

RESISTING THE COMMODIFICATION OF MEMORY

AIDS Memorial Culture in Félix González-Torres' Candy Works

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Abstract At the center of this paper lies a pile of candy whose properties can inspire resistance against the commodification of memory. As popular media discourses often historicize and depoliticize the immediacy of HIV/AIDS, the candy piles of Félix González-Torres manage to do the opposite. It practices remembrance of the pandemic in the 1980s, while resisting state control over remembrance narratives, and rejuvenation of the discourse on HIV/AIDS. This paper wants to interrogate the particular methods of González-Torres' work that realize remembrance on its own terms. Partly through embracing the themes of ephemerality, queerness, loss, illness, and transience.

Keywords: memory, queerness, ephemerality, visual arts, HIV/AIDS

I. Introduction

HIV/AIDS is still affecting many lives with an estimated 40 million HIV+ people in 2022 (WHO, 2023). Although, compared to the 1980s, the cultural conversations, protests, and immediacy on this issue shrank in the West. Most of the contemporary media around HIV/AIDS historicizes the virus in connection with the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s (Stamm, 2020, p.621). This process can be analyzed as a commodification of memory, which means that cultural memory is stripped of its political power, and its questioning nature, to be made into an easily consumable product (Mbembe, 2002, p.22).

Still, activist groups and artists are challenging the process of forgetting the complicity of the state and mainstream society when acting on the crisis. They highlight the ongoing urgency of the issue and keep evaluating the actions of the past, questioning the structures of the now. Félix González-Torres series 'Candy Works' is an example of such efforts (Wyrick, 1993, pp.44). Despite the death of the artist in 1996, his artworks still circulate in public spaces today. One of them is "*Untitled*" (*A Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), which shows a 175lb heavy pile of colorful candy piled up in the exhibition space. It has an unusual quality- spectators are not prohibited from taking away pieces of candy thus the work is in everlasting transformation of depleting and replenishing. The work is in reference to Félix's partner Ross Laycock who died of AIDS in 1991, the year the work was created, and thus conveys a powerful message about memory of loss, and love in relation to HIV/AIDS.

Félix González-Torres work, due to its contemporary circulation, and depth, seems not to fall into the same issue of commodification as other cultural productions do. This leads to the need for further inquiry, which is the research question of this paper. It asks, how does the work "*Untitled*" (*A Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) resist the commodification of memory? This paper attempts to answer this question by highlighting three characteristics of the work, for one its ephemeral qualities, second, its political meaning and virality, and third, its power of longevity and regeneration.

2. Resistance in Remembrance

2.1 Ephemeral Traces

Since the world is finite and there is limited space in archives, cultural memory undergoes a selective process of what is worthy of remembering. Thus, discarding a memory in favor of another becomes a political choice. Often this process has

negative implications for marginalized groups whose histories, cultures, and voices are being displaced by hegemonic cultural memory. But even if the memory that challenges dominant cultural narratives is archived, it is threatened to lose its political power. Mbembe (2002) describes, if memory is archived it is “(...) removed from time and from life, (...) to establish an unquestionable authority over them and to tame the violence and cruelty of which the ‘remains’ are capable, (...)” (p.22). The consequence of archiving is that the memory falls into the hands of the state, the monopoly of power, and thus the consumption of that memory is controlled. It is turned into a product of digestible mass consumption only possible through commodifying memory by stripping it of its viral political threat to disrupt the present order and thus questions the legitimacy of the state (Mbembe, 2002).

Exemplary of such process is the HIV/AIDS pandemic which, especially in the Western context, is regarded as an issue of the past. Mainstream media situates compelling stories around HIV/AIDS, such as *It's A Sin* (2021), *Pose* (2018), or *Dallas Buyer Club* (2013), in the 1980s, which makes the issue at hand appear like something that is overcome and finished. The events of the past still reach into the future, but the people in power are not being held accountable for the deaths of millions, and the threat of HIV/AIDS today is still largely overlooked. Such paralysis regarding the real-life, political implications of HIV/AIDS could be seen as an effect of this commodification.

