

# **RAD -ICAL CONVEN -TIONS**

**Cuban American Art  
from the 1980s**

# RAD -ICAL CONVEN -TIONS

## Cuban American Art from the 1980s

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Co-presented by the Lowe Art Museum and  
Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami

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# Coda: Félix González- Torres, Whose Narrative?

By Elizabeth Cerejido

One of the main questions that drove the research for this exhibition project focused on how Cuban American art history has been discursively constructed; what has shaped the prevailing narrative(s) about the cultural production of Cuban-born practitioners whose artistic formation took place largely in the U.S.? Although one of the ways this project has responded to that question has been to contextualize this production more expansively within the American avant-garde of the late 1970s and 1980s, and beyond a bicultural framework, when it came to thinking about Félix González-Torres, my aim was the opposite: to reframe his artistic production by asking what it would mean to understand his work from the perspective of his cultural identity, that is, as a Cuban American artist. I recognize that this is a particularly risky proposition given the artist's known eschewal of identitarian labels. González-Torres was especially aware of what this meant in the context of increasing politics of multiculturalism that became dominant within the cultural debates of the mid- to late 1980s. On this point, he famously remarked: "I have my own agenda. Some people want to promote multiculturalism as long as they are the promoters, the circus directors . . . As in a glass vitrine, 'we'—the 'other'—have to accomplish ritual, exotic performances to satisfy the needs of the majority."<sup>1</sup> Adding: "Who is going to define my culture? It is not Borges and García Marquez, but also Gertrude Stein and Freud and Guy Debord—they are all part of my formation."<sup>2</sup> However, González-Torres's place as one of the most influential contemporary artists of the late 20th century is well established, and thus, it is time to offer critical material on his work and problematize what has become a normative approach to thinking about his place in global art circuits. I agree with José Esteban Muñoz when he similarly contends that while it is certainly true that González-Torres rejected "minoritarian identity labels . . . that is not the end of the story."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is too simplistic and unsatisfactory to gloss over what Muñoz elsewhere refers to as the artist's multiple "horizons of experience" (as a gay, immigrant, *Cubano* living with AIDS) and pretend that they do not find a visual and conceptual expression in his work.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, I turned to the records located at the Cuban Heritage Collection of INTAR Theatre and Gallery, where González-Torres had one of his first solo shows in NYC,

<sup>1</sup> Tim Rollins, Susan Cahan, and Jan Avgikos, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Tim Rollins (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 166.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 1999 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 166.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.



DURING THE VISIT TO THE  
 INTAR GALLERY IN MIAMI  
 FELIX GONZALEZ TORRES  
 WROTE TO INVERNA LOCKPEZ  
 DIRECTOR OF THE GALLERY  
 EXPRESSING HIS GRATITUDE  
 FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO  
 GROW AS AN ARTIST. HE  
 ALSO MENTIONED HIS  
 HOPE THAT HIS FUTURE  
 EXHIBITIONS WOULD BE  
 AS REAL AS THIS ONE AT  
 INTAR.

fig.31  
 Black and white photocopy of a postcard sent from Félix González-Torres to Inverna Lockpez, 1983. INTAR Theatre records. Courtesy Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, FL



fig.32  
 An image of a "Non-Work" by Félix González-Torres; a handkerchief that reads: Bay of Pigs 1961 Mariel 1980 Kennedy 1960 Sputnik 1957 Mami 1986 Madrid 1971 Pain. INTAR Theatre records. Courtesy Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, FL

where he settled in 1985 from Puerto Rico. INTAR was founded on a mission to support the work of Latino artists (it later expanded their vision to include artists of color), and the fact that it was in this specific context in which González-Torres agreed to present his work seemed poignant to me and fitting for my argument. In my research, I came across two items that struck me. One was a black and white photocopy of a postcard that shows the artist's mother facing the sea, her back to the viewer; above the image, in faint handwriting, appears the word *Mami* followed by the year, 1983 (fig. 31). Beneath it, the artist wrote a note to INTAR Gallery Director, Inverna Lockpez—in Spanish—in which he expresses his gratitude for *la oportunidad de crecer un poco más cómo artista* (for the opportunity to grow a little more as an artist). And added: *Solo espero que mis próximas exhibiciones sean tan reales como esta en INTAR* (I only hope that my subsequent exhibitions are as real as this one at INTAR).

