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Towards a Destructive, Unmonumental, Queer Hagiography: Félix González Torres and the Spiritual- Activist Potential of Destruction

Daniel Santiago Sáenz Tabares
Concordia University, danielsaenzt@gmail.com

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Félix González Torres and the Spiritual-Activist Potential of Destruction

Daniel Santiago Sáenz Tabares

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta una discusión sobre dos obras del artista cubano-norteamericano Félix González Torres, centrándose principalmente en las estrategias destructivas y el potencial teológico de su obra. Comenzando con un análisis de las dimensiones activistas y contra-monumentales de *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* y *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)* (1991), el artículo examina estas dos piezas, así como la vida del artista en general, a través de los lentes del martirio queer y de la teología queer para postular una toma hagiográfica de la vida y obra de González Torres. Lejos de un estudio biográfico definitivo, este artículo es el resultado de una investigación interdisciplinaria mezclada con la imaginación queer.

Palabras claves: Hagiografía, Arte Contemporáneo, Félix González Torres, Martirio Queer, Escultura.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta uma discussão sobre duas obras do artista cubano-norteamericano Félix González Torres, com ênfase nas estratégias destrutivas e no potencial teológico de seu trabalho. A partir de uma análise das dimensões ativistas e antimonumentais de *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) e *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)* (1991), o artigo examina essas duas peças, bem como a vida do artista em geral através da lente do martírio e da teologia queer para aplicar uma abordagem hagiográfica sobre a vida e obra de González Torres. Longe de um estudo biográfico definitivo, este artigo é o resultado de uma pesquisa interdisciplinar misturada com a imaginação queer.

Palavras-chave: Hagiografia, Arte Contemporânea, Félix González Torres, Martírio Queer, Escultura.

Abstract

This article presents an examination of two artworks by the late Cuban-American artist Félix González Torres, focusing primarily on the destructive strategies and theological potential of his work. After describing the activist and counter-monumental dimensions of *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) and *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)* (1991), the author examines these two pieces, as well as the artist's life more generally, through the lens of queer martyrdom and queer theology to postulate a hagiographic take on González Torres' life and *oeuvre*. Far from a definitive biographical study, this analysis is the result of interdisciplinary research mixed with queer imagination.

Keywords: Hagiography, Contemporary Art, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Queer Martyrdom, Sculpture.

Daniel Santiago Sáenz Tabares

Aspiring historian of Hispanic visual and religious cultures born in Medellín, Colombia and based in Montréal, Canada. His research examines the intersections of sanctity and masculinity in the Early Modern transatlantic world, Counter-Reformation spirituality, art, and art theory in Europe and the so-called New World, as well as the pedagogical role of images in the Christianization of the Americas. He holds a B.A. with Great Distinction, Honours in Religion and Art History from Concordia University (2016), where he is currently pursuing a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)- and Fonds de Recherche du Québec - Société et Culture (FRQSC)-funded Master's degree in Art History.

Introduction

Cuban-American artist Félix González Torres (Cuba, 1957 - U.S., 1996, hereinafter referred to as «FGT») is known for creating artworks that required the viewer's participation and that could only fulfill their function by disappearing into the body politic as the public took the candy or paper sheets with them (Kornblau, 1994: 52). His work remains compelling for many and has generated a great deal of art-historical scholarship. The following article takes up a small part in this larger debate by examining FGT's use of destructive strategies in two of his candy-based works, namely *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) and *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)* (1991).

In particular, I am interested in the hagiographic and queer potential of these sculptures, and perhaps of FGT's work and life more generally. Thus, the article argues that FGT deploys destructive strategies to create counter-monuments, which acquire particular significance in the age of HIV/AIDS and can in turn be used in the construction of a queer hagiographical discourse surrounding the late artist. The article begins by drawing the methodological boundaries that inform the argument. Then, following a formal analysis of the sculptures, it discusses the erection of counter-monuments through the use of destruction. It concludes by discussing these installations as queer relics to examine the hagiographical potential of FGT's work.

A Note on Methodology

In this article, I attempt to deploy a destructive, queer, theological methodology to shed light on the works of FGT. As such, this tripartite approach draws from notions of counter-monumentality and unmonumentality (Young, 1992; Hoptman, 2007), destructive tendencies as a viral strategy (Chambers-Letson, 2009), as well as Queer Theory and Theology (Althaus-Reid, 2003; Boisvert, 2004; Wilcox, 2012; Méndez-Montoya, 2014; Janes, 2015). This combination is in many ways the result of my positionality vis-à-vis FGT's work. I come to his work as a Latino living in Canada —Félix and I share the experience of being expats—and as someone raised in the Catholic tradition but who felt the need to cut all ties with

the Roman Catholic Church upon realizing that my interest in paintings of male saints had more to do with their muscular, scantily-clad bodies than the Roman Catholic Church would allow. I also come to his work as someone with a deep-rooted interest in the study of religion and the history of art. It should be clear that, although this article is largely art-historical, I am not a historian extensively trained in the study of contemporary art. I state this not as an apology, but because it might help the reader make sense of my chaotic, at times subjective, at times emotional writing — but then again, is *any* writing, academic or not, ever objective? I make therefore no claim to universality and objectivity, but rather to some degree of methodological liberty that makes interdisciplinary work possible.

