. Pimentel, 2024)

The viewer as recipient of the *gift* is to a certain degree co-opted into this exchange, more so than with Gonzalez-Torres' *candy*. "The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions" (Debord, 2010, p.47) and here the lure of the commodity delivers a rebuke via the scanned image. There are more similarities with Gran Fury's modus operandi as the image uses mechanisms which are relatable to the viewer but which are subsequently used to deliver the counter message; '*Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed And Indifference Do*' (1989) being a case in point.

As described earlier, there were perceived weaknesses with Gonzalez-Torres' work particularly when viewed through the lens of *relational aesthetics*. Similar weaknesses therefore are present in this installation. Questions of how to qualify the value of the exchange persist. The aesthetic quality of the QR codes, designed to ride the wave of the *spectacle* could in fact unwittingly reinforce it. Were people taking the QR codes as works in their own right or in order to access the counter works? Despite the intended message, exhibiting in a shopping centre serves to give legitimacy to the altar of consumption and the status quo, whilst changing little, if anything.

complicity

In order to take the message outside the confines of the commercial space, ‘‘untitled’ (broke and stuff)’ (2024) stickers were stuck in public spaces around the shopping centre (See Fig.12 and Fig.13)



Fig.12: ‘Untitled’ (Broke and stuff) (R.Pimentel, 2024)



Fig.13: ‘Untitled’ (Broke and stuff) (R.Pimentel, 2024)

As they were removed by cleaning staff, they were replaced with others. This replacement, reminiscent of Gran Fury’s strategy of *sniping* to ensure posters they had pasted up were replaced if they had been removed or covered over. However follow up analysis of website engagement resulting from the QR code stickers revealed poor levels of interaction as the ubiquitous QR code on a sticker has lost its power as an effective tool as counter spectacle. Once again however, even if there had been substantial engagement, qualifying its effectiveness would have proved problematic.

The introduction to this text referred to the insertion of disruptive elements within it. Short phrases inserted to deliberately break up the flow of the main body of text, their purpose not to minimise the writing in the main body of text, but to allude to a second strand. Disruptive elements can be left for the audience to decipher or interpret in true ‘*Death of the Author*’ style (Barthes, 1968). However, there are occasions when such is the urgency of the situation that underpins the disruption that the intended message is stated so as to leave the audience under no illusion as to what was intended by the artist. Gonzalez-Torres, exhibited a piece titled ‘*Forbidden Colours*’ (1988) at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (See Fig.14).

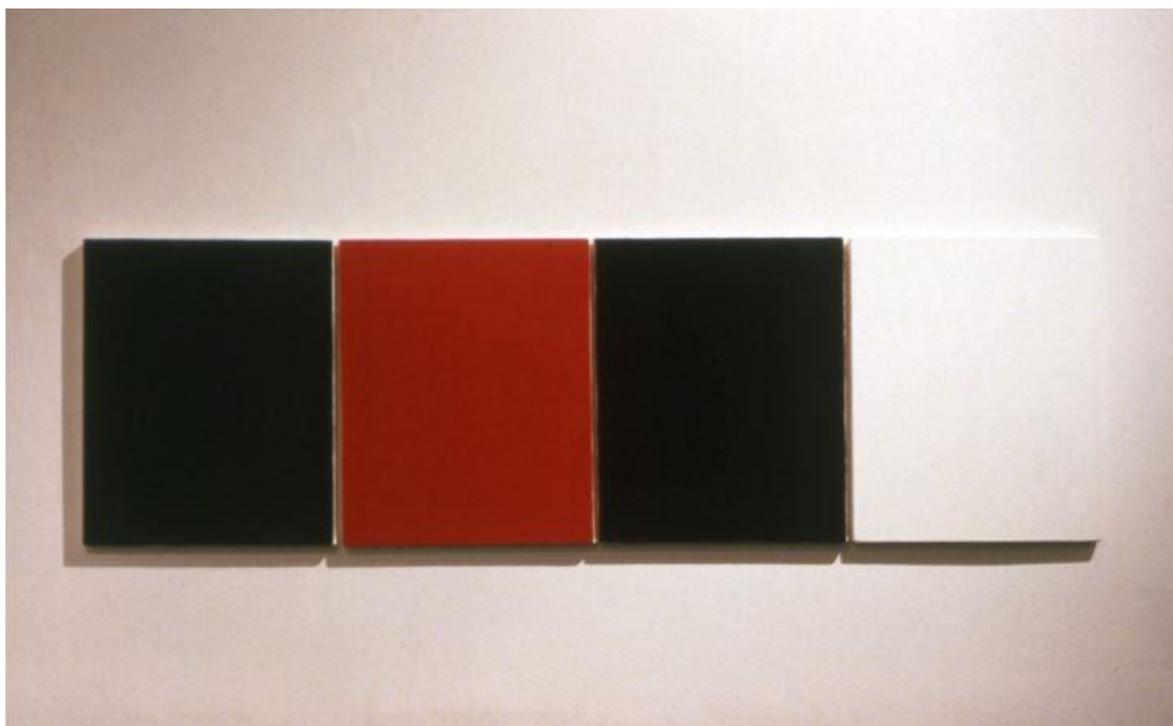


Fig.14: Forbidden Colours (Ault, J. 2006, p.120)

