



HOW 179 POUNDS OF CANDY CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial), Istanbul.
September 17 – November 13, 2011

Curated by Adriano Pedrosa and Jens Hoffmann, the 12th Istanbul Biennial, 2011 has the vision to provide a deep understanding of the aesthetic-political aspects of the world we live in. The exhibition is structured around artworks key to the development and conceptualization of late 20th century art, notably the sensitive, poetic, intelligent and historically relevant Cuban-American artist Felix González-Torres (1957-1996) whose work has yet to diminish in effect and influence. For those unfamiliar with González-Torres' work, he rose to prominence in the 80s and 90s with works that drew from both Post-Minimalism and Conceptualism, while integrating political and personal issues of his time, notably the plight of AIDS of which he succumbed at the untimely age of 39.

Though clearly a fan of Minimalism, González-Torres sought to politicize the form, to infect its seemingly apolitical aesthetics and reveal the machinations of the world, from the very micro-personal to the macro-political. And yet, he managed to eschew some of the more dogmatic tactics of the era—one need only to compare his work to Jenny Holzer's radicalizing text-based installations or Hans Haacke's

mordant political critiques to appreciate the subtlety and modesty of González-Torres' craft. When one approaches González-Torres' œuvre one is confronted with a double reality that foregrounds popular Modernist aesthetics while never letting go of the political dimensions of art. It is never an either/or situation, and this ability to reside on both sides of the aesthetic-political coin is, I believe, what enables us to rediscover González-Torres' works today and to gain political and aesthetic leverage to interpret new and possibly undiscovered works and perspectives via them.

"Untitled" Ross

Likely one of González-Torres' most famous works, *"Untitled" Ross*, is composed of a simple pile of candies, wrapped in various cheerful colours of cellophane, and weighing a total of 175 pounds. The candy is, in actuality, a stand-in for the ideal weight of the artist's lover, Ross, who died of AIDS in 1991, five years before the artist himself. The pile of candies functions as an offering to the public, who is invited to serve him/herself, a kind of symbolic "host"—of the artist, AIDS, disease and homosexuality—that is continuously replenished in order to maintain the ideal weight as parts of it are consumed over time.

The works gathered around “Untitled” Ross present problematically representable relationships, such as that of homosexual love and encounters. Kutluğ Ataman’s *forever* (2011), an actual mattress that the artist shared with a former lover, is laid onto the ground to be transformed into a personal effigy. Beds reoccur in Tammy Rae Carland’s photographs of *Lesbian Beds* (2002), and also as an homage in another of González-Torres’s works on the subject of Ross, “Untitled” (1991), in which he used a billboard featuring a photo of their empty bed as a form of mourning for his recently departed lover.

Minimalist aesthetics are also blurred into representations of the body such as in Tom Burr’s *Endlessly Repeated Gesture* (2009), a disco-mirrored platform from which one can see multiple selves and vistas of the gallery reproduced to infinity, while Juan Capistran picks up on González-Torres’ simple yet evocative use of formalism in *Black on Black (Two Johns)* (2007) to depict an anthropomorphized sexual encounter between two black horizontal sculptural slabs. Meanwhile Henrik Olesen takes up the notion of homo/sexuality through a give-away brochure, *Pre Post: Speaking Backwards* (2006–11), in which various queer accounts and histories are compiled from gay subcultures on the practice of sex in public spaces.

Untitled (History)

The *Untitled (History)* section is inspired by a series of González-Torres works entitled “Untitled,” in which we read—white type written on black background—“Patty Hearst,” “Jaws,” “Bruce Lee,” “Jackie,” alongside the dates of their respective arrest (1975), release (1975), death (1973) and wedding to the famous Greek magnate (1968), thus juxtaposing divergent historical moments and realities within one tableau.

