

DIRECTIONS

FRANCESC TORRES  
MEMORIAL

FEBRUARY 13 - MAY 3, 1992



An oil field in northern Kuwait on fire. Photo by Mike Nelson, courtesy Agence France-Press.

"Art becomes the sediment of intellectual interests which lay outside."<sup>1</sup>

FOR CATALAN-BORN, NEW YORK-based Francesc Torres those interests are history, politics, culture, and sociology. Art provides a context, a zone in which to consider issues and behavior. His installations include remnants from actual practices and events, what anthropologists call material culture. Torres selects images and objects because of their connotations, not to subvert them or beg aesthetic questions. His works are often site-specific, usually inspired by particular events, and he does not make preparatory sketches. The merging of concepts and props is the process of his work. Yet he also insists: "I'm looking for elegant results." The gallery space is his studio.

Torres's approach did not evolve from academic training. In the late 1960s he was part of Barcelona's conceptual art scene, particularly the Grup de Treball (Working Group). Those young artists were known for their collaborative installations and radical left politics. Torres came to view the imperative to make art engaged as a constraint, preferring that art propose analysis of topical events and issues but not be forced to bear a particular agenda.

In Paris in 1968 as an apprentice to Piotr Kowalski, whose interactive sculptures combined technology with psychology, Torres explored how art can function as a lens to focus on such issues. The artist's role, in Torres's mind, is to involve the individual in considering collective notions, to prompt viewers to be wary of being conditioned by consensus.

Compulsory military service also influenced Torres's perspective. He cites this experience with the mentality of the Spanish government under Fascist authority as the source for the meditation on power and aggression that has been a trademark of his work, but he points out: "I've never been a pacifist." Upon completing his army tour in 1972, Torres left for the United States.

In his first works in this country, performances-within-installations, Torres explored the components of identity. In *Almost Like Sleeping* (Artists Space, New York, 1975) he lay in bed, anesthetized and flanked by projections of images of dictator General Francisco Franco, "a cultural conditioner on the political and social level," and of his grandfather, "a cultural conditioner within the family and cultural context." A silent film of Torres biting his nails related

the anxiety of considering to what extent one's past affects one's present and future.

Torres soon moved beyond this introspective focus, yet performance elements remain in his work. He no longer appears in his pieces, but the gallery-as-studio practice has a comparably spontaneous aspect. Scale as well as content are confrontational, engaging viewers with an immediacy usually encountered in theater. In his installations of the early 1980s, Torres moved the observer from outside to inside his dramas.

Projections are usually the focus of his pieces, but Torres is not a video artist. Often what is projected is manipulated, archival footage rather than footage he has shot. *Steel Balls* (University of Colorado, Boulder, 1983; Queens Museum, 1989) was conceived around documentary footage of a U.S. bombing raid on a Nazi ball-bearing factory during World War II. The 16mm film, printed in negative, flickered on a screen high on a wall of the gallery. Two TV monitors showed the original footage in slow motion, with a soundtrack from a pinball machine also in slowed time. Cutouts of planes flying in formation toward the screen hung from the ceiling, while similar silhouettes crashed onto the floor. Operable pinball machines triggered an interplay between the literal and the metaphorical: "When Someone begins to play, they become a member of the plane crew and, symbolically, spectator, perpetrator and victim of the events unfolding on the screen and monitors."<sup>2</sup> This refraction of possible identities can gall as well as titillate.

*Belchite/South Bronx, A Trans-Cultural and Trans-Historical Landscape* (University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1988) [fig. 1] juxtaposed the remainders of two types of battles: the ruins of a village destroyed during the Spanish Civil War and subsequently abandoned; the devastation resulting from the construction of an expressway, which isolated a once-vital New York neighborhood. "One a casualty of war, one a casualty of peace, and both casualties of civil strife."<sup>3</sup>

Texts described the circumstances, the politics leading to both situations. A stylized Belchite church was set among screens that evoked bombed-out buildings. A stripped 1970 Ford Pinto with its hood up had two monitors in the engine area. Video footage brought these remote locations close, making intimate the results of the respective nightmares. The floor was strewn with rubble, litter, and basketballs cum cannonballs. This study of wastelands offset the title's lyrical reference to "landscape." Not merely to emphasize blame



Fig. 1. *Belchite/South Bronx, A Trans-Cultural and Trans-Historical Landscape*, 1988 (detail). University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.



Fig. 3. *Fifty Rainz*, 1991 (detail). Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.



or cite particular incidents, Torres's strategy was to call attention to how history's remnants are neither accidental nor insignificant.

Torres's scrutiny of power gave faceless forces a mask in *Oikonomos* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1989) [fig. 2]. A cast of the classical Greek sculpture *Zeus of Artemision* was the centerpiece, at once personifying, parodying, and idealizing power. Poised as if throwing a thunderbolt, Zeus stood on a pedestal, holding a baseball bat in one hand while the other hand pointed to a large suspended screen showing footage of youths making spare change by washing the windows of cars stopped in traffic. From the statue's waist hung a small monitor, alternating images of a stock exchange trading floor with coverage of the Indianapolis 500.<sup>4</sup> Yards behind the pedestal was a chair draped with an auto-racing outfit, at first glance resembling the athletic wear that has become leisure and sport uniforms for those at both extremes of the economic spectrum. Each element suggested a product of culture—an object or means of acquisition—and the combination elicited the urges that drive *oikonomos* (economics).