This leads to the question of what the artist Félix González-Torres is doing differently compared to popular media when thematizing HIV/AIDS. The use of medium and technique might be the first, and most obvious difference. As a visual artist, there are fewer limits compared to the creators of movies who focus on maximizing story, entertainment, and profit. Instead of film, his work transports its themes regarding HIV/AIDS through a minimalist and timeless tool: candy. “*Untitled*” (*A Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) consists of a 175lb pile of colorful, individually wrapped, identical, candy pieces. The candy is arranged in precise piles or geometrical shapes like rectangles on the floor. This clean-cut arrangement transports a sense of rigor through its accurate appearance. However, this rigor is broken through when spectators decide to take pieces of the candy. Through this slow process of depletion intricate feelings, those of loss and incompleteness, rise to the surface. The performance cycle of the work - the arrangement of the candy, the shrinking of the piles through spectators, the expression of emotions through this deterioration, and regeneration through the refilling of the piles - reinforces this. “*Untitled*” (*A Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) breaks through the rigor and disintegrates into ephemeral traces of the work itself (Kee, 2019).

Ephemera is concerned with things that are fading away, in transition, almost ungraspable, so how can something so translucent be a part of cultural memory

which often relies upon archives storing material evidence? Even though through the act of performance, eating the candy, the work itself is destroyed traces of it always remain. May it be the colorful wrapping paper that is discharged, the remaining taste of sugar in one's mouth, or the satisfactory feeling of eating candy. Such traces, remainders after performance, can be understood as evidence that has taken on a different mode of materiality. A kind of materiality that is connected to lived experience instead of a material object (Muñoz, 1996).

In the specific case of *"Untitled" (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* such lived experience is loss caused by the death of a lover. This plays into the autobiographical interpretation of the work that connects it to Ross Laycock, Félix Golzález-Torres partner who died of AIDS in 1991. As the title suggests, the pile of candy can be understood as a portrait of Ross during his suffering. For one representing sweet, colorful candy almost reminds of endearing nicknames for a lover, while the depletion of the pile indicates the process of being consumed by the illness and dying. The spectator becomes a witness to this loss, and subsequently also a witness to the devastation HIV/AIDS caused. (Rounthwaite, 2010). Being a witness to the pandemic plays into the responsibility of survivors and strengthens the experiences of marginalized groups who were especially vulnerable. Thus, the ephemeral qualities of the work, which transport memory of lived experience are a way to tell stories around Queerness without falling into the trap of commodification (Muñoz, 1996).

Preserving memory of Queer life does not need to be done through hegemonic media and under the authority of the state. As both not only spin hollow representations of Queerness for neoliberal campaigns, but, have first and foremost relentlessly been the institutions of oppression against Queer life. The ephemeral is a way to avoid the appropriation of a minoritarian culture and allows perseverance without institutional collaboration. Instead, it offers intimate witnessing of traces of a life, a life that maybe was as sweet, desirable, and playful as candy. But there is more, as the spectators are not just witnessing the work but also taking part in the lived experience. By extracting the candy, they are affecting the loss. Becoming entangled in the piece, even complicit in it, the spectator cannot part from what they have taken in. Through the indulgence of the candy, they are infected with an indelible experience because they have affected the erasure.

2.2 A Viral Effect

This consequence highlights the second central quality of the work to resist the commodification of memory, and that is the work's political message transported through its virality. When encountering the work, the spectator is facing a dilemma: do they take the candy going against the norm of museums not to touch, let

alone eat the displays or do they refuse the sweet taste of the colorful treat? It is a decision between authority and desire, but the predicament reaches even further when confronted with the object represented by the candy. The spectator is then faced with the choice of indulging a piece of an HIV+ gay man's body. Choosing to do so implies a political stance, especially, when keeping in mind the historical context of the work which is set in the early 1990s. At that time the Queer body was associated with disease, a moral disease but also in the literal sense the infection with HIV/AIDS. Equating Queerness with illness assumes that non-Queers are protected from contracting, infecting, and dying. Not only accepting the death of human beings as a consequence but also wanting the erasure of Queerness itself (Chambers-Letson, 2009).

This sentiment is not unique to HIV/AIDS during the 1980s and 90s but the blossoming of a long-reaching marginalization of Queerness within the Western context. Despite the faint wish of liberal ideology to prove progress the persecution of Queer practices, expressions, and lives under the narrative of moral and mental disease remains a contemporary reality. Thus, the artwork is not a relic of the past, telling a story of loss and survival during the 1980s HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is loaded with political immediacy because the debate on illness and Queerness is a contemporary one. The choice to eat, indulge, and infect is ideological. The candy pile allows the spectator to spread that ideology just like a virus by literally taking something into the body, leaving an irreversible mark, an ephemeral trace.