The other discovery I made was a 35mm slide of an early (and apparently quite unknown) dateline exhibited in the show mentioned above in which the artist printed the following string of words in red on an unkempt handkerchief (like the ones traditionally used by Cuban men): *Bay of Pigs 1961 Mariel 1980 Kennedy 1960 Sputnik 1957 Mami 1986 Madrid 1971 Pain* (fig. 32). What interested me in both of these cases—the note to Inverna and the work pictured in the 35mm slide from that solo exhibition at INTAR—is that they signal an interest by the artist in revealing instances (personal, as well as historical) that specifically relate to his identity as a Cuban American; moments, I want to argue, that the artist felt were important enough to include in his work; instances, perhaps, of his "real" self (that "realness" that he alludes to in his note to Inverna Lockpez?); instances that have been largely erased from the vast and growing literature on his oeuvre.

The use of the word *Mami* (the affectionate term for "mother" in Spanish) is present in both cases mentioned. Its inclusion next to the date of her death from leukemia in 1986 interspersed among words in English that conjure images of crises of historical import stands out (Bay of Pigs, Mariel, for example), not only because it belies a certain vulnerability, a child-like sweetness, a *carriño* (affection), but also because of its foreignness, a foreignness that has been eclipsed from Félix González Torres's narrative in favor of a more universal framing of his work that has been stripped-down of the messiness of cultural specificities and the contradictions of multiple subjectivities. Thus, when thinking of the work with which I wanted to represent González-Torres in *Radical Conventions*, this early handkerchief seemed perfectly appropriate. In addition to the content of the work, I was also interested in its materiality, in the handkerchief as medium. These "instances," fraught with sentimentality that border on kitsch, signal slippages that further complicate the construction of Félix González-Torres as a consummate conceptualist and minimalist.

My quest in locating that early work eventually led me to Andrea Rosen, Félix González-Torres's long-time friend, dealer, representative, and founder and director of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.<sup>5</sup> I met virtually with Rosen and her colleague, Holly McHugh, who were both generous with their time. From our initial conversation I learned that the work I was looking for (the handkerchief) had likely been destroyed by the artist and belongs to the category of "Non-Works", which the Foundation defines as "material that Gonzalez-Torres included in exhibitions and/or publications but that he ultimately decided to remove from his oeuvre." Andrea reiterated that if a work does not "exist in the world" it is because the artist wished it so.

Our conversation was also profoundly illuminating for the ways in which it shed light on the relationship between the principal tenets that informed González-Torres's work, how curators interpret those principles, and the role of the Foundation as guardians of the artist's legacy and vision. The curator, on the one hand, is given great freedom in how she interacts and engages with the work, while on the other, the Foundation maintains a watchful eye on the curatorial process to ensure it is faithful to the artist's vision. For example, I was encouraged to think creatively about how to incorporate the content of that early work within an existing "Portrait" or "Dateline" barring the owner's approval. To that end, as curator, I had the liberty of continuing to add to, expand, (alter even!) the narrative of the work. Inspired by the spirit of Gonzalez-Torres's process, his penchant for being subtle yet contentious, drove me to propose "recreating" that early work for *Radical Conventions*. However, I was told I could do so as its author; in other words, the work would not be by González-Torres, but inspired by it and therefore a wholly new "physical manifestation" of the work.<sup>6</sup>

As curator, I am grateful for the insight both Andrea and Holly offered about González-Torres's practice. As gatekeepers, the Foundation plays a critical role in both how access is granted to information and in facilitating the location of works for exhibitions. From our communication, what came across was that this is a task that Andrea performs from a profound sense of responsibility, the kind of responsibility that also stems from love!

However, the experience also led me to ponder about the role foundations like this one play in legacy production and narrative formation (construction). For while the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation thoughtfully safeguards the integrity of the artist's legacy, that mission is not without its problems—at the core of it is an issue of control of narrative and of the ultimate question: who speaks for the artist? González-Torres's work is continually relevant because the ideas that

<sup>5</sup> This is the version of the spelling of the artist's name that the Foundation uses.

<sup>6</sup> I am quoting Andrea Rosen as this is how she referred to works that do exist in the world.

drove his practice were in flux, expansive, open in its capacity to invite challenge and intellectual engagement. As such, how does the Foundation ensure that they encourage new ways of thinking critically about González-Torres's work while continuing to respect his vision, a vision that is, by the very nature of the artist's practice, mutable?

Returning to the artist's message to Inverna Lockpez, what did keeping it "real" mean for Félix González-Torres? I take his wish to be "real" to mean for his work to be operative at these very personal dimensions, that is, in the cultural and identitarian aspects that made up who he was. Félix González Torres was a queer, Latino, American *and* Cuban artist who operated against two discursive systems: normative ideas about conceptual and minimal art, that is of ways of art making that purportedly eschewed any reference to personal or cultural identities, *and* against essentialized constructions of cultural identity.

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