The ricocheting between objects, images, and ideas in Torres's works functions like a web, drawing viewers in. Darkness often helps conjure a hushed and inclusive setting. This framing by lighting blurs the dimensions of the room space and is analogous to how memory and history spotlight and isolate specific events within a hazy continuum.

On the occasion of his retrospective, Torres created his first sequential installation, *Fifty Rains* (Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 1991) [fig. 3], which focused on moments from fifty years of Spanish history. During a fellowship in Berlin, Torres discovered the abandoned structure that had housed the Spanish Embassy under the Third Reich. He incorporated material from the site in *Plus Ultra* (Kunstforum der Grundkredit Bank, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 1988). He recreated the ruin in *Fifty Rains* to evoke the year 1943 with actual historical debris.

For 1973 Torres focused on the assassination of Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, whom Franco had appointed prime minister. Until recently, the remains of Carrero's bombed car were displayed as a memorial at the National Army Museum in Madrid. Although Defense Ministry officials would not allow Torres to use the actual vehicle, the perfect condition of the substitution (same make and model) made the installation all the more macabre. Surrounded by soft-focus

blow-ups from newspaper accounts, the shiny car stood in contrast to the "blurriness suggesting the memory's tendency to distort the past."<sup>5</sup>

The final space was a living room showcasing Spanish designer objects, fashionable books, and photo blow-ups of politicians and entertainers anticipating 1993. The soundtrack in all areas was thunder and rain, which in this room dramatized the sparse, almost sterile projection of upper middle-class predilections, as if style rather than substance would overshadow concerns in the future and as if to ask: "Where are we now?"

In a different vein Torres has proposed a comparable query in *Memorial*. One year after the war in the Persian Gulf, Torres prompts us to reconsider what transpired. What has happened since television coverage subsided? What has been lost, altered, influenced, memorialized? How does memory burnish history? With the projected image Torres conflates heroism and catastrophe, blending actual footage from burning oil wells with the notion of a commemorative eternal flame. The television's "snow" or silence is analogous to the stillness of the grave and calls into question what dies as a result of conflict. The cemetery-like grid of the rifles and the hats from all walks of life imply involvement—whether as observer or activist, civilian or soldier, perpetrator or victim—and the relationship between the person on the street and the powers that be. Masks allude to theater and its premise that what is larger than life is integral to the drama of daily experience. Viewers are "entertained" while examining their own perceptions and roles. Describing what is activated by his installations, Torres has written: "What we have in our hands is not the historical event itself, but a collection of perceptions of such an event with which we construct a narration—which is conditioned by ideological, political, economic and cultural factors and is intrinsically malleable and open to critical analysis."<sup>6</sup>

Barbara Gordon  
Exhibition Curator



Fig. 2. *Oikonomos*, 1989 (detail). Installation for 1989 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1. All unattributed quotes are from an October 1991 conversation with the artist.

2. Francisco Torres, *Francisco Torres: Plus Ultra* (Berlin: Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD and Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 1988), p. 52.

3. Torres, in Mar Villaspesa, "History's Broken Toys," *Artforum* 29 (January 1991): 112.

4. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which lent the bronze copy of the original Zeus, protested the incorporation of the two elements, and the baseball

bat and small monitor were moved to sit at the base of the sculpture. A didactic panel describing the controversy with a photo of the artist's initial conception was posted at the entrance to the installation.

5. Kim Bradley, "Spanish Vignettes," *Art in America* 10 (October 1991): 141.

6. Torres, in J. M. Cortés, ed., *La Cracolin Artística Como Cuestionamiento* (Valencia: Instituto Valenciano de la Juventud, 1990), p. 239; reprinted in Villaspesa, "History's Broken Toys," p. 111.