Featured within this date-focused section are a series of works revealing the political fissures that come to the fore when re-reading history. Of note are works that “reshuffle” the material of historical time such as Julieta Aranda’s *There Has Been a Miscalculation (Flattened Ammunition)* (2007/2011) in which a large Plexiglas cube containing pulverized books on the topic of 20th-century history is periodically set into turbulence by a built-in air compressor or Taysir Batniji’s *Suspended Time* (2006), a simple hourglass laying on its side, stopping time itself.

Political books, as the repositories of historical thought and action, figure prominently as in Milena Bonilla’s *Capital/Sinister Manuscript (Luxury Version)* (2008), an unauthorized Spanish translation of Karl Marx’s *Capital* written by the (right-handed) artist with her left hand; Claire Fontaine’s book-cover of Guy Debord’s famous *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) disguising a brick, a brute tool of social rebellion; and Simryn Gill’s appropriation of the same book transformed into a necklace of paper beads, resembling a prayer necklace. While the creation of new documents such as Shuruq Harb’s *A Book of Signatures* (2009), a handmade book consisting of 250 signatures by men named Mohammed from Palestine, documenting the political inclinations of the region and Voluspa Jarpa’s *Biblioteca de No Historia (Library of No History)* (2010) in which official US declassified government documents on the Chilean dictatorship are bound and distributed for free each day to the first 20 visitors aim to rewrite history itself.

Untitled (Abstraction)

Félix González-Torres’ *Untitled (Abstraction)* is a sheet of paper bearing a perfect horizontal line on a vertical grid. It is a minimally composed, and (almost) disguised example of “pure” abstract art, which in fact represents a very human reality, the declining state of a person’s immune system while consumed by the HIV virus. Lygia Clark stands as a historical example from which González-Torres drew his ideas of using abstraction to further social and political beliefs. Clark’s *Bicho (Beast, or Critter)* aluminum hinged sculptures of the 1960s were used specifically to question the nature of a stable “finished” work of art, inviting the



Kristen Margin, *The Third of May*. Photo : Nathalie Barki.

Alexander Gutke, *Singularity*. Photo : Nathalie Barki.

Kutluğ Ataman, *Forever*. Photo : Nathalie Barki.

Juan Capistran, *Black on Black*. Photo : Nathalie Barki.

viewer to manipulate and reconfigure the work's shape and meaning both from a personal as well as potentially political perspective.

Remapping of space is an important theme in this section in which Alexander Gutke's 16-mm film *Singularity* (2010) features the representation of a measuring tape and frames the whole exhibition environment by running up and down the edges of the gallery space from wall to ceiling and back. Dóra Maurer's photographs *Rajzolás kamerával kör a négyzetben* (*Drawing with the Camera-Circle in the Square*) (1979) and *Rajzolás kamerával kör a négyzet körül* (*Drawing with the Camera-Circle Around the Square*) (1979) also re-map space via a sequence of black and white photo captures in which the artist moves the camera in a circular manner, thus re-structuring the view of the camera and a constantly shifting artist perspective. While, Edward Krasinski's *Intervention* (1981), a simple abstract black-and-white geometric wall sculpture, is horizontally intersected by his signature blue tape running along the gallery's entire wall, thus encompassing the whole space into the work. The Italian Modernist painter Lucio Fontana is another pivotal minimalist/political influence, which is echoed in Adriana Varejão's *Parede com Incisões à la Fontana, Istanbul* (*Wall with Incisions à la Fontana, Istanbul*) (2011), a photo invoking Fontana's cuts as open wounds and Lygia Pape's *Divisor* (1968) photo-performances in which hundreds of individuals inserted their heads into a landscape-large white "Fontana" painting, thus embodying the implied violence. Also, Annette Kelm's *Untitled (White Target)* (2006) combines Fontana and Jasper Johns' emblematic images (the cut canvas and shooting target, respectively) by photographing the back of a shooting target to reveal the cuts incurred by the bullets' violence.