The work was accompanied by an exhibition statement written by Gonzalez-Torres, making explicit the intentions of the piece (See Fig.15). In the statement, Gonzalez-Torres identifies the same issues around participation and authorship as well as drawing a link between those in positions of power and the discrimination and exclusion of the marginalised, ending with “I hope for a different message” (Ault, 2006, p.121). Whereas Gran Fury and ACT UP opted to work outside the institutions of power and presented the viewer with unambiguous messaging, Gonzalez-Torres here makes a wider connection, by addressing it to “all the PWAs” he links ‘People With AIDS’ to a wider struggle and opts to use the institutional framework to convey that message, thereby undermining its establishment position. The phrases inserted throughout this text are intended to draw attention to the current war in Gaza, one in which the United Nations has stated that there are “reasonable grounds” to believe that genocide is being carried out (The United Nations, 2024). This dissertation is therefore the institutional vehicle I have chosen to insert my own position on this conflict. As with Cildo Meireles’ *‘Insertions into Ideological Circuits’* (1970) highlighted in the introduction and Gonzalez-Torres’ *‘Forbidden Colours’* (1988) referenced here, the audience becomes the unsuspecting recipient of a message that counters the dominant establishment narrative. This University, and the internet more widely, therefore become the repository for its dissemination.

INSTALLATION BY FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES
September 16 - November 20, 1988

When I was asked to write a short statement about the work in this space I thought it would be a good opportunity to disclose and, in a certain sense, to demystify my approach. I hope that it will guide the viewer and will allow an active participation in the unraveling of the meaning and the purpose of this work. Many may consider this text redundant; an unnecessary intrusion, or even a handicap. It is assumed that the work must "speak for itself," as if the divine dogma of modernism were able to deliver a clear and universal message to a uniform "family of man." Others know this is not true--that each of us perceives things according to who and how we are at particular junctures, whose terms are always shifting. Preferably the exhibition gallery will function as an educational device, simple and basic, without the mysteries of the muse, reactivating history to affirm our place in this landscape of 1988.

This work is mostly personal. It is about those very early hours in the morning, while still half asleep, when I tend to visualize information, to see panoramas in which the fictional, the important, the banal, and the historical are collapsed into a single caption. Leaving me anxious and responsible to anchor a logical accompanying image--scanning the TV channels trying to sort out and match sound and sight. This work is about my exclusion from the circle of power where social and cultural values are elaborated and about my rejection of the imposed and established order.

It is a fact people are discriminated against for being HIV positive. It is a fact the majority of the Nazi industrialists retained their wealth after the war. It is a fact the night belongs to Michelob and Coke is real. It is a fact the color of your skin matters. It is a fact Crazy Eddie's prices are insane. It is a fact that four colors--red, black, green and white--placed next to each other in any form are strictly forbidden by the Israeli army in the occupied Palestinian territories. This color combination can cause an arrest, a beating, a curfew, a shooting, or a news photograph. Yet it is a fact that these forbidden colors, presented as a solitary act of consciousness here in Soho, will not precipitate a similar reaction.

From the first moment of encounter, the four color canvases in this room will "speak" to everyone. Some will define them as an exercise in color theory, or some sort of abstraction. Some as four boring rectangular canvases hanging on the wall. A few experts will interpret them as yet another minimalist ecstasy. Now that you've read this text, I hope for a different message.

For all the PWAs.

Félix González-Torres
New York City 1988

Fig.15: Forbidden Colours Exhibition Statement (Ault, J. 2006, p.121)

I see sea

white (the concluding part)

The outbreak of the AIDS crisis in the 1980's shed a light on the fault lines in American society. On the one side a marginalised community dying in their thousands; 100, 777 deaths occurred between 1981 and 1990 of which 59% were homosexual or bisexual men (Center (sic) for Disease control, 1991) and on the other side a newly elected Republican Government under Ronald Reagan, which viewed AIDS as “a disease that affected only marginal and despised groups” and subsequently “could make little claim to his attention” according to Snowden (2019, p.437).

Confronted with an unfolding catastrophe, different artists responded to the crisis in different ways. This text looked predominantly, although not exclusively, at Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991) and the work of Grand Fury, an artist collective working within the activist group ACT UP. Their different strategies for raising public awareness and instigating dialogue raised important discussions around the role and nature of participative action on behalf of the viewer. When does the more passive engagement of empathy, couched under the broader umbrella of *relational aesthetics* as defined by Bourriaud (2002), end up reinforcing existing societal and establishment hierarchies? Does the more confrontational and antagonistic activist approach, in which traditional art forms and methods make way for a plethora of practices and forms elicit change? Or as Foster (1985, p.13) describes, does it simply give rise to a pluralist state in which “art and criticism tend to be dispersed and so rendered impotent”? The underlying problem with these two different approaches, is not the work itself, which was borne from a sense of injustice and rage, but by the external labels attached to them. That Gonzalez-Torres' work is undermined by its association with *relational aesthetics* is flawed as it was an association chosen by Bourriaud not by Gonzalez-Torres. That Gran Fury's work was perceived, as highlighted by Ramos and Snow (2023, p.14), as being “too rooted in movement politics” and therefore lacking critical distance, was a position taken by cultural institutions at the time and not by Gran Fury. The fact that the work described here is still relevant today, forty years on, is a greater testament to its effectiveness and importance. It is because of their power to influence that many of the strategies used by Gonzalez-Torres and Gran Fury/ACT UP have appeared, often subconsciously, in my own practice. The lacking of critical distance and being “too rooted in movement politics” must not become a barrier to producing art that engages with the pressing issues of today. The urgency felt by Gonzalez-

Torres and ACT UP has influenced the structure of this text to include a commentary on the most urgent political event of today. This is not a naïve position; As Santiago Sierra (2002, p.15) states “We do our work because we are making art and because we believe art should be something, something that follows reality”.

it must end now

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