The agents of González-Torres ideology carry the traces of experiences with them, eventually dispersing them around the world. For this purpose of distribution and to effectively infect as many as possible, the artwork must be easy to replicate. Candy is a mass-producible medium, factory-made and cheap (Chambers-Letson, 2009). At first, this might seem counterintuitive to promote mass consumption, because the main point of critique of this paper is the commodification of memory, which is aimed at making memory consumable. However, it is necessary to distinguish if consumption presupposes eradicating the political or if the political is the center of this consumption. Also, the question of who controls consumption arises. In the case of Candy Works, the aspect of a mass-producible medium democratizes consumption. This is opposed to the creation of a popular show whose production has many more barriers.

In terms of circulation and longevity, which are important aspects to keep in mind when creating art concerned with cultural memory, mass production can be favorable. This is mainly because a delicately crafted unique even if durable cannot be in multiple places at once. Furthermore, there might be the danger that a singular artwork gets stuck in the past as a relic in the archives. Félix González-Torres wanted to avoid this status at all costs, stating that if his works

lost their contemporary cultural relevance they should not be manifested (Chambers-Letson, 2009). Thus, by using a common mass-produced medium with ephemeral qualities this archiving is avoided. When displayed it can be assured that the pile of candy still radiates with political meaning, because if not then it is just a simple pile of candy.

The understanding of art as a political vehicle was central to González-Torres' artworks. As a member of the art collective Group Material, he was also committed "to the creation, organization, and promotion of an art dedicated to social communication and political change" (Wyrick, 1993, p.45). The collective operated from 1987, the start of González-Torres artmaking until 1991, combining activist aspirations with the profession as an artist. Before Candy Works, which was created in 1991, González-Torres created artworks addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic in collaboration with the other artists in the collective. Being aware of this context helps to further underline that the spread of political ideology is a central idea to the work in question. Shaped by collaborative art activism González-Torres' proposal of the HIV-infected body as edible candy wants to provoke a political dilemma (Wyrick, 1993).

2.3 Perseverance Without an Archive

To keep this political virality alive, the aspect of longevity comes into play. As already mentioned, the work strives to avoid archiving and should only be manifested if it is culturally relevant. Thus, it is resisting the commodification of memory because it keeps its political power by making the dilemma of ingesting the HIV+ body a contemporary debate. Central to this longevity is using a mass-producible medium, but the work is also protected by other mechanisms giving it infinite life. These are the instructions given through the certificates of authenticity and ownership.

Usually, certificates of authenticity and ownership are transferred from the artist or previous owner to the new owner when a work is sold. It is a document assuring the new owner that the work bought is original and confirming its present value. But in the case of González-Torres' artworks the certificate's meaning gets extended. The owner of one of his candy works is not just buying a prestigious artwork but also the responsibility that comes with owning this ephemeral piece (Kee, 2019). These responsibilities are outlined with a set of instructions that accompany the work when purchased. In the conceptual art world, such instructions that communicate the artist's intention and give orders on whom to take care of the work are not unusual.

One of the instructions for the work "Untitled" (*A Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) reads that the owner should regularly maintain the piles. This assures that one central

quality of the candy works is cared for which is the aspect of “endless supply” (Kee, 2019). The pile of candy even though it is depleting, should never be fully consumed, the loss is never totalizing but always impending. To fulfill the instructions and prevent the vanishing, workers must routinely refill the pile, simulating that there is an endless supply. This goes against the common understanding of reality that no amount is infinite, proving or at least hoping that some things can live forever. Thus, regeneration becomes a central theme to the work simultaneously with loss (Chambers-Letson, 2009).

Connecting this wish for an endless life with the autobiographical interpretation of the work one can assume that replenishing the piles is an attempt to restore Ross Laycock, González-Torre’s partner. The artist himself describes the slow death of Ross as a disappearance. In an interview, he narrates:

“(.. .) this beautiful, incredible body, this entity of perfection just physically, thoroughly disappear right in front of your eyes. (.. .) Just disappear like a dried flower. (.. .) I would say that when he was becoming less of a person I was loving him more. Every lesion he got I loved him more. Until the last second. I told him, “I want to be there until your last breath,” and I was there to his last breath. (.. .)”