I am of course aware of the potential problems and methodological dead-ends of the approach I propose to undertake. My defence is twofold. First, I strongly believe that academic discourse can —and should!— be *re*invigorated by inter- and multi-disciplinary research. This is why I follow the proposal of queer theorist Judith Halberstam (1998) for a queer methodology which, borrowing frameworks from a number of disciplines, «collects and produces information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour» (p. 13). What has been excluded in the literature consulted for this article was the —likely unintended— spiritual nature of FGT's work. It is worth noting that in an interview with Ross Bleckner (1995), FGT stated that «[...] I'm an atheist. I'm 100% atheist». I am therefore well aware that FGT did not intent his work to be religious, but his intention does not undermine the myriad of possibilities that emerge from reception and interpretation. Moreover, the constant *aggiornamiento* of his work was of utmost importance to FGT, a fact that comes up in much of the literature on his work. As such, reinterpreting his artworks through the lens of religious studies and queer theology seems not only valid, but also appropriate.

Second, I am not saying that art-historical methodologies are not interesting or useful enough. *Au contraire,* art historians and critics have been *quite* prolific in writing about Félix's work. Art historian Mark Clintberg (2008: 8), in the course of the research for his M.A. thesis, uncovered over six hundred publications on

FGT, ranging from monographs to lifestyle magazines. This was almost ten years ago. As such, the potential to write an original essay on FGT, or at least one that is more compelling and creative than a regurgitation of previously-stated facts, although not impossible, remains an overwhelming task, perhaps too large for the scope of this article. Instead, by deploying methodological strategies from other disciplines, I intend to rekindle the conversation on the subject and inspire, either through agreement or sharp criticism, conversations on destructive strategies and queer religiosities in contemporary sculptural practices.

Describing Monuments without Monumentality

My discussion of FGT's works in this article is informed by notions of monumentality or, more precisely, the 'lack' thereof. As I discuss later in the essay, these portraits of—and monuments to— specific people are not as imposing as traditional monuments tend to be, at least in comparison to the Statue of Liberty (United States), the Taj Mahal (India), Mount Rushmore (United States), *Cristo Redentor* (Brazil), and so on. Curator and writer Laura Hoptman (2007) writes that

> [i]f the term 'monumental' connotes massiveness, timelessness and public significance, the neologism 'un-monumental' is meant to describe a kind of sculpture that is not against these values (as in 'anti-monumental') but intentionally lacks them. Most obviously, the piecemeal, jury-rigged or put-together state of these new sculptures lends a distinct sense of contingency (p. 138).

The materials used —everyday, ordinary, perhaps even perishable objects— and the mode of assemblage —toppled, pulverized, fragmented— that Hoptman refers to, and to some extent those by FGT, intentionally lack the monumental qualities of their predecessors that denote massiveness, timelessness, and public significance, which leads to the «destruction of the symbols of artistic permanence» (Hoptman, 2007: 138). The concept of unmonumentality is therefore useful in making sense of FGT's sculptures under consideration, which are not only made out of ephemeral, mundane, unmonumental materials (candies), but also

put into question the idea of artistic permanence by disappearing as the viewers take candies with them and then re-appearing as the gallery or museum refill the piles to fulfil their contractual obligations.[1]

Another framework that informs my discussion is FGT's use of destructive strategies. The premise for this analysis is the relationship between the (self-)destruction of the candy piles and the dissemination of specific messages, spreading amongst the population like a virus. In an interview with Maurizio Cattelan (2007; see also Chambers-Letson, 2009: 559), FGT confessed that

> At this point I do not want to be outside the structure of power, I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative to what, to power? No, I want to have power. It's effective in terms of change. I *want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. If I function like a virus, an imposter, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions*. Money and capitalism and powers are here to stay, at least for the moment. It's within those structures that change can and will take place. My embrace is a strategy related to my initial rejection (italics mine).

FGT juxtaposes his artistic and political strategy to a viral infection: infiltrate the host, reproduce, change the system. This strategy is executed through the destruction of his work: as the candies leave the pile, they spread all over and carry with them Félix's political messages, which seek to reduce «the conditions of capitalist exploitation and (related forms of) structural racism, heterosexism, sexism, and class subordination» (Chambers-Letson, 2009: 560). Performance scholar Josh Tanako Chambers-Letson (2009) describes the working of this viral strategy as follows:

[1] The perpetual replenishment of the objects that make up FGT's work is one of the guidelines stipulated in the certificates of authenticity *qua* contracts, a subject that has been examined by some scholars. See Clintberg (2008: 2-3); Chambers-Letson (2009: 579); and on the replenishable nature of Félix's work Spector (2007: vii & 154).