"Untitled" (Passport)

Felix González-Torres's *Untitled* (*Passport #II*) (1993) features an unlimited stack of booklets on which the image of a bird flying through a stormy sky is printed. Addressing issues of freedom to travel, and border ownership and identity, it comes as no surprise that the Cuban artist had his own set of personal experiences with passports and travel. González-Torres' passport-as-art is a document which usurps governmental control of passage to propose free voyage as experienced by nation-free birds.

Within the context of post 9/11, however, travel is increasingly viewed with fear and mistrust and the works presented in this section investigate this experience of nervous passage and surveillance. Baha Boukhari's *My Father's Palestinian Nationality* (2007) is a collection of the artist's father's accumulation of identification documents—as required for an internationally employed architect—that maps the complex identity of the Palestinian both abroad and at home. While Lara Favaretto's *Lost & Found* (ongoing since 2005) speaks of the legacies of security checks and failures within travel with a series of abandoned personal belongings purchased from "lost and found" auctions conducted by the Italian railway system. Meanwhile Rula Halawani's photo series *Intimacy* (2004) documents the nervous crossing of Palestinians at the Qalandia checkpoint located at the tenuous Jerusalem / Ramallah

boarder. Ownership of space is questioned by works such as Antonio Dias's *Do It Yourself: Freedom Territory* (1968), a parking-like grid space, which invites the user to claim as "free" or Rivane Neuenschwander's *At a Certain Distance (Public Barriers)* (2010), a collection of beautiful and fragile ad hoc fences, inviting us to reconsider the temporal, and hence temporary, dimension of borders.

"Untitled" (Death by Gun)

This section revolves round Felix González-Torres' 1990 "stack piece" by the same name on which was printed the identities of every person known to have been killed by a gunshot in America during the week of May 1-7, 1989. The 460 deceased are listed by name, age, city, and state, along with brief descriptions of the cause of deaths accompanied by a photographic image of the person. González-Torres was inspired by an article in the July 17, 1989, issue of *Time* magazine entitled "7 Deadly Days" in which it was stated that death by gunfire in US had doubled in the past 50 years as a result of gun ownership at a rate of one gun for every two households.

As a clear call for change in America's relationship to guns, the works in this section take up the project of showing the grim realities of gun violence. Eddie Adams's *Street Execution of a Viet Cong Prisoner, Saigon* (1968) representing a Vietnamese military soldier shooting a Viet Cong prisoner in three time sequences presented alongside 1930-40s Weegee's crime-scene images of the brutal New York underworld are potent documents in the argument against facile gun access.

Other works poetically reshape our relationship to the materiality of the gun such as Edgardo Aragón's *1993* (2010), a portrait of the artist's cousin who was killed by a gunshot wound and is drawn in gunpowder dust or Ella Littwitz's *Untitled (Sheet)* (2010), a touching photograph of a bullet-hole-riddled sheet, which had covered a member of the Israeli military when shot by Egyptian aircrafts during Israel's War of Independence of 1948, and Kris Martin's seductive *Obussen II* (2010), featuring a pile of more than 700 shiny and golden empty Howitzer shells from World War I.

Other works show the pop-culture fascination with guns via the prints of Roy Lichtenstein as seen on the June 21, 1968 cover of *Time* magazine and Raymond Pettibon's black-and-white graphic-novel-inspired drawings of love and murder, or Kristen Morgin's *The Third of May* (2011), a remaking of Francisco Goya's famous 1814 painting of an execution, using a series of children's toys such as Mickey Mouse and Pinocchio as stand-ins for contemporary victims, soldiers and firing squads.

By grouping together works around themes Felix González-Torres explored, the 12th Istanbul Biennial, 2011 succeeds in having us rethink political issues via aesthetics, and once and for all cements the twinned abilities of art to impart reflection via beauty.

Valérie Lamontagne

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Rivane Neuenschwander, *At a Certain Distance 01*, Photo Nathalie Barki.



Smyrn Gill, *Pearls Cook*.



Lara Favaretto, *Lost Found*, Photo : Nathalie Barki.



Kris Martin, *Obsessen*, Photo : Nathalie Barki.

