Death and Resurrection of the Author: A Reexamination of Biography's Role in Contemporary Art

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THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE AUTHOR:
A REEXAMINATION OF BIOGRAPHY’S ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

A THESIS PAPER SUBMITTED TO
BRENTON GOOD AND THE DEPARTMENT OF VISUAL ART
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF A
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS PROJECT

BY
JOSHUA M. RAYNER

MAY 2011
And still it is not yet enough to have memories….For it is not yet the memories themselves. Not till they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them.”

—Rainer Maria Rilke, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

In 1910, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote of creation as a synthesizing of the external and internal worlds. Through a poem the two are inextricably fused, feeding each other and giving life to something that will go out from the creator and give life to others. Living breeds living for the poet as she gathers her experiences and distills them within, returning them in a form that describes the old and ushers in the new.

The same is true of any art. Poetry, sculpture, theater, all come about in the way that Rilke illustrates so beautifully; for art to happen, experiences must occur and a biography be formed. This is at the very essence what transpires, and always has; however, it has only been over the course of the past century that, as critical disciplines for the creative arts began to be more formalized with defined narratives, the element of biography began to receive attention from an evaluative standpoint. Reactions were positive or negative regarding the degree of its usage, what form it ought to take, and as many other concepts as there were critical camps.

Speaking broadly, much of the discussion has been concerned with what biography really is at its root, and whether that is communal and contextual or individual and limited; these questions became part of the process of postmodern thought growing out of modernist systems. Biography had been understood largely through structures that matched Enlightenment carry-overs, but those structures began to shift away from understanding people as tabula rasa individuals capable of self-creation (and the accompanying view of biography as a narrative of the individual) and more towards an understanding of biography as taking place on both

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\[\text{1 quoted in Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 208.}\]
individual and communal planes.\(^2\) We can now comprehend biography as existing on several levels of human experience; individuals and cultures create biographical texts, with crossover between them. In many ways the twentieth century has been defined by the growing pains of this conceptual shift, as modernist ideas played themselves out to their logical conclusions, were found to be wanting, and postmodernist movements attempted to fill the gaps.

A great deal of this philosophical change has been disseminated by the arts.\(^3\) An understanding, then, of the role of biography in visual art is vital for a well-rounded apprehension of what art accomplishes. The following will examine the way in which art can employ biography appropriately and inappropriately, referencing thoughts and writings about the relationship between the internal and external, the role of the author, humanity’s archival tendency, and relational aesthetics. From this overview of writing on the topic, I will present a handful of contemporary artists who demonstrate the biographical paradigm in particularly overt ways.

Before anything can be understood about postmodern views of biography, the question of authorship and its purpose must be answered. Who, exactly, is the biography describing? Roland Barthes’ essay *The Death of the Author* is a succinct encapsulation of critical thought on the subject. Barthes argues for an entirely changed view of writing and, by extension, creation in general. The author herself is not actually the author of the work; rather, she is the compiler of information or experience, all of which is actually shared and is universally relatable to

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\( ^2\) To reiterate, this is a very sweeping generalization of this change; clearly there are early standouts, such as the popularization of Marx and Engels, before the twentieth century, but I am addressing changes in popular thought and that thought’s activation in society on a large (global) level.

\( ^3\) As will be demonstrated in the following, this is primarily due to the intertextual aspect of biography as a key component of artwork.
everyone. A work is relatable and, even more profoundly, is only legible or understandable to the reader because the work draws from what everyone knows. The author does not create new content; content is rearranged, retranslated, reordered. The earlier semiotic systems’ approach to placing and structuring signs and signifiers and myths is thus flipped on its head. The system of opposition that was the cornerstone of modernism is rendered meaningless by this idea of communal authorship, since author and readers can be seen as sharing essentially the same role. In fact, it can almost be said that the role is reversed; the author is “merely” the presenter, while the reader is the primary interpreter (not, as with a modernist view, a god-like author who is able to decide what the final meaning of the text is).

Because of this the possibilities for the text are as limitless as the text itself, and the text is very far-reaching as it is entirely composed of multiple writings. It is not the reader’s job, then, to decipher or decode the text, which would wrongly imply some type of outside “key” (likely in the possession of the author). The act of reading must be reconsidered and seen in terms of untangling meaning from the threads that compose the text. The meaning is in the entanglement, the arrangement, not in something mysteriously buried within the language. A work is simply composed of lines of references gathered together by an author, lines that are at anyone’s disposal; this idea can be magnified to extend beyond writing to all of society and experience. There is a larger text of human experience, and each experience is subtext, a reference but also an addition.

From this understanding of the nature of language, and language as metaphor for everything, grow the primary advances of postmodern thought. Mikhail Bakhtin was similarly influential for the genesis of postmodern literary criticism with his parallel writings on intertextuality. The notion that every subtext exists in relation to not only a greater text but a
multiplicity of other subtexts is foundational for the postmodern rejection of systems of opposition; the resulting, ongoing dialogue is not progressive or unilateral but is instead multilateral. There is a change in how we think of “progress” from a linear, time-based movement to a spreading and activation of more ideas, as well as a fuller understanding of a set of interrelated issues (generated by an exploration of all the viewpoints that could have an impact).\(^4\) Autonomy or fetishism of the work or art object has no place, as meaning is actually generated through the relationships, contradictory or unified, of the varying dialogues. A central tenet of modernism was the idea of progress and perfection. Hegel’s system of thesis to antithesis to synthesis, and subsequent adaptations, assumes that history or society is constantly moving (or, ought to be moving) from a state of less perfection or purity or wholeness to a more complete state; the implication is that progress takes on “moral” value, that what is considered to be more pure is intrinsically better than all preceding it. Newer must be better because it will have synthesized the purer parts of the preceding thesis and antithesis; purity began to be conflated with morality. Barthes and Bakhtin set the stage for a rethinking of this chronological snobbery by demonstrating that there is not only one thread or narrative or geist, but many.

The implications of this are far-reaching. Margins, outsider, feminist and queer theory could not fully exist so long as everyone was imagining that a single path of perfection was necessary (even though, of course, those who were in the margins or working towards feminist

\(^4\) Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 34. “Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another.….Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication….Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account.”
goals were present the entire time). The advent of postmodern thought simply made possible their acknowledgment and, a step further, their advocacy.

The ideas of a comprehensive text, an empowered reader, and intertextuality thus are fundamental to an understanding of the necessity of biography in artwork. Much of the criticism of biographical methods of interpretation results from a perceived conflict between the work and the artist, that they are somehow other. While it is important to note that there are degrees of efficacy when it comes to individual works’ references and intertextuality, what is most important is to recognize that every work is, to a degree, biographical in this way. By extension, the experience of the author can be said to also be the experience of the text, or culture at large, and vice versa. Author and text co-write, and so work an influence on each other. A denial of biographical interpretation is somewhat ludicrous because any work can be seen as one great biographical reference; this type of biography is not something external or exclusive, it does not arise from the modernist cult of the author; it is instead the shared, intertextual biography.

It is helpful to recognize that we commonly think and act in everyday life as though a bifurcation of internal versus external, as well as particular versus universal, is an accurate view of reality. This delineation is actually artificial, more an accident of the mechanics of mental processing and organization than anything essential or inherent to existence or actuality; overly zealous application of the mind’s need to differentiate between internal and external qualities in order to function can lead to a false sense that the subtext is separate from the text, that the author has complete claim to the work, or that an individual can be fully separate from the whole. While viewing the world in this way may be helpful in some contexts that are more immediately bound in the physical or temporal, one does not need to mull over a subject to begin to realize that the tabula is not actually rasa and that presuppositions are not formed in isolation.
Internal qualities are fully formed and influenced by what is external, and the external is likewise completely affected by a conglomeration of internal responses; particulars and universals are entirely and eternally indebted to each other. “Biography” is essentially yet another descriptive metaphor we use to help ourselves understand this concept, but has often in its modernist usage become conflated with actual distinction: my biography as opposed to her biography.

Often forgotten are, again, the multiple biographies at play. Difference very quickly approaches inconsequentiality when it is considered that the author and the reader both share the same evolutionary history, genetic makeup, and many other factors that are shared by every member of the human species. This does not deny that the tiny percentage of biographies that deviate has no real and lasting consequence, or prohibit speaking about those differences; rather, this fully allows their discussion. An understanding of basic sameness is a motivator for freedom in exploration of difference through a positive lens.

The work can be seen as an effort to document or make sense of the play between individual and shared biographies. The tendency to create an archive, to capture and isolate for examination, is in essence an effort towards legibility of the text. By creating or examining a subtext, inferences about both subtext and text can be made. A Van Gogh painting metaphorically addresses a host of experiences; relationships between blues and golds are influenced by the biological construction of the eye, psychological interpretation that extends to questions of what is aesthetically pleasing, and many other topics. The painting is a record of these things. Because of the relationship between internal and external, there is a compellation in every person to record experience, to construct biography; the result is countless albums of baby pictures, journals, the dried out bouquet that commemorates an engagement. These things are not inherently precious, but become powerful records of a life due to their status as entries into an
archive. Michel Foucault noted that the archive cannot ever approach completion during a lifetime (and who is taking the trouble to archive or gives the archive any meaning or preciousness other than its compiler?), but that ultimately the archive is more important than the history that actually occurred, due to its limiting and focusing effect; an archive condenses history, making it more legible and, perhaps most importantly, places history into a non-linear format. Christian Boltanski tackles another side of the archival impulse; biographical creation is a way to fight against death, meaning that the archive each person constructs in her own life will alter (by adding to or changing) the shared text of human existence, contributing to its communal life. This also infers the massive importance of every individual subtext or life.

The archive has a scope that extends from individuals to communities and cultures, but is concerned more with the artifact: what is being made as representative of that biography. In support of these artifacts is anthropology, a detailing of biographical movements that helps explain how or why the threads were woven in a certain way. Joseph Kosuth’s 1975 essay *The Artist as Anthropologist* speaks directly to the increasing place of anthropological art. The overall goal of this type of work is “a non-static ‘depiction’ of art’s (and thereby culture’s) operational infrastructure.” The key is that this work is subtextual, it is not a mere recording but an activated participation in and perpetuation of the text; an author or artist sustains and adds to culture by actually using the features that she maintains. The artist is engaged, theory and ideas are read in a work but through the lens of actual praxis, making detachment impossible. Thus,


the work both depicts and alters society, referencing its cultural memory or history and the present.

The difference between an anthropologist and an author lies in the former’s necessary detachment from the culture under review; there is no impact beyond whatever small disturbance is caused by mere presence. The artist, however, has an impact because she is operating while immersed in the same socio-cultural context that formed her, meaning that her own activities not only reflect but embody the culture. There is a cycle, again of external to internal to external influences, affecting society while learning from and being affected by that same society. Kosuth understands this as the artist’s “mapping of an internalizing cultural activity in his own society.”