> [...] Gonzalez-Torres structured his pieces as carriers or hosts infected with the artist's viruses. *These viruses might be otherwise understood as his ideological critique of dominant structures of power, posed to the spectator as he or she engaged with the piece*. Through the encounters with a specific piece, then, a spectator also came into contact with the artist's virus, potentially contracting the virus by engaging with the work and also becoming a carrier of the infection, *spreading the virus through the body politic as he or she continued to engage with the political questions posed by Gonzalez-Torres's art* (p. 560, italics mine).

As the viewers engage with FGT's works by taking pieces of candy with them, they *literally* and *figuratively* bring his political message outside the gallery or museum and disseminate it amongst the body politic. As such, the destruction of the candy piles is a *sine qua non* step in this process of infection and dissemination of messages which have social justice at their core (Chambers-Letson, 2009: 561).

Having established our methodological boundaries, it is important to provide a description of the artworks under consideration or, to put it in the words of art theorist W. J. T. Mitchell (1994), «to put language at the service of vision» (p. 153). This endeavour is as challenging as it is necessary—the works of FGT are highly performative and dialectic in nature, and so they only function insofar as the viewer interacts with them (Bacal, 2013: 105). I have, however, never experienced these installations firsthand, and so I rely on secondary accounts and videos to understand the affective and phenomenological dimensions of his works. As such, my *ekphrasis* [a thick visual description] might not do justice to the lived realities of FGT's sculptures, but it is worth a try.

The first sculpture under consideration is *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*. We have a pile of multi-coloured candies, often placed in a corner, the cellophane shining under the spotlights—green, yellow (golden?), blue, red, white (silver?), and orange. The ideal weight of this pile is one-hundred and seventy-five pounds (Chambers-Letson, 2009: 561). The shiny, colourful glare of the candies stands in stark contrast to the white walls of the gallery,

and its form is marked by overflow and excess (of candies, of colour, of texture). The juxtaposition of this pile with the artwork on its right is compelling: the former, an outpour of matter, the latter, limited and constrained by the boundaries of its frame. With no curatorial label nearby, the materiality of *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* nevertheless incites the haptic and invites the viewer to engage with it, not in disinterested contemplation, but to physically lower herself and touch the work, taking one candy with her. Although the basic composition and the call for viewers' participation remain more-or-less the same throughout the pieces considered in this article, we shall nevertheless discuss the material aspect of another one.

The second sculpture to be discussed in the article is *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)*. This pile, with an ideal weight of three-hundred and fifty-five pounds (Spector, 2007: 154), is made of blue-and-white candies wrapped in transparent cellophane. Perhaps less eye-catching than *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* due to the minimalist use of colder colours, *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)* is almost two-hundred pounds heavier (and in visual terms, larger) than the former. The white and blue on each candy makes a swirl, a sign that brings to mind ideas of union, embraces, and intimacy, a connotation that is hinted at by the subtitle of the piece.

These installations present a challenge to dominant aesthetic codes in the museum. Geographer Tim Edensor (2005) writes that

> One crucial way of ordering the material world is through the installation of particular aesthetic codes which determine or influence the placing of objects, their subjection to particular arrangements of display informed by standardized notions about how they should be best highlighted or showcased. [...] objects are organized in categories, situated a proper distance from each other, placed against uncluttered backgrounds, labelled, lighted, hung, or raised on a dais to claim the attention of shoppers, visitors or neighbours (pp. 320-321).

Although FGT follows aesthetic codes of his own, his pieces nevertheless go against the codes set in place by museums and galleries for the display of artworks. To begin with, touching, which is usually forbidden in exhibition spaces, is *necessary* in FGT's

work. The nature of these installations demands that the viewer crouch and look down in order to interact with the art. Rather than gazing and moving on, viewers are invited to fully experience the material qualities of the work through sight and touch. The haptic dimension is often times forbidden in the exhibition space, and although widely available to us in the everyday life, we seldom stop to consider and experience the matter out of which things are made. This is not what we are used to in museums, where often times artworks are placed on the walls in an organized, logical manner. In fact, FGT challenges the hierarchy that is created by the positioning of artworks on walls or atop plinths, and instead make the floor the focus of attention. The candies are piled up on the floor, denying the need for a pedestal or a dais, demanding that attention be paid to the work alone. By rejecting the aesthetic codes of the exhibition space, these clutters of candies elicit an embodied experience.

Counter-Monumentality as a Commemorative Strategy

So far, I have referred to these works as either installations, candy spills, piles, or sculptures but I suggest that we refer to these two works as counter-monuments instead. In my methodology, I mentioned that these works consciously lack monumentality as a strategy to undermine the notion of artistic permanence. This is most evident in the fact that FGT created «an art that could essentially disappear by availing itself for the taking» (Spector, 2007: vii). This impermanence, however, is complicated by the constant replenishment of the candy stock (Güner, 2016; Moore, 2004: 166). Thus, it appears that these monuments vanish over and over again, the cycle of destruction and replenishment is a continuous one. Elaborating on the counter-monuments and writings of Jochen Gerz, Scholar of English and Judaic Studies James E. Young (1992) writes that

> By inviting its own violation, the (counter-)monument humbles itself in the eyes of beholders accustomed to maintaining a respectful, decorous distance. It forces viewers to desanctify the memorial, demystify it, and become its equal. The counter-monument denaturalizes

> what the Gerzes feel is an artificial distance between artist and public generated by the holy glorification of art. Ultimately, such a monument undermines its own authority by inviting and then incorporating the authority of passersby (p. 279).

It appears that the candy spills are doing just that: offering themselves to the will of the viewer, inviting their own destruction, bridging the gap between the spectator and the artwork. By encouraging the participation of the public, they appropriate the nature of monuments (Young, 1992: 279). By definition, memorials are a reminder of something that is absent, and the candy spills do this quite well: they reproduce the absences of the people they commemorate, over and over again (Young, 1992: 290). Through the cycle of destruction and replenishment, FGT's counter-monuments escape «the actual consequence of a memorial's unyielding fixedness in space», which Young (1992: 294) describes as «its death over time: a fixed image created in one time and carried over into a new time suddenly appears archaic, strange, or irrelevant altogether.» This process is indeed related to FGT's work. According to gallerist Andrea Rosen, FGT «believed that change was the only way to make the work remain pertinent and relevant. He often said that if the work was not culturally relevant at ant moment in time, it should not be manifested» (as quoted in Chambers-Letson, 2009: 580-581). Thus, the very existence and *raison d'être* of Félix's counter-monuments are, in fact, their continuous destruction.

The counter-monumental dimension of these works can be enhanced by the writings of Robert Smithson (1938-1973). In «A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,» Smithson (1995) introduces the concept of ruins in reverse, «that is—all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built» (Smithson, 1995: 72). Thus, FGT's counter-monuments are not destroyed *after* every single candy has been taken away, but are destroyed since the very beginning. When asked if he was worried about viewers destroying his work, FGT responded, «No. I have destroyed it already, from day one», and later «I destroy the work before I make it» (Cattelan, 2007). As such, by questioning and

transgressing the concept of time, FGT's counter-monument rise into destruction and, as ruins in reverse, are destroyed from day one.

Having established that FGT's candy spills are destruction-centred counter-monuments, we may now address who they commemorate. As the name indicates, *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* is a reminder of Félix's late lover, Ross Laycock, who passed away following a battle with HIV/AIDS. The colourful candies that make up this counter-monument are Fruit Flasher, Ross' favourite, and their collective weight correspond to his ideal weight (Chambers-Letson, 2009: 561). Anthony Easton (2013) —a queer theologian, artist, fellow scholar of religion, and friend— wrote that «[y]ou would take the candy, and the candy pile would disappear. One would think, that the candy pile would be empty. The wasting would be like the physical death». Indeed, the materiality of Ross' portrait is linked to the materiality of Ross' body; the diminishing weight of the pile mirrored the diminishing weight of his body as witnessed by Félix (Chambers-Letson, 2009: 561-562). The artist, in an interview with Ross Bleckner (1995), describes his experience in a moving passage that deserves to be cited at length:

> He [Ross] was 195 pounds, he could build you a house if you asked him to. It's amazing, I know you've seen it the same way I've seen it, *this beautiful, incredible body, this entity of perfection just physically, thoroughly disappear right in front of your eyes*. [...] *Just disappear like a dried flower*. The wonderful thing about life and love, is that sometimes the way things turn out is so unexpected. *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. One time he asked me for the pills to commit suicide. I couldn't give him the pills. I just said, "Honey, you have fought hard enough, you can go now. You can leave. Die."

As a counter-monument, one that disappears and reappears through destruction and replenishment, *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* commemorates the diminishing body of Ross. It is important that FGT's counter-monument of Ross was *not* an

idealized reminder and instead centres on the experience and changing body of someone living with HIV/AIDS, of someone he loved when he «was becoming less of a person.» This counter-monuments demands that we stop simply *looking* at people living with HIV/AIDS, and instead demands that we listen to Félix's story of love loss, over and over again.[2]

«Untitled» (Lover Boys) works in a similar manner, but this time around the weight of the pile is equal to that of both Félix and Ross. According to curator Nancy Spector (2007), this is, in fact, a portrait of two men in love. She writes that

> Each act of consumption registers, metaphorically, a momentary fusion of bodies. In its endlessly replenishable structure, this sculpture insists (as of all the candy spills) on the mutability of the body in its best for sensual and emotional enjoyment. But in its excessive generosity—its willingness to give itself away to any admiring beholder—the sculpture risks the danger of total dissipation (Spector, 2007: 154).

As such, the dispersion of the candy involves the viewer in this amorous portrait, expanding the boundaries of intimacy and eroticism. *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)*, in its willingness to give pleasure to the point of risking total dissipation, reminds us that «the twin concepts of *eros* and *thanatos* (sex and death) have always stood in harmony, spurring artistic production as well as the most obtuse forms of spiritual and erotic ecstasy» (Boisvert, 2004: 45). Thus, as a counter-monument, *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)* speaks to this paradox, where the willingness to give and love generously (*eros*) is ultimately linked to total dissipation (*thanatos*). This is not, however, a moralizing tale, but rather a story of love and loss where participants are active agents in the enjoyment and dissipation of the counter-monument, of the couple itself.

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[2] This recalls some of the early pamphlets by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power: «STOP LOOKING AT US; START LISTENING TO US» (Reed, 2011: 209, capital letters in the original).

No Such Thing as a Selfless Gift

Another equally important dimension of these two sculptures is their function as gifts. At first sight, we think that FGT is freely giving sweets to viewers, a lovely act of generosity. Following the model set by French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1970), we know that «although the prestations and counter-prestations take place under a voluntary guise they are in essence strictly obligatory, and their sanction is private or open warfare» (p. 3). No gift is ever free and always arrives with the expectation that the receiver will give something in return. What viewers are expected to do in return could be, perhaps, to bear witness to the stories told in the counter-monuments. Perhaps viewers are given the task to propagate the artist's goal of social justice, which FGT declared on a regular basis, «I'm still proposing the radical idea of trying to make this a better place for everyone» (as quoted in Chambers Letson, 2009: 581). Clintberg (2008) argues that

> [e]nveloping his politics in what appears to be a benevolent and neutral gift, Gonzalez-Torres attempts to infiltrate institutions that might otherwise be resistant to his beliefs and values. The framework of the gift could disarm its receiver or host, who may not be suspect that these gifts are intended for argument (p. 68).

By disguising his political messages as innocent gifts, FGT's viral strategy becomes all the more successful: viewers and institutions alike welcome them with open arms and carry them out into the world. These gifts allow FGT to spread his criticism of governmental and medical inaction in the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He criticizes the system that allowed AIDS-related illnesses to become, by 1992, the leading cause of death among North Americans between the ages of 25-44 (Reed, 2011: 208). FGT's gifts are not uninterested, they demand that we hear this criticism and that we partake in it.

FGT's gifts can also be interpreted as addressing issues related to immigration. The dispersion of the candies and the disappearance of the candy piles bring to mind the experience of diaspora. As the candies leave the piles, travelling from one room to another, from the exhibition space into the public space and

then back into the private space, they evoke experiences of crossing borders. In doing so, spectators become active participants in migration processes. This, I believe, is important. Often, immigrants are seen as threatening and disruptive, our mere presence creates a sense of danger at personal, social, and political levels. Evidence of this can be found in increasing xenophobia in North America and Europe—particularly anti-Muslim sentiment, as well as fear of radicalization and terrorism, but this can also be felt in Donald Trump's anti-Latinx rhetoric. Not only are immigrants seen as a threat to national values, but also quite literally as carriers of biological diseases (Chambers-Letson, 2009: 663-564). However, FGT's strategies encourage his audience to walk in the shoes of those living in diaspora, which could be part of the messages disseminated through his gifts.

Queer Martyrdom, Hagiography, and Eucharist

The following section of this project is one that I draw from my years as a student of religion. Trailing in the footsteps of queer theologians, my goal is to put religion —in this case, Roman Catholicism— in conversation with the queer subjects of FGT's sculptures. In doing so, I hope to centre queer bodies and queer sexuality in religious discourse and highlight what Melissa M. Wilcox (2012) has described as

> the rampant presence of homoeroticism within the culture of the Church, to boisterously shatter the glass closet that the Church has been trying so hard to paint over in the past decade, especially in its ban on admitting gay men to seminary (p. 246).

In this way, I aim to examine the political —and sexual— strategies of FGT through the lens of theological discourse and also question the history of Christian dogma through the materiality of Félix's viruses. With this in mind, and drawing inspiration from scholar of religion and sexuality Donald L. Boisvert, I suggest that FGT could be considered a queer saint. As such, some of the pages in this essay postulate the hagiography, that is the story and life, of Saint Félix.

A Hagiography of Dissent

What does it mean to create a queer hagiography? This endeavour is largely inspired by Boisvert's book, *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints* (2004), as well as the years that I spent working under his supervision. On the topic of gay hagiography, Boisvert (2004) writes that

> In some ways, this book is a preliminary attempt at crafting a gay hagiography. I mean this in a dual sense: first, as the search for a gay interpretation of traditionally [Roman] Catholic images of sanctity; and second, as a unique hagiographic 'take' on gay icons and personages (p. 14).

For the purpose of this article, I am particularly interested in the latter sense, that is, Boisvert's hagiographic take on the lives of gay icons. This endeavour is evident in theorist David M. Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995), two essays that examine «how different people people on various sides of recent culture wars have responded to the challenge that Foucault has posed to our established ways of thinking, reading, writing, and doing politics» (p. 14). Thus, such hagiographic approach is less concerned with the spiritual dimension of sainthood, and more with social role that these gay icons have played. After all, as Boisvert (2004: 15) points out, saints have important sociological and cultural roles; they are, in fact, socially and culturally charged constructs that *represent* something about the culture or society they emerge from.

This hagiographic endeavour, however, does not intend to sanitize or normalize the lives of gay icons. After writing that «[a]s far as I'm concerned, [Foucault] was a fucking saint,» Halperin (1995) notes the following:

> Not that I imagine Foucault to have led either a sexually or a morally perfect life. [...] But if Foucault did not have to to lead a perfect life in order to qualify as an object of my worship, I certainly do consider him to have led an intellectually and politically exemplary life. I believe he grasped his total political situation as a gay intellectual and scholar better than anyone else has ever done. Moreover, Foucault's acute and constantly revised understanding of his own social location enabled him to devise some unsystematic but effective modes

> of resistance to the shifting discursive and institutional conditions which circumscribed his own practice. As I shall argue, it was that ability to reflect critically on and to respond politically to the circumstances that both enabled and constrained his own activity that accounts for why Foucault's life—as much as or perhaps more than his work—continues to serve as a compelling model for an entire generation of scholars, critics, and activists (pp. 6-7).

Living a morally or sexually perfect life is not important in our effort to craft a queer hagiography. What matters is the social, intellectual, and in our case artistic, strategies and consequences of these saints' lives. Of course, I do not intend to compare FGT to Michel Foucault, but Halperin's rationale for Foucault's sanctity can be helpful in clarifying my call for a queer hagiography of FGT. Félix understood his situation as an artist, a gay man, and a person living with HIV/AIDS, an understanding that led him to devise artistic strategies to both resist and infiltrate institutions and systems of power in order to spread his political messages.

To be sure, a call for a queer hagiography is not a call for queer icons to fit established or normative standards, whether moral or hagiographic. Quite the contrary, marginality and indecency become central to queer sanctity. In her discussion of Batuque worship in Brazil, the late Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003) wrote that

> Holiness then becomes a category of the marginalized, when we consider that the saint is meant to be an outsider to society, not in the sense of failing to participate actively in the political life of her community, but due to her dissenting role. It is participation in the transformation of the structures of society which marks the distance from the centres of order and power. That is Queer dissent, and divine dissent, as in prophetic or other models surrounding the idea of Holy women and men (p. 160).

Dissent, whether political, spiritual, or sexual, is according to Althaus-Reid a defining characteristic of holiness. Hugo Córdova Quero's (2014) reflection on the life of Althaus-Reid reminds us of the humane and humane dimension of sanctity. He writes that

> [t]here is a need to «normalize» and «sanitize» the saint's life in order to make it almost «perfect». [...] However, there is another kind of «holiness» which is not governed by perfection, but by its opposite, namely, imperfection, fragility and potentiality. [...] Saints are not super-heroes who can do almost everything; rather, they are individuals who have incarnated and embodied the depths of our humanity.

Thus, sanctity is not the result of virtue and perfection—quite the contrary. Saints are not holy *despite* their marginality and indecency, but rather *because* of it. FGT's dissenting role and his will to transform the structures of society are clear in his activist strategies, both artistic and political, in the age of HIV/AIDS and government inaction. To be sure, there are some overlaps between HIV/AIDS and religious discourses during this period. In the early days of the plague, conservative politicians framed HIV/AIDS as divine punishment for homosexual acts (Reed, 2001: 208). Moreover, Althaus-Reid (2003) argues that «paths to sanctity are the ones which tend to privilege marginal locations, in the sense of being located sites of struggle and non-conformity» (pp. 160-161). That FGT operated at the intersection of various sites of struggle and non-conformity is clear; he was a Cuban-American gay man living with HIV. FGT, however, did not claim victimhood and instead found agency in his artistic and political practice. This agency is indeed part of queer holiness because «queer dissidents in search of paths of holiness through social practices of justice in sexual, religious, and political areas of their lives might well be reducing the hetero-God and church to impotency» (Althaus-Reid, 2003: 165). In the case of FGT, his social practice of justice takes place in social, political, and artistic areas. As a queer dissident on the path of holiness, Félix and his unmonumental monuments work to reduce heteronormativity and serophobia by making two seropositive gay men the subject—and also the medium— of his political messages. His holiness, then, is the product of his dissent and his actions of social justice (Althaus-Reid, 2003: 170).

Another trail in the path to queer holiness is that of queer martyrdom. Historian Dominic Janes (2015: 9) introduced the concept of queer martyrdom to describe a state of male Christian suffering and witness that, due to its inclusion of gender and sexual transgression, came to stand outside the boundaries of Victorian gender and sexual norms. «Queer martyrdom», Janes (2015)

writes, «could encompass both attempts to accommodate sexual deviance within the realm of Christian moral witness and the attempted manipulation of Christian imagery of martyrdom in the cause of sexual liberation» (p. 9). As discussed above, my intention here is not to reconcile marginalized sexualities and Christianity—I do not see any opposition to begin with—but the the idea of queer martyrdom, with its will to sexual liberation, is certainly useful. Through the lens of Althaus-Reid's queer holiness and Janes' queer martyrdom, Félix, Ross, and those who succumbed to the plague can also be seen as martyrs. Boisvert (2004) writes that

> Gay men, by virtue of their marginal social positioning throughout history, and in many different cultural contexts, have long been the helpless victims of unbridled state or religious power structures. We have long been martyrs, very convenient and expendable scapegoats. Whether it be those who were burned on the pyres in the Middle Ages, those used for medical experimentation in Nazi concentration camps, those left behind to die in the early years of the AIDS scare because of political and medical neglect, those still executed in Islamic countries for the so-called crime of sodomy, or those beaten savagely by thugs on a drunken Saturday night in any North American city: all, in fact, are martyrs (p. 187).

To claim sanctity for these martyrs is not to erase their sexuality and desires. Instead, the making of queer saints is an empowering endeavour, a commemoration that in fact *centres* their sexual and political dissent within the confines of religious economies.

This hagiographic endeavour draws from an existing tradition of saint-making among LGBTQ scholars. Janes (2015) writes that

> The use of the term 'saint' to apply to prominent gay men who died of AIDS was widespread in the late twentieth century, including in the scholarly community, as for instance in the case of David Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995). Halperin admired the Frenchman as an exemplary individual and thinker. Above all he saw Foucault as a liberatory figure. Rather than being enmeshed and trapped by power, he writes that the 'kind of power Foucault is interested in, then, far from enslaving its objects, constructs them as subjective agents and preserves them in their autonomy, so as to invest them all the more completely.' But that is also what Christian saints and martyrs can be

> understood to have experienced, and it is what gives their actions such significance in relation to the development of regimes for the production of the self. Queer martyrdom, therefore, is a state that can be applied to create a sense of exalted drama around the sufferings and privations of sexual and gender deviants, and it can be employed in personal scripts of the creation of the self or can be imputed to others (p. 12).

David Halperin (1995: 6) has claimed sainthood for Michel Foucault. I wish to do the same with these queer martyrs, but especially so with FGT whose counter-monuments remain, to this day, affective memorials to the pain inflicted upon our queer siblings, the loss of a lover, and the experience of living with HIV/AIDS. Just like FGT's work, hagiography can be, and should be, reinterpreted in a new light, adapting from generation to generation, lest they lose their relevance (Boisvert, 2004: 17). Saint Félix and other queer martyrs remind us of the unavoidable links between the gay lover and the gay activist, roles that gay men cannot escape insofar as our desire for other men brings about discrimination, violence, and systematic oppression (Boisvert, 2004: 200).

Relics and Communion in Queer Times

In the queer hagiography of FGT, *«Untitled» (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* and *«Untitled» (Lover Boys)* function as relics. Relic, from the Latin *relinquere* [to leave behind], refers to the remains, body parts, and objects from a saint that are *left behind* after her or his death (Schopen, 1998: 256). They are «objects of memory which speak to a community's notion of holiness.» (McDannell, 1995: 42). In our study, the candies that we take from FGT's piles are relics imbued with the queer holiness discussed above. To be sure, holiness is not confined to one fixed space, but instead can be de-localized and transferred from one space to another or to a person through the circulation of relics—a process called translation (McDannell 1995: 136). That is to say, the queer holiness and will to social justice in FGT's *oeuvre* does not reside solely in his piles, but can instead be transferred and spread among the body politic through each individual candy. Relics, by definition, necessitate destruction, not only in the sense of martyrdom and death, but also

in the destruction of the body, where different body parts are taken from the remains and placed in reliquaries. The counter-monuments discussed in this article do just that: they are a reminder of the sacrificial death of these martyrs and destroy themselves in order to spread in society. Adding on to the discussion of viral strategies, these relics contain FGT's political messages and hopes for a better future. To take one candy is to participate in a network of relationships and activism.

Before concluding, it is important to discuss the Eucharistic potential of these pieces. Medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum (2011) writes that «the bread and wine of communion was —so Christians were taught—the actual body of God available for incorporation into the adherent's own body, even if they rarely appeared as flesh and blood» (p. 126). In Christian doctrine, the Eucharist is the moment when God makes community with the believer (Méndez-Montoya 2014: 326), when the body of Christ enters the body of the believer and thus the body politic. In the act of communion, «desire is a meeting point between divinity and humanity; God's desire for humanity embraces human desire for God. The Eucharist is a conjoining of bodies of desire» (Méndez-Montoya, 2014: 335). Similarly, FGT offers us his own body and that of Ross, both marked by governmental inaction and the unfulfilled hope for a cure, in the form of sweet treats (Easton, 2013). The ephemerality of the body, especially in this case the body with HIV/AIDS, is acknowledged—the piles and the bodies are bound to disappear. This ephemerality, however, is met with a «hope that the AIDS body will be returned and restored. The death cannot occur without the resurrection» (Easton, 2013). This hope for restoration, which is mimicked by the replenishment of the candy piles, becomes particularly important in queer times. Halberstam (2005) writes that

> Queer time perhaps emerges most spectacularly, at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibility have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic. The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and [...] squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand (p. 2).

Although FGT's can be read as providing hope and an alternative to the finitude of queer time, I would argue that it also provides an alternative way of being in the world. Just like his candy piles are not bound to the aesthetic codes of the museum and the idea of artistic permanence, queer time is not bound to heteronormative expectations and conventions (Halberstam, 2005: 2). Queer time and FGT's candy piles are not solely about destruction, but also involve alternatives and hopes. This queer Eucharist brings about possibilities for the restructuring of society. Althaus-Reid (2003) writes that

> The consecration of the sacramental bread is still performed in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America by male, priestly hands. A sacramental act such as the Eucharist is, as in the case of the Moya ritual exchange of the town authorities, a location of power even if, as in a gift economy, it functions by demonstrating the instability of (divine) power in the name of a Jesus Christ who is, as with the Opa Laywe also an ambivalent god of failure and exchanges. What the Eucharist lacks is what in the festivities of the plaza is suggested, that is the symbolics of the exchange and the transgression of an order (as shown in the cross-dressing ceremony of women distributing bread while wrapped in male attire). The dialogical suggestion which we can take from this is that of a Eucharist in which the excluded of the sacred space of the priest, such as women, may take the role of distributing the bread and wine to the people (including the priest), while using elements which suggest the inclusion of other sexualities and their current power disbalances in society (p. 122).

FGT's candies *qua* Eucharist allows *anyone* to take on the role of distributing the bread to the people. Dissidents are then invited to perform a powerful action that has long been denied to us in the history of Roman Catholicism on account of our non-conformity and marginality. We are invited to make community with them and with each other. In both cases, we receive sacrificed bodies, which are made palatable in the form of a wafer or a candy (Easton, 2013: n.p.). We are invited to come together, united by a shared experience as racial, sexual, political, and social dissidents. From the perspective of a gay man, this queer Eucharist represents the sacrificial blood and body of those who died during the plague. We

honour their memory, we mourn their deaths, and we acknowledge their sacrifice in community.

Conclusion

Throughout this article I have drawn extensively—and creatively—from art-historical and theological sources in an attempt to not only queer hagiographical discourses, but also to examine the potentially-spiritual dimension of contemporary art, a topic that remains relatively under-studied. FGT's counter-monuments and gifts continue to nourish queer activism and imagination, thus guiding dissidents on the path of queer holiness and making Félix worthy of sanctity. This constant nourishing and flourishing is made possible by the artist's deployment of destructive strategies, which allow him to build counter-monuments that can stand the test of time and that remain relevant by inviting destruction, replenishment, and reinterpretation. It is indeed the call for reinterpretation that inspired this essay, as well as the desire to claim FGT as a queer martyr and saint. Of course, I do not expect Pope Francis to canonize FGT and I am not saying that sanctifying him is the only way of making his work and his queerness worthy of consideration. I do think, however, that queer holiness is a useful and rich lens to understand the contributions of activists to the reinvigoration of queer thought and politics.

It is clear that my call for a hagiographic take on Félix's life and work are the product of a queer imagination, and a rather subjective one at that. My position of privilege as a gay, middle-class, Latin American, cis-male student of religion and art history has certainly shaped the way I relate to FGT's work. Of course, individuals who approach his work from different positionalities may or may not disagree with me, or see little to no value in constructing a queer hagiography. I think, however, it remains important to recognize the right of queer people of faith to shape divinity in our image, and of queer folk more generally to (re)claim traditions that have historically been used against us. Perhaps the work of FGT can be a starting point to (re)consider the creative potential of destruction, not only as an aesthetic strategy, but also as a political one. Perhaps San Félix can be our Patron Saint of Indecency and Dissent, the Patron Saint of *Eros* and *Thanatos* in

the age of HIV/AIDS, and when we fight discrimination and systematic oppression, the viral strategies of our Patron Saint can inspire us to infiltrate the system and stoke the flames of Queer Revolution.

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