

## This is Not a White Page Identical to Itself

Justin Polera

A lone student stands at the bottom of the steps of the University of China in Nanjing. Her black face mask and all-black attire starkly contrasts with the one thing she holds in her hands: a blank sheet of white standard paper. The woman is perfectly still, a scenography of resistance, a memorial for ten people killed in a fire just one night before in a high-rise under strict Covid lockdown. She was joined by countless more on the steps, and soon in cities across China, all lifting sheets of white paper, an abstraction whose emptiness was full of meaning. By maintaining plausible deniability, they evaded censorship: no one could accuse them of immoral messages. Yet the masses with their paper, in the so-called White Paper Revolution, called for a multitude of things, from the end of the Zero-Covid policy to freedom of expression, and even democracy in China.

The empathic blankness of the Chinese protest "signs" recall the radical paper stacks and monochrome works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who mobilized opaque and open-ended abstraction as an insurgent oppositional stance that exploded a multiplicity of meaning while flying under government censorship. In contrast, artworks with text calling for queer rights, or stating, "the government has blood on its hands," were specifically targeted in the culture wars as some are today in the United States and in China. The white paper protests brought together a wide spectrum of students, intellectuals, factory workers, and the bourgeois because its abstraction could stand for many things rather than be explicitly limited to one thing. Gonzalez-Torres elucidated his work "*Untitled*" (*Passport*), a paper stack consisting of blank white sheets of paper, as "a chance to alter one's life and future, an empty passport for life.... A simple white object against a white wall, waiting." When the protestors in China hold up white paper or when a viewer takes a page from Gonzalez-Torres's work, the white page is emphatically not identical to itself; the meaning is created by where, when, and who is taking it up.

The work "*Untitled*" (*Public Opinion*) was similarly born out of a moment of political urgency; it was first shown in Los Angeles in 1991 in the aftermath of the widely supported Gulf War, and just months after the brutal crime of Rodney King being beaten by LAPD officers. Gonzalez-Torres's clear-wrapped black-rod candy is at once

transparent and opaque. It takes on an aporia of dialectical meanings, including rage and mourning in the black community, opposition in the public to social injustice, inequality and racism made manifest by police brutality, or a space for public discourse around demands for reform. At the same time, the color evokes the Republican agenda and the dominant culture that stigmatized minoritarian life, especially at the height of the AIDS crisis.

Gonzalez-Torres called for his candy works and most of his paper stack works to be manifested with ease, which is key to how these works operate in the world because they may exist in many places, sometimes at once. Like the White Paper Revolution, they can spring up anywhere that an authorized owner or borrower chooses to manifest them. It spreads like a virus, working as a double agent within the system. It operates in concealed and clandestine ways, infiltrating the ideological circuits of distribution. Once a single piece of candy is removed, it enters back into circulation, undetectable except that a carrier may pass it on, imbuing it again with meaning. Further, a black monochrome monolith of candy is not easily marked as a site of resistance. It maintains its right to opacity, appearing as an innocent floor sculpture. When it first appeared, "*Untitled*" (*Public Opinion*) was laid flat. Its horizontality was a black rectangle. The black monochrome is loaded with art historical lineage including the revolutionary potential of Malevich's *Black Square*, Ad Reinhardt's socially engaged, bodily oriented conscientious Black paintings, Robert Smithson's entropy pouring in *Asphalt Rundown*, the latter of which Gonzalez-Torres took even further in his candy works as they spill out into endless permutations—a triangle in a corner, on top of counters, running along floorboards, even under stairs. In not declaring itself with a single message, it is propelled forward through queer abstraction: as David J. Getsy argues, "it is a matter of survival, of thriving, and of resistance to have at one's disposal tactics of dissemblance, duplicity, masking, and code-switching."

Gonzales-Torres wanted his work to be close to the public. The work creates an arena of engagement through which viewers contribute to its meaning. In each context where it is manifested, it can resonate with recent history. The work becomes malleable, evolving, constantly vital, timeless. In his first language, Spanish, the word "manifestación" is strongly political; it is used for public protest and demonstration. As the embodiment of protest, it reimagines public monuments as mutable, communal gathering points. If an exhibitor chooses to install the work at its ideal weight of 700 pounds it may appear imposing, yet entropy is in flux. The work is fragile to the point of disappearance. But if it disappears, it may or may not be renewed.

Thus, what is shared—both in the White Paper Revolution and Gonzalez-Torres's sculpture—is unshareable, as Joshua Chambers-Letson has described "the commons of

incommensurability," and which José Esteban Muñoz named as affective—in which that which "is graspable to us is a sense rather than a politic." As the artist himself said, the work becomes "a voice not only of a more diverse contestation but also infiltration. An infiltration that upsets the expected narrative, and ultimately a voice that includes all of us, for all of us—from this room, to any other rooms. A voice that truly attempts liberation through meaning and renaming, and reordering according to our own needs."

Courtesy the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation © Justin Polera