## BIOGRAPHY

Born in Barcelona, August 8, 1948. Awards include: Visual Artists Fellowships, National Endowment for the Arts, 1980-81 and 1982-83; Sponsored Projects, Visual Artists Program, 1983-84, and Media Production, 1986-87; New York State Council on the Arts; Artists' Fellowship, New York Foundation for the Arts, 1986; Berliner Künstlerprogramm, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, 1986-87; New Works Grant, Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, 1988. Lives and works in New York.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1973 Two Illinois Center, Chicago, *Francesc Torres: Two Exercises + Information on Other Works*.
- 1974 Galeria Redor, Madrid.
- 1975 Artists Space, New York, *Almost Like Sleeping, Francesc Torres, Performance; 112 Workshop, New York, Francesc Torres: Personal Intersection*.
- 1977 P. S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York, *Francesc Torres: Repetition of the Novelty; 112 Workshop, New York, Francesc Torres: Accident*.
- 1978 New American Filmmakers Series, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Francesc Torres: Residual Regions*.
- 1979 Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, *Francesc Torres: Aquesta És una Instal·lació Que Té per Títol... / This Is an Installation That Has As a Title...; Everson Museum, Syracuse, Francesc Torres: "John Doesn't Know What Paul Does."*
- 1981 New American Filmmakers Series, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Francesc Torres: The Head of the Dragon*.
- 1982 Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, *Francesc Torres: Works from the Field: A Selection*.
- 1983 University of Colorado, Boulder, *Francesc Torres: Steel Balls*.
- 1984 Damon Brandt Gallery, New York, *Francesc Torres: "Warriors Have Funny Heads."*
- 1985 Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, *Francesc Torres: Tough Limo; Fine Arts Center Art Gallery, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Francesc Torres: Paths of Glory; P. P. O. W., New York*.
- 1986 La Jolla (California) Museum of Contemporary Art, *Francesc Torres: The Dictatorship of Swiftness*.

- 1988 University Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, *Beilchite/South Bronx, A Trans-Cultural and Trans-Historical Landscape*, and tour; *Kunstforum der Grundkredit Bank, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Francesc Torres: Plus Ultra*.
- 1989 Herron Gallery, Herron School of Art and Center for Contemporary Art, Indiana State Museum, Indianapolis, *Dromos Indiana: Biology and Mechanics*.
- 1990 Capp Street Project, San Francisco, *Francesc Torres: Destiny, Entropy and Junk*.
- 1991 Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, *Francesc Torres: La Cabeza del Dragón; Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona, Francesc Torres: El Carro de Fenc*.

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1972 Ciudadela and other locations, Pamplona, *Encuentros, Rencontres, Meetings, Treffen, Incontri*.
- 1973 The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, *Nature into Art*.
- 1975 Palais des Beaux Arts, Paris, 9e Biennale de Paris.
- 1976 Venice Biennale, *Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures*.
- 1978 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, *Artwords & Bookworks*.
- 1984 The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, *Art and Ideology; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Het Lumineuze Beel/The Luminous Image*.
- 1985 Alternative Museum, New York, *Disinformation, The Manufacture of Consent; Palau Robert, Barcelona, Barcelona-Paris-New York: El Camí de Dotze Artistes Catalans 1960-1980*.
- 1988 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Committed to Print*.
- 1989 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *1989 Biennial Exhibition (also 1991)*.
- 1990 Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, *Bienal de la Imagen en Movimiento '90*.
- 1991 Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Alberta, *Camera Lucida*.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cameron, Dan. "Four Installations: Francesc Torres, Louise Lawler, Allen McCollum and TODT." *Arts Magazine* 59 (December 1984): 66-70.
- Francesc Torres: El Carro de Fenc*. Exhibition catalog. Barcelona: Centre d'Art Santa Monica and Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament de Cultura, 1991.

*Francesc Torres: The Dictatorship of Swiftness*. Exhibition brochure. La Jolla, Calif.: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986. Essay by Ronald J. Onorato.

*Francesc Torres: Paths of Glory*. Exhibition catalog. Stony Brook: Fine Arts Center Art Gallery, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1985. Essay by Donald Kuspit.

*Francesc Torres: Tough Limo*. Exhibition brochure. Pittsburgh: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, 1985. Essay by William D. Judson and Francesc Torres.

"Francesc Torres: Tough Limo." *Artscribe* 89 (November-December 1991): 39-51. Interview by David Levi Strauss.

*Francesc Torres: Works from the Field, A Selection*. Exhibition catalog. Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1982. Essay by John G. Hanhardt.

Hanhardt, John G. *Francesc Torres: Antologia*. Exhibition catalog. Madrid: Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1991. Essays by Victoria Combalá and Francesc Torres.

Kuspit, Donald B. "Francesc Torres." *Artforum* 27 (January 1989): 173.

———. "Francesc Torres." *Art in America* 69 (March 1981): 130-31.

———. "Symptoms of Critique: Nancy Spero and Francesc Torres." In *Art and Ideology*. Exhibition catalog. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984.

Pacletti, John. "Francesc Torres." *Arts Magazine* 57 (November 1982): 42-43.

———. "Learning from Experience: Francesc Torres." *Arts Magazine* 55 (June 1981): 88-91.

Posner, Helaine, et al. *Beilchite/South Bronx, A Trans-Cultural and Trans-Historical Landscape*. Exhibition catalog. Amherst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1988.

Torres, Francesc. "Art of the Possible." In Hall, Doug, and Sally Jo Fifer, ed. *Illuminating Video*. New York: Aperture, 1990.

———. "Francesc Torres on George Grosz. Clarity That Hurt." In Lyon, Christopher, ed. *Contemporary Art in Context*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990.

———. "Turmoil in the Barracks." *Art Criticism* 2 (1986): 85-88.

Wooster, Ann-Sargent. "Censorship vs. Appropriation at the Whitney Biennial." *High Performance* 12 (Fall 1989): 14-15.



HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND  
SCULPTURE GARDEN  
Smithsonian Institution