Hal Foster builds on these readings of anthropologically-based works to speak of ethnography as a setting for works of the margins. The title of his 1996 essay *The Artist as Ethnographer* establishes a link with Kosuth’s exposition, addressing the more particular contemporary phenomenon of ethnographic anthropology (ethnography and ethnographic work being a subtype of anthropology). Foster postulates that the ethnographic impulse in contemporary art is so widespread because it allows class distinctions to remain the way they are (for better or for worse, or even with no moral concept at all), while at the same time reaching across boundaries; most importantly, the artist can say something that communicates societal margins, while not actually moving herself into that spot. This anthropology is descriptive, meaning there is not necessarily a condemning or cynical undertone to it. Distinctions can just as

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8 Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” *Situation* (Cambridge: MIT, 2009), 74-75. The distinctive features of this type of work are natural extensions of intertextual theory: anthropology is especially prized as a science of alterity (it is concerned with what is perceived to be different from some established mainline); culture is the basis for the work; it is contextual, rooted in the everyday; ethnography arbitrates the interdisciplinary nature of the work; self-critique and awareness of the self’s place in society allows reflexivity of the ethnographer, who is at the center, while preserving a romanticism of the marginal.
often be good or fair as they can be bad or unfair, and there certainly is a respectable way to be centrist but have a fascination with the margins, while remaining in the same place. Clearly this is an interpretation of the author as less involved than what Kosuth argues and draws less from an intertextual view, but it is important to note that a treatment of ethnography does not require *direct* descent from a particular segment of society; a privileged white male can, in fact, make honest work about Latino culture without denying his own origins because both subtexts are woven together at various points. Meaning will be derived from that intermingling, as attention will be called to their relationship.

Foster also discusses two traditional epistemologies that divide the anthropological discipline.9 One stresses symbolic logic, understanding the social in terms of exchange systems; this is a linguistic, Barthesian approach, the “ideology of the text.” The other epistemology privileges “practical reason” in which the social is understood in Marxist terms of material culture. Foster suggests the actual root of the attraction to ethnographic art making is the way in which both systems can be present alongside each other and not necessarily conflict; anthropology is “the compromise discourse of choice.” The epistemologies coexist in compromise, they are not combined into a synthesis, and neither ought one be privileged over the other; this relativism fully preserves the identities of every aspect or subtext that composes society. Foster does warn, though, that the balance is very fine, and can easily lead to poor ethnographic art. He situates this warning in relation to the institution; *within* it, the “deconstructive-ethnography” focus on art has the danger of becoming narcissistic, hermetic, and

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9 Ibid., 75
cynical, while *outside* the institution, ethnographic authority and sociological condescension can
go unquestioned, resulting in a limited or edited engagement with the societal section in focus.\textsuperscript{10}

This ethnographic deconstruction is in need of a balancing unity, but a possible answer is
not far from the questions. In response to the attitudes against which Foster cautions, the past two
decades have shown an increase in work that addresses the nature of internal/external
relationships through the anthropological and archival lens; in fact, the intertextual lens often is
the work. Described by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998 as “relational aesthetics,” this work at its
essence recognizes the value of relation over that of an actual art *object*. The dangers of which
Foster warns, as well as the coldness or cynicism that could easily arise from a slight
misapplication of Barthes’ death of the author, are met by the application of human relationships.
Relational aesthetics provides a human reason for creating something universal, rather than
accepting mere inevitability or even futility, a response that could be extrapolated from
intertextuality. Bourriaud mentions that there is so much freedom within the sphere of human
relations for an artist to share or not share as many forms, problematics, trajectories, styles,
themes, iconographies as she wants. They still find universal connections with others, while still
being deeply personal. Barthes speaks of the author as compiler or translator of the same text;
Bourriaud highlights work that demonstrates how the translator is beautiful. The viewer is as the
neighbor of the artist, giving attention to the ways in which they are contributors to the same
community, an ultimately humble relationship. Intersubjectivity and interaction are not
aggrandizing or even really fashionable, but that is what connects with people now. People do
not really desire a grand utopia, utopias are now experienced as day-to-day, fragmentary, and
subjective; art can draw these together in a way that shows the humble but great importance in

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 76
meeting neighbors rather than revolutionizing nations. The forms used do not give the artist or
the patron or anyone any sort of a priori superiority over the viewer or anyone else, but instead
present the opportunity to negotiate open relationships that are not pre-established; the gesture is
more important than the production of a material thing, it is a production of a self-enriching
subjectivity.

Bourriaud also states that contemporary art actually still represents the same heritage of
the modernist avant-garde’s drive for progress; the key difference is a rejection of modernism’s
dogmatism and teleology. Modernism looked to create progress through opposition and conflict,
but now progress is sought through relations; there is no false expectation of creating some sort
of earthly Golden Age, but rather progress is found in increasing social fairness, the “density of
life,” and combinations of existence.

For Bourriaud, relational work is possible, and also necessary, because of the increase in
globalization and urbanization over the last century. He reasons that as people were driven closer
together both physically and mentally in larger and larger numbers, the speed and ease of
interaction grew in tandem. In every sphere of life, this resulted in a lessening of the importance
of objects as symbols of status or their perception as inherently valuable. Exchange shifted into
the realm of abstraction and ideas—the Information Age. Consequently, experience and
encounter, as well as the time and space to allow them, increased in value. Bourriaud argues that
people most want to feel a validation of their intertextual participation, and the new type of
artwork provides a state of encounter; it is a relational device. A good deal of conceptual art in
the ‘60s and ‘70s emphasized a break with modernism by calling for linguistic subversion, an
internal response; now, that subversion has been rethought, placed instead in the context of
external relationships and eclectic culture. The viewer is transformed into a direct interlocutor,
which in this context implies participation through the same function as a neighbor interacting with another neighbor; intertextuality, the death of the author and birth of the reader, is interpreted as a communal system. For Bourriaud, the basis of today’s art experience is the co-presence of the spectators, the art exhibit a possibility for an instant community.

What does this mean, then, for biography? As stated above, there are varying degrees of the presence of biography in artwork; there is a base level at which it is inevitably present in any work, and there is a spectrum up to a work that is made entirely to grapple with biography. If we accept Bourriaud’s advocacy of relational aesthetics, the most appropriate confrontation of biographical matter occurs when a work is made in awareness of its participatory potential for both artist and viewer. The work would address its referential history (and thus contribute to a certain archive), would be aware of the conflation of marginal and centrist texts while still deriving meaning from their contradiction, would meet the needs of the society that contributes to its formation while altering the culture in an affirming manner, and would be dependent most of all on its efficacy of remarking terms and blurring lines that disrupt the interrelationship of a group of people. An inappropriate treatment of biography is to interpret the work purely in the light of the artist’s personal and specific biography, reinstating the modernist system of dichotomy and opposition and dragging the work down to its lowest denominator. When a work strives to instate an author-god or establish exclusivity our contemporary sensibilities are taken aback; while there are still many growing pains that come from lingering modernism, postmodern thought is now pervasive enough that a self-referential work only confuses. Much as a medieval Germanic person would recognize and understand a pictorial symbology and language that gives every gargoyle, shrub and color meaning, our culture has created a sort of symbology of ideas and relationship, drawn from intertextual biography.
A number of recent artists tap into this, purposefully or incidentally, in particularly clear ways. In keeping with the scope of this paper, I will examine several artists that interpret intertextual biography by establishing an especially poignant aura of vulnerability or by operating along the lines of a gift economy, creating works that expressly impart something to their viewers or participants; these gifts resonate because they are given in recognition of that relational, intertextual impact. Each artist expertly blends societal and personal biographies, creating work that plays each type of biography off the other, conflating them or separating them where most appropriate. Felix Gonzalez-Torres drew almost exclusively from his own personal life to describe and politicize the cultural attitudes around him, highlighting the way in which a viewer’s participation in good or beautiful things meant an inevitable identifying with systems of oppression as well. Rirkrit Tiravanija rides on Bourriaud’s tenets of communal desires to give viewers a space in which to relate, while simultaneously educating them about the consequential impact of their actions and ideas. Dario Robleto culls intensely meaningful objects from his own history or that of others, combining and arranging them in a way that preserves the poignancy of their original identities while imparting a new poetic onto the viewer that ties her to the people behind the objects. Each has a distinct approach, all transform the viewer in some way.

The type of transformation that Felix Gonzalez-Torres achieves is owed to his work’s delicate balance of art elements. Many of the most common art themes are played off each other so that neither end of the spectrum dominates; drama, even melodrama, is tempered by understatement, a sense of uniqueness is countered with an emphasis on seriality, removal of the hand, and the everyday. Delight in the materials’ aesthetic quality is stabilized by great
This balancing draws the viewer into the work in a manner akin to seduction; if a viewer chooses to approach the art through a formal lens, for instance, she will find a basis for that approach. However, once she begins to delve into the work’s formal aspects they will necessarily lead her to the concepts driving the work.

Gonzalez-Torres’ series of paper stacks are an excellent example of this. The 1991 work Untitled (Passport) [Plate 1] is simply a short column of square, white sheets of paper. Formally, it seems to accomplish goals in the same vein as Minimalist sculpture, alluding to artists like Robert Ryman or Donald Judd; it has clean geometry, is a monochrome, sits by itself and presents an ordinary, mass-produced, widely available material. But exploration does not end there, the minimalist interpretation can only be carried so far before questions arise. Why the titled Untitled? Why the blankness, and the seriality? Why are we told that it is composed of “endless copies”? It is not enough to read it as an environment or a way to make the viewer notice some type of essence of plain paper; we begin to realize that endless copies infers a removal of copies, that the idea of a passport, a governing or regulating of travel and passage, is contained somewhere within the work. We begin to think of the simultaneous oddity and necessity of passports, of their cost, of their coding as legal identification of the bearer and her

11 Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 63. “With Felix Gonzalez-Torres, however, we find an aspiration towards what [David] Hickey calls beauty: a constant quest for simplicity and formal harmony. Let’s call it an immense delicateness, that virtue that is at once visual and ethical. Never the slightest excess or stress on effect. His work assaults neither eye nor feelings. Everything about it is implicit, discreet and fluid, unlike any cosmetic and body-built conception of ‘the visual impact.’ He is forever juggling with clichés, but these come back to life in his hands: the sight of a cloudy sky, or the photograph of a sandy beach printed on satin-finish paper, everything makes an impression although the beholder might be irked by so much kitsch. Gonzalez-Torres braces himself against subconscious emotions. So I am gripped by a childlike sense of wonder in front of the glowing, dazzling hues of piles of candies. The austerity of the “stacks” is offset by their fragile precariousness.”
distinguishing features, and of the varying difficulty of obtaining one depending on nationality and destination. When we take a sheet home, those ruminations suddenly stand in stark contrast with the act of participation in the work. The gift (and dispersal of the artwork) addresses the politics of social interaction and movement\textsuperscript{12}, but its gift characteristic removes any cynicism from the questions raised. For a moment, the viewer is shown a glimpse of a utopia in which all of the baggage of passports that we know is absent; the only trait left is the passport’s blank surface, waiting to be inscribed with a chronicle of motion and experience.

Other paper stacks are even more blatantly political, such as *Untitled (Death by Gun)* [Plate 2]. This work is like *Untitled (Passport)*, except that 464 newspaper clippings of peoples’ faces are arranged across it; they are portraits of all those who were killed by gun-related violence in a single week. By removing a sheet, not only is the viewer given a reminder of the systems of violence that are active in her society but her participation in the artwork becomes a sign of her, and everyone else’s, participation in those systems. It is a memento of responsibility, and its dispersal an admission on the part of the possessor.

But again, these works are not only cynical or fatalistic eye-openers. They are often displayed in conversation with each other and more like them, working together to provide the viewer with a deconstructed look at varying aspects of the culture. Part of this, necessarily, is a regard for actual beauty, and so Gonzalez-Torres has created paper stacks that are simply beautiful images. Often depictions of clouds with sunrays bursting through or a bird in flight [Plate 3], they evoke a romanticism and desire for dream-like peace.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 56. “Gonzalez-Torres’ art…gives pride of place to the negotiations and construction of a cohabitation. It also contains a beholder’s ethic. As such, it is part of a specific history, a history of works prompting the onlooker to become aware of the setting he finds himself in…”
Gonzalez-Torres sought to seduce, but in a way that was not cheap but actually gave the viewer true pleasure. This quality is especially evident in his candy spill pieces [Plate 4]. These are extraordinarily visceral, accomplishing so much through pure interaction with the body before the mind is ever engaged; everything is about drawing the viewer in through sensuality. The candy is recognizable, individually wrapped in bright colors, shiny and crinkly in the cellophane. It is free for the taking; the viewer, by now the participant, can put several pieces in her pocket to savor while walking through galleries and viewing other art, tasting the sweetness as she puts them in her mouth and sucks on them, saliva breaking the hard candy down. Her body ingests it and continues to break it down, the sugars and other nutrients are dispersed throughout her body for fuel and any waste is passed. The material of these artworks is entirely predicated on the sensual, and defined by pleasure and allure.

And then the viewer sees a title like Untitled (Lover Boys) [Plate 5] and is told that the ideal weight of that pile (replenished and weighed at the start of every day) is 355 pounds, the combined weight of Gonzalez-Torres and his lover Ross Laycock when he was diagnosed with AIDS. Suddenly the piece is transformed into a portrait of two people in love, but a love that will soon be shattered by the grief of loss. That this portrait is of the artist and his lover themselves only adds to the biographical profundity. The emotion contained in this biography is intense, evoking memories in the viewers of their own experiences with grief and destroyed love, as well as a historical remembrance of the fear-filled conditions surrounding the AIDS epidemic in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Gonzalez-Torres’ biography is shared on this level, but the artist continues to push it through the direct involvement of the viewer. As with the paper stacks, the participant signals her responsibility for these conditions; she is aiding the wasting away and dissemination of these two...
men, helping to dismantle the portrait. The consumption is both a fusion of bodies and a splitting apart; the viewer’s action also relates back to the artist, though, as the work is a full baring of vulnerability. By giving himself, Gonzalez-Torres risks total consumption, and disappearance. Though it is unlikely that the pile of candy would disappear completely, it is still probable; the generosity of the gift, an erotic expression of intermingling and excess, carries with it a dangerous potential for dissipation. By placing a candy in her mouth, the viewer becomes implicit in Felix and Ross’ love and its ruin; Gonzalez-Torres exposed himself, and by sharing in it the viewer converts that exposure to vulnerability, allowing full honesty in the interaction between artist and viewer.

Politics, of course, enter into this work and others, especially regarding a breakdown of conceptions of alterity. Gonzalez-Torres, as a Cuban-born Hispanic American, already was outwardly a minority, and at the height of his artistic career AIDS and homosexuality were seen as the ultimate badges of otherness. By giving of himself, Gonzalez-Torres combines strong political sentiment with vulnerability to produce work that criticizes and implicates, but even more importantly suggests routes for healing; his work demonstrates a human care for love above any critical or opposing system. Even a piece like Untitled (Public Opinion) [Plate 6], a 700 pound spill of black licorice candy, in all of its sinister weight and brutal coloring is best read as an educating effort; each single black piece is in itself not imposing, but in combination builds into a giant, ugly mass, reflecting the way public opinion is often created.

While Felix Gonzalez-Torres was demonstrating to his viewers how their participation in these systems impacted both his and their biographies, Rirkrit Tiravanija was setting out to give people a free lunch. Tiravanija’s first series of openings worked to literally dismantle galleries as well as perceptions of what ought to be their function. His debut show at SoHo’s 303 Gallery in
1992, *Untitled 1992 (Free)*, established the artist as a constructor of the sort of environments Nicolas Bourriaud described several years later; the gallery’s office was dismantled and placed in the front room, with all the shelves, binders, books, desks and chairs piled in the middle of the room. Normally all of these administrative materials are kept separate or out of sight of the main gallery space in order to preserve and not compete against the integrity of the art, but Tiravanija deliberately exposed these inner workings, leveling the typical view of the hierarchy of value by equivocating both artwork and work necessary for the artwork’s display.

In the back room, Tiravanija was simply serving Pad Thai, the national food of his motherland, to whoever entered the gallery. There was no real “art” in the sense of created objects; the social interstice that the participants created by enjoying a meal together was the art experience. Gallery owners and casual visitors alike sat down next to each other and struck up conversations while Tiravanija shared his heritage with them through food, rather than through a traditional art medium. When Tiravanija was not there, the cooking utensils, leftovers, and trash were left out as the only visible, physical signs of the social gathering [Plate 7].

Tiravanija notes that this show came at a time when New York was in an economic depression following the bursting of the great boom in the ‘80s (a depression that was especially keen for the art sector); the food’s centrality not only questioned the idealism behind the relevance of authorship and authenticity, but also was like the medicine of a doctor curing illnesses. He described this type of work as a return to functionality, similar to taking Duchamp’s urinal off the pedestal, reinstalling it on the wall and using it according to its original purpose.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Rirkrit Tiravanija, “No Ghosts in the Wall,” *Participation* (Cambridge: MIT, 2006), 150-151. This is indicative of Tiravanija’s practice in general; for him, the prevalent view of the artist’s identity is wrapped in a sensibility to endeavor that resists 1. any kind of artifice, 2. a time/space continuum which has been imposed on the ontological structure of art making, and 3. the unnecessary staging of a reality which does not actually exist.
This issue with artifice plays itself out in another installation, *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*. In 1996 Tiravanija constructed an exact replica of his New York City apartment in the Kölnischer Kunstverein, and then left; for three months, anyone could use the apartment at any time. People cooked there, played music together, slept there, even got married; a garden sprang up outside of the space. Incredibly, none of Tiravanija’s possessions were taken, and many actually left behind tokens of their experience, ranging from kitsch to valuable objects. Visitors to the gallery were able to experience Tiravanija’s life as directly as was possible, and yet in a manner that was completely a new creation. By removing his actual self, Tiravanija allowed a multiplicity of experience to occur, collecting at the end an archive of that experience.

Much of Tiravanija’s work is more about providing a space in which communal biography can be created fresh, rather than drawing on past experiences. One piece in particular, however, challenges viewers more in the tradition of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, while maintaining Tiravanija’s heavy emphasis on overt participation. His work *Untitled 2006 (pavilion, table, and puzzle representing the famous painting by Delacroix La Liberté Guidant le Peuple, 1830)* [Plate 8] addresses specific political subtexts of viewer’s lives. The installation consists of a pavilion constructed of Thai wood and tin over top of an enormous wooden table with matching benches. On it is a giant puzzle that is disassembled at the start of every day; viewers are told it is of Delacroix’s *July 28: Liberty Leading the People*, one of the most instantly recognizable paintings in the world [Plate 9]. This work invites viewers into a sheltered place (even when already indoors) to engage in a group activity of creating (or recreating, several steps removed) something together. On the surface there does not seem to be much more to the piece other than an opportunity for community over piecing a jigsaw puzzle; however, upon further reflection the
politics begin to appear. The museum’s clientele is likely going to be a fairly specific demographic: Americans of European descent, coming from a position of privilege in both the colonial and postcolonial worlds. They will be working on top of a foundation of Thai woods to recreate an image of French Enlightenment idealism, the people led by Liberty (an image also lauded by Americans). The assemblage of the puzzle can be seen as a metaphor for reenacting history, that the participants are enjoying community but doing so through a reconstruction of French ideals of liberty; for France these ideals were acceptable and good, but for Southeast Asia, French influence was anything but a promotion of liberty. It could be said that there is a redemption of sorts through the communal aspect that the piece fosters now, but it seems clear that, like some of Gonzalez-Torres’ works, Tiravanija is questioning the cost of that redemption, and its efficacy outright. Additionally, Tiravanija must be aware of the reality of museum goers’ hesitation to sit down, take time with each other, and rebuild something; generally, only several of the thousands of pieces in the puzzle are actually linked together, perhaps indicating that contemporary apathy could be one of the factors keeping a return to colonialism at bay. Either way, this artwork is an especially poignant reminder of the layered intertextuality that exists even on a global scale.

Dario Robleto also delves into history, but in an even more focused way than Felix Gonzalez-Torres or Rirkrit Tiravanija. Robleto’s work began to be shown fifteen years ago, and has since the beginning been an exploration of an American past; with both an alchemist or DJ’s mixing and combining abilities, Robleto culls literal fragments from across history and assembles them in a way that imparts new life to both past and present biographies and heals the wounds of history. Even more so than Gonzalez-Torres, Robleto treats the objects that compose his work as precious and important (not only in terms of their links to concepts and readings of
our societal text). This is because the objects are precious; their meaning comes from a direct connection with events and movements in past and present history, not only through metaphor.

*Our Sin Was In Our Hips* [Plate 10] is a typical work of his, demonstrative of his usual working process and subject matter. On paper, the materials list (which Robleto considers as important as the work) essentially describes the piece: *Hand-ground and powderized vinyl records, melted vinyl records, male and female pelvic bone dust, polyester resin, spray paint, pigments, dirt, concert spotlight. Female pelvis made from mother’s Rock ‘n’ Roll 45 rpm records, male pelvis made from father’s Rock ‘n’ Roll 33 rpm records.* These materials have been formed into cast replicas of two pelvises, placed on top of each other in a coital position with a concert spotlight on them. Materials like bone dust are in themselves imbued with meaning, while others like Robleto’s parents’ actual records point to a very personal history. The implied history of Robleto’s conception extends far beyond himself, however; it is very likely that a significant segment of the American population exists because parents met and loved through concerts and rock ‘n’ roll listening parties.

Other works are more conceptual, even hidden and barely observable, such as the 1997 piece *We’ll Dance Our Way Out of the Womb*, described thus: *Thirty-six 120 watt light bulbs, neighborhood. Over the course of a month, I secretly exchanged the existing light bulbs from the front porch of every house in the neighborhood block I grew up on with a higher-wattage light bulb, thereby making the whole block significantly brighter at night. At first glance, these few materials seem perfectly ordinary, unlike many of those in *Our Sin Was In Our Hips*; however, the simple inclusion of that specific neighborhood makes all the difference. Even though the people who now live on Robleto’s childhood block and even his very home could be completely different, through this happening they share collectively in Robleto’s biography,*
whether aware of it or not. *Deeper Into Movies (Buttons, Socks, Teddy Bears & Mittens)* (also 1997) continues that trend while introducing the gift element that would begin to be his focus afterward. Winkingly recorded as in “Private Collection,” the description of this work’s action is *The thread from my first baby blanket was completely unraveled. Various lengths of this extracted thread were then seamlessly spliced into thread purchased from various fabric stores, thrift stores, etc. The united threads were then re-spooled and returned to the shelves from which they were purchased.* Gonzalez-Torres metaphorically gave up himself, sacrificed his work so that everyone could be a participant in it; anyone who next bought that thread of Robleto’s would in contrast *literally* sew a piece of his history into whatever she made. His blanket, once unraveled and dispersed, would not be respun, it would never be in its original form again. The important thing to note, though, is that its identity is not lost or diluted; each thread is still a thread that sheltered Robleto’s infant form, and now has new life as a binder or mend of something new or made whole again. The bravery that is required for this work is steep, but the reward is just as great.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, Robleto has concentrated largely on themes of healing heartbreak caused by war and violence across history. As an American artist, many of his pieces contain materials that connect with the Civil War, a war that signifies many of the identifying characteristics of American life and its roots in systems of violence and oppression. It is important to note, however, that Robleto does not make specific or propagandist political statements through his work; he is much more concerned with presenting the bits of evidence that devastation occurred on some level that affected segments of society across the spectrum, and then using those war-torn shreds to demonstrate the actual poetry of healing. *The Creative Potential of Disease* (2004) [Plate 11] is a very literal totem of repair. This piece consists of a
doll framed by velvet and melted and cast shrapnel; the doll, we read, is a self-portrait doll made by a Civil War Union soldier amputee while recovering in the hospital. It is crudely formed out of patched fabric and a clay head, and for therapeutic effect is missing a leg. Or rather, was missing a leg, as Robleto has fixed the doll with modern uniform material, modern surgeon’s thread, and a cast leg made of femur bone and anointed with an alchemic balm from another piece. The viewer feels the pain of someone else’s remembrance and self-therapy through the artwork, which thus establishes an interesting variation to the idea of recycling. Old objects, like the doll or Robleto’s blanket, are modified in a way that gives them new life but still preserve their identity and meaning, based in the old; for the viewer, the encounter is with the “new” object, in turn causing a relationship with the old or past situation, an emotional or intellectual response that is in fact new for the viewer.

Some of Robleto’s work is patently about the shared nature of history. One such piece, No One Has A Monopoly Over Sorrow [Plate 12], has its genesis in a World War I story Robleto uncovered. He has remarked that that war was the first to introduce an amount of destruction that made entire decimation of soldiers a routine possibility. This disrupted normal Catholic-rooted traditions that dictated proper burial procedures, especially in France; without bodies, surviving relatives strove to make do with rings, watches, or pieces of uniform, anything that could act as a symbolic stand-in for an actual body. The French government did not provide any service to aid this process, and so the family members were forced to do the salvaging themselves, right on the recently scarred battlefield. This also proved inadequate as there was no real way of knowing to whom these objects originally belonged; a ring could be any soldiers blasted and twisted

wedding band. Robleto recounted that, “It produced an important shift in mourning customs when they realized that mourning had to become communal: that one ring had to be everybody’s ring, and that fragment of the uniform had to be everybody’s fragment.”

*No One Has A Monopoly Over Sorrow* taps directly into the emotions of this history; even if the viewer does not know that particular story, she lives in a post-World War I era in which this sense of communal mourning has become understood, and resonates with memorial mindsets that events like the Vietnam War, Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and September 11 have made common. In Robleto’s basket of ringed finger bones nestled among wax-dipped funeral flowers the full weight of this now usual tradition is combined with the stark grief of individual-scale mementos. The personal and the communal texts have been woven together to punch the viewer’s emotional gut with a comprehension of the manner in which violence destroys every plane of our existence.

It would be inappropriate to summarize several artists who create work directly influenced by the idea of an intertextual biography without mentioning ways in which biography is misused, or at least used poorly. Many use it well, and many do not. Often this occurs through a misdirected, continued application of modernist ways of understanding authorship as autonomous. The German artist Wolfgang Laib, for example, has achieved much notoriety through his minimal works of pollen, beeswax, and lacquer; while certainly his goals are different from those of artists like Gonzalez-Torres, and he does not fit into Bourriaud’s paradigm of relational aesthetics, his art can still only be described as postmodern. As a parallel to Robleto, Laib’s materials are utterly crucial; a pollen square or pile [Plate 13] is an affirmation of the wonder contained in the ordinariness of a thing, and its engagement of the viewer’s sense of smell and of space in addition to its visual vibrancy establishes a connection with the viewer.

15 Ibid., 258-259.
that is based not so much on recorded history but on a natural and organic, perhaps even primeval, relationship that people have with Laib’s materials. The work itself is beautiful; the issue lies in the cult of his person and authorship that Laib has erected. He has often been compared to Joseph Beuys, but that is ill-considered; for Beuys, the mythos of his person was just as much a part of the work as the objects he created. In this case, he is not so much a key as a foil, a critique of the structuralist idea that the author is the decoder of the work. When reading essays about Wolfgang Laib and interviews with him, a significant percentage of the writing is devoted not to the work but to perpetuating the artist’s mystique. His ascetic, slowed-down life is unusual in contemporary culture and certainly has influenced elements of his art practice, but the artwork he creates ought not be overshadowed by his persona. Laib, however, encourages this; his comments in interviews are tightly controlled, as I experienced first hand in 2009, and so much of what is written about him has the feel of being from the same source. This is more propaganda than biography, and is inappropriate for a body of work that draws primarily from a biography grounded in the natural world. As a counterexample, Anish Kapoor creates with a similar sensitivity to Laib (and is autochthonous to the Eastern spiritual tradition that Laib has adopted), but does not instigate more of an investigation into his person than is usual. The work remains influenced by Kapoor’s biography but there is no attempt to force an authorial hype on it, allowing the art to quietly function in its interaction with the viewer without an overshadowing of other themes not rooted in the art itself.

It would also be unfair to not mention critiques of the ideas and writers behind my understanding of biography as intertextual; in more recent years, Bourriaud’s relational...
aesthetics have been most under review. Criticism stemming from the editors and contributors of the journal *October* has reasonably demonstrated cause to not accept Bourriaud’s views wholesale; in issue 110, Claire Bishop writes an extended critique from a variety of philosophical platforms, but her essential question is, does relational aesthetics have room for qualitative judgment or can success only be determined based on how effectively a work provides the simple opportunity for human relationships? Given some of the output of those solidly within the relational aesthetics camp, including Rirkrit Tiravanija, this challenge is not without reason. Tiravanija, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Molly Nesbit co-curated a “Utopia Station” at the fiftieth Venice Biennale; the pavilion was essentially a space for community to happen.

For them, “utopia” was a place that could be used as a catalyst for action of some sort, with the understanding that activities imply an activism. The standards in this type of situation, Bishop argues, are too lax; a certain amount of “antagonism” (necessary for real democratic interaction, which cannot occur if difference is suppressed and openness carried to an extreme of emptiness) ought to be in place for the art to be purposeful and worthwhile.

In his essay *Chat Rooms*, Hal Foster also raises concerns with a viewpoint that is devoted to relational aesthetics. Bourriaud’s ideas do seem to stem from a certain idealistic, ivory tower

\[17\] Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October*, 110 (2004): 65. “I am simply wondering how we decide what the “structure” of a relational art work comprises, and whether this is so detachable from the work’s ostensible subject matter or permeable with its context. Bourriaud wants to equate aesthetic judgment with an ethicopolitical judgment of the relationships produced by a work of art. But how do we measure or compare these relationships? The quality of the relationships in “relational aesthetics” are never examined or called into question. When Bourriaud argues that “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them,” I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit “dialogue” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does “democracy” really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?”

approach to reality; the irony is that Bourriaud is attempting to describe reality. Foster argues that there is perhaps too much blind optimism contained in relational aesthetics, that a shaky analogy is constructed between a work that is open and inclusive and an inclusive society. We ought not to assume that a trend towards relational importance in cultural interactions and events dictates that every person, or even necessarily the majority of people, will respond best to artwork that opens up these possibilities. Another of Foster’s concerns that addresses intertextual thinking as a whole is that a “reactivation” of an artwork could be to great or too ambiguous a burden on the viewer. There is a risk of overstepping intertextual emphasis, rendering the text illegible and reestablishing the artist as the principle figure or primary exegete of the work. The death of the author could mean not so much a birth of the reader as the befuddlement of the viewer.

While these concerns of Bishop and Foster’s are valid and worth giving attention, in my opinion they are in response to more extreme forms of intertextual art or relational aesthetics. The work I have described above does not discount its audience in any way or at any extreme; Dario Robleto mentions that he and Felix Gonzalez-Torres both were careful to trust and be optimistic that their audience was not dumb and that the viewers would work along with them and their objects.\(^{19}\) It is important to note again that my encapsulation of biography in the light of intertextuality is not so much an original idea, or that it exists as a prescriptive idea at all; rather, intertextual biography simply describes what occurs when an artwork is made. The degree to which an artwork is indebted to intertextuality can widely range, but the element is present whether recognized or not.

When Rilke wrote of blood memories, “nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves,” it was this nascent view of biography that he was addressing. These concepts, happenings and objects that are bought and sold and displayed in museums and galleries around the world are the evidence or manifestation of experience binding with blood. They are biographical, meaning that they are human; their vitality and their importance are wrapped inextricably with that humanity.
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Passport)*, 1991
White paper, endless copies.

http://www.tate.org.uk/images/cms/12546w_erasure genteel_untitledpassport.jpg
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, 1990
Offset print on paper, endless copies.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Aparición)*, 1991
Offset print on paper, endless copies.

http://www.harpreetkhara.com/archives/tag/elly-clarke
Plate 4.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross)*, 1991
Variously colored-cellophane-wrapped candies, endless supply, ideal weight 175 pounds.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, 1991
Cellophane-wrapped blue-and-white candies, endless supply, ideal weight 355 pounds.

Plate 6.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Public Opinion)*, 1991
Cellophane-wrapped black-licorice candies, endless supply, ideal weight 700 pounds.

Plate 7.

Rirkrit Tiravanija, installation of *Untitled 1992 (Free)*, 1992, 303 Gallery

http://legwork.cc/2010/06/cooking-invocation/
Plate 8.


http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/116137/hARIOITICA-and-rirkrit-tiravanija-contact

Walker Art Center Collections, Card Catalogue
Plate 9.

Eugène Delacroix, *July 28: Liberty Leading the People*, 1830
Oil painting.

http://smarthistory.org/romanticism-in-france.html
Dario Robleto, *Our Sin Was in Our Hips*, 2001-2002
Hand-ground and powderized vinyl records, melted vinyl records, male and female pelvic bone dust, polyester resin, spray paint, pigments, dirt, concert spotlight. Female pelvis made from mother’s Rock ‘n’ Roll 45 rpm records, male pelvis made from father’s Rock ‘n’ Roll 33 rpm records.

*Alloy of Love*
Dario Robleto, *The Creative Potential of Disease*, 2004
A self-portrait doll made by a Civil War Union soldier amputee while recovering in the hospital, mended and repaired with a modern-day surgeon’s surgical needle and thread, new pant leg material made from a modern-day soldier’s uniform, cast leg made from femur bone and prosthetic alginate treated with *Balm Of A Thousand Foreign Fields*, vegetable ivory, collagen, melted shrapnel and bullet lead, cold cast steel and zinc, polyester resin, rust.

*Alloy of Love*
Plate 12.

Dario Robleto, *No One Has A Monopoly Over Sorrow*, 2005
Men’s wedding ring finger bones coated in melted bullet lead from various American wars, men’s wedding bands excavated from American battlefields, melted shrapnel, wax-dipped preserved bridal bouquets of roses and white calla lilies from various eras, dried chrysanthemums, male hair flowers braided by a Civil War widow, fragments from a mourning dress, cold cast brass, bronze, zinc, silver, rust, mahogany, glass.
Plate 13.

Pollen from various plants.

Bibliography