(Bleckner & Gonzalez-Torres, 1995, p.47)

Processing this painful experience González-Torres states that the work stems from his fear of losing everything, losing his partner. Thus, the work he has created is infinite, and cannot disappear. However, the work is not a representation of a moment frozen in time forever cherishing the love that was but instead the never-ending moment of disappearance (Rounthwaite, 2010). Thus, not just the forever disappearance in the archives but also the plain fear of losing a loved one is trying to be prevented by instructing an endless supply of candy.

Another central quality of the instructions is their great flexibility. An authoritarian quality operating with rigor to dictate how the artwork should be displayed is missing from González-Torres instructions. Rather, they are especially keen on seeing the work as a changeable, flexible, and ephemeral situation. For example, one of the instructions is that the size of the work should be based on standards depending on the context the work is displayed. Such flexibility allows for authentic reinterpretations in different spaces. Furthermore, not even the specific type of candy is fixed. Sometimes it is pointed out what color the candy should be, but a product-specific instruction is missing (Kee, 2019). The flexibility of the instructions lets the work live on because it can adapt to future contexts.

Taking the right measurements for it to prevail thus becomes the responsibility of the owner. This extends the understanding of the owner to also being the care-

taker of the work. Creating a collaborative endeavor between the artist followed by his intentions, and the new owner/caretaker navigating the contemporary context. Commitment and integrity, as well as trust, are key in this collaboration, sometimes even requiring the neglect of economic interest for the maintenance of the artwork (Kee, 2019). In this way the artwork can continue faithful to original intentions but flexible to the current context, transporting its story of loss and love through time and space.

Other contemporary artists have also picked up this ambition, reinterpreting how this infinite aspect outside of storage in the archive can be achieved. This poses new questions and pathways for navigating the endeavor of memory as a collective effort. Reckitt (2011) asks

“Can a creative gesture begun by one artist be passed like a baton through the years to be continued or completed by another artist in another time so that it never has to end but fulfills Félix Gonzalez-Torres ‘s ambition to become ‘endless copies?’” (p.59).

This leads to the imagination of how memory could be reimagined to be protected, reproduced, and reinterpreted by many, instead of a single authority. Implying that the changing of memory might be preferable to its commodification which takes away crucial political meanings.

3. Wrapping It Up

The central aim of this research paper was to inquire what the work *“Untitled” (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* does to resist the commodification of memory. Many mainstream pop-cultural productions around the HIV/AIDS crisis tend to historicize the events ignoring important questions of responsibility and immediacy of the topic (Stamm, 2020). As outlined, the work transcends specific contexts in contrast to some of these productions through the themes of the ephemeral, the political, virality, regeneration, and longevity. Their interplay creates a complex situation in which the need for archiving is rejected and even made obsolete.

Through the ephemeral qualities the telling of Queer lived experiences about loss due to HIV/AIDS is possible. Using the ephemeral protects Queerness from commodification because it is not graspable and essentialized but allows for a trace to be sufficient evidence for the events that have occurred (Muñoz, 1996). Set in the context of Queer experiences of HIV/AIDS the work is already politically loaded due to embodying the consequences of the inactions of heterosexist society. This oppositional standpoint can be spread, like a metaphorical virus,

through the traces of the experience the work leaves (Chambers-Letson, 2009). This independent action, to infect, the work itself implies an autonomous nature separate from the artist, leading to the final aspects of regeneration and longevity. The work is detached from the control of the past and instead opens for reinterpretation and alterations. This keeps the artist's wish for longevity alive knowing that the only way to achieve this is by moving on from the past (Kee, 2019)

Taking the merging of these themes into consideration, they together form a shield against the commodification of the loss González-Torres tried to process through the creation of Candy Works. An act of staying loyal to his lost partner, the Queer community he was a part of, and his political ideology expressed through his activism and work in Group Material (Wyrick, 1993). The simple pile of candy on the ground even when telling a story of loss, also promises hope. Not just through its reoccurring regeneration but also because its existence is a resistance to the popular forms of telling stories of Queer lives with HIV/AIDS and proposes remembrance outside of the archive.

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