DIRECTIONS

FRANCESC TORRES MEMORIAL

FEBRUARY 13 - MAY 3, 1992

An oil field in northern Kuwait on fire. Photo by Mike Nelson, courtesy Agence France-Presse.
"Art becomes the sediment of intellectual interests which lay outside."

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 engage 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, 1973) 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." 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."

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. 2. Fifty Rains, 1991 (detail). Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 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. 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 “bluriness suggesting the memory’s tendency to distort the past.”

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.”

Barbara Gordon
Exhibition Curator

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


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.


BIOGRAPHY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1973 Two Illinois Center, Chicago, Francesco Torres: Two Exercises + information on Other Works.
1974 Galeria Redor, Madrid.
1979 Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Francesco: Torres: Aquesta Es una Instalación Que Té per Títol.../This Is an Installation That Has As a Title...; Everson Museum, Syracuse, Francesco Torres: "John Doesn't Know What Paul Does."
1983 University of Colorado, Boulder, Francesco Torres: Steel Balls.
1984 Damon Brandt Gallery, New York, Francesco Torres: "Warriors Have Funny Heads."
1986 La Jolla (California) Museum of Contemporary Art, Francesco Torres: The Dictatorship of Swininess.
1988 University Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Beichtle/South Bronx, A Trans-Cultural and Trans-Historical Landscape, and tour; Kunsthaller der Grundkredt Bank, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Francesco Torres: Púas Ultra.
1989 Herron Gallery, Herron School of Art and Center for Contemporary Art, Indiana State Museum, Indianapolis, Dromos Indiana: Biology and Mechanics.
1991 Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Francesco: Torres: La Cabeza del Dragón; Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona, Francesco Torres: El Carro de Fenc.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1972 Ciutadela and other locations, Pampiona, Encuentros, Rencontres, Meetings, Triennials, Incontri.
1973 The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Nature into Art.
1978 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Artworks & Bookworks.
1990 Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Bienal de la Imagen en Movimiento '90.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY