Interview

Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Hans-Ulrich Obrist

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HANS-ULRICH OBRIST: Felix, you were born in Cuba, so maybe we could start there. We could talk a little bit about Cuba and also the time you moved?

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES: Oh, wow, is it going to be like kind of a, you know, a confessional autobiographical? I left Cuba when I was 11 years old through Spain. I mean, you want to know how I left Cuba and stuff like that? Well, actually, there's two different things: one thing is to move; another thing is to be a refugee, you know? I didn't move -- the first time, I didn't move. I was a refugee because my family was not in agreement with the government and is not in agreement with the government up to these days. So my sister and I were sent to Spain alone to live with the priests in 1971. And then from there that we were sent like a package from Madrid to Puerto Rico to live with my uncle. And then I moved to New York in 1979, but that was a deliberate decision just to move to New York because they are different from being 11 years old and being put on a plane and sent to another country like a package. You don't know what the hell is happening. Just suddenly they give you keys and say, "Okay, goodbye, and we'll see you soon," and then 10 years later, you see your parents again. I guess that's pretty much a very compressed story of that move. Actually, something that is very funny that you ask me that question as the first question. Because I was just thinking that from all the interviews I've done and all the things I have written, I never really dealt with that, with that moment of living -- with that travel, which is very traumatic and has been, despite my denials and despite my suppression of it, has been very influential. You know that moment of being put in a plane, being given a kiss, and say, "Goodbye, I'll see you soon" and then it's been 10 years and you don't see them -- my parents I mean. And the moment of coming back in 1979 in which I went to embrace my mother at the airport. And when I left, I was 11 years old, so she was bigger than me, so when I embraced

her, it was like embracing this big thing, this big person. When I came back, I was already a grown-up. I was 20 years old and when I embraced her, she was smaller than me. So I never embraced her again really. Because when I went back and I tried to feel the same body I left, I didn't because it was not there. It was almost like half a body. But, again, it's very funny that you ask me that question because I was just thinking about that last night about that travel, about that migration if you want to call it.

HUO: You've also gone to Paris now and the idea of *travel* is very present in your work --

FGT: Travel is very important for me -- in many, many ways because we can define travels in so many forms. Travels, the traditional travel, right, you go to Paris for a vacation let's say, or travels through life or travels through a health situation, from being well to being bad or from being bad to being -- or from being unhealthy to being healthy. There are different types of travelling. Also, we travel with our mind a lot too. That's a type of traveling that I'm very interested and that I enjoy very much, which is to travel with the mind, going back to places where you had been. You don't need a plane, you don't need a TV, you don't actually need to be there, you basically can travel in your mind. The shows in Paris, the current one at Ghislaine Hussenot and Jennifer Flay is called *Travels* because not only I traveled to Paris, but also, you had to travel from one gallery to another to have the whole effect of the show. And I wanted to include that "public space" of the street as part of the show. You cannot leave that outside. The reason that those two spaces have meaning is because there's a street outside. There is an "outside world" so you travel between the inside and the outside in order to create some kind of meaning.

HUO: Let's talk about the *Passport*, because I felt like travelling with the passport, at Jennifer Flay's Galerie, there as these passport-sized, small booklets on a stack to carry away, which are then linked to the bird poster at Ghislaine Hussenot.

FGT: That passport piece, which is called "Untitled" (Passport #II) because there's another piece that's called "Untitled" (Passport), which is a white stack, 24 inches by 24 inches by 6 inches high, which is white paper you can take, the public can take. Because like most of my work, as I have

told you before, I need the viewer. I need the public for that work to exist. Without the viewer, without the public, this work has no meaning. It's just another fucking boring sculpture sitting on the floor, and that's not what this work is all about. This work is about an interaction with the public about a large collaboration. But that passport piece is really about the fact that the way we are defining our culture, the way our self is constructed is through many different channels. And one of those channels is that little thing called a passport, which identifies us as some kind of… coming from some type of gender, coming from some type of country, and also being born somewhere and with the date. It defines that. And also, to top it all, it has numbers. That's what we are. That number is unique. No one else in America has that number except me, whoever has only one specific number. And that's, again, another definition of who we are in a very abstract way. One other thing that bugs the hell -- the shit out of me in that last few years, this whole talk about body art, right, which is almost like the criminal system. These people in order just to think about a body, to talk about a body, they need to see a body, right? It's like you go into a gallery and you see five bodies hanging everywhere, people say, "Oh, it's about the body." I said, "Well, no shit," you know? But it's not really about the body. It's about wax, or it's about plaster. Because the body at this time in our history, this time in culture, is defined not just by the flesh, but it's defined also by the law, by legislation, by language, first of all. So, therefore, when we feel pain in the body, when we feel decay in the body, when we feel pleasure in the body, all those issues are very much related to the law or to a symbolic order, in that case, a phallocentric order, and our rejection or our acceptance of that order. Because sometimes we accept certain parts, sometimes we reject certain parts of that but only vis-a-vis the definition that is based on language. And I think when you see a passport, really what you're seeing is a body there. Because it's about the definition of a body, a body that, kind of, travels from one place to another only based on the fact that there's a passport that is defining us and that sometimes could be helpful or could be detrimental. And that particular passport that I showed at Jennifer, again, it's my own definition of a passport. It's just all these birds flying, and there's no cover, no back, no text. It's

just these birds that can fly anywhere they want without much restriction and except, you know, the physical restrictions.

HUO: Do you think maybe this is also linked to the way you work? Oscillating between a private space and public space. If I think of your billboard work, which was very public at 24 places at the same time and then as a project inside MoMA showing an unmade bed, in a certain way, a very intimate and the most private possible space.

FGT: Well, the billboard in MoMA came from a very specific, personal impulse. I needed to see my bed. I needed distance from my bed, and the bed became a sight that was not only a place to sleep but was also a place of pain at night. And that's the personal impulse, right? Then, there's also the formal issues, and other issues that influence the way we work, right? I was asked by MoMA to do this show, and I'm someone who tries to be honest with the way I feel -- I mean at least I try. When I went to MoMA, when I went to see the *Projects* room, it's such a beautiful room that I said, "Why fuck it up with art? This place doesn't need any art. It's a very beautiful space. Let's do something outside." And besides that, they'd had so much art already. So I say, "Why don't we do something that includes another possibility that is not just this very prescribed notion of having a project in which you just show, like in a showroom, you just show your wares," right? So the original idea was not to show anything even inside the museum, not to have any billboard inside, just to have the booklets that tell people where to go to see this thing in the streets. But there were some problems with that with the museum. It's almost like they need to see their money's worth. So I put one piece there, which I'm happy I did now. One, I glued it to the wall. And then I showed, like you said, those 24 of the same image, 24 places of my unmade bed, in which two people slept or it has the impression on the bed… on the pillows. We have to question at this point if there really exists a division between public and private. And the recent development in America, I can only talk from America because that's where I live, that's where I am, has proven that there's not such a thing as a private space or a public space especially for certain segments of the population who love people from the same gender, from the same sex. In this case, I'm

referring to the 1986 *Hardwick v. Georgia [Bowers]* in which the Supreme Court voted that gay men and lesbians had no right to privacy. That the state could actually go into the bedrooms and legislate and penalize the way they express love to each other. In other words, some people are more equal than others, but that's another story. I think at this point in history, what we're really talking is about private property and perhaps not even that. But not about private space because our most intimate desires, fantasies, stories are intercepted by sectors legislated and controlled by the law. And, again, when we talk about public spaces, I always wonder how public it is when only Philip Morris and Marlboro can actually pay for those public spaces.

HUO: At the beginning of your work in New York you were part of Group Material. Was this the beginning of your public work?

FGT: No, not at all because I was working this way, I was working as an artist before I joined Group Material. And then when I joined the group, I think that what happened was that some of those ideas got developed because of the dialogue that we have in the group. And I really cannot talk much about the group because it's a group thing. It's about consensus. I'm just going to very oblique about the way I mention Group Material. But I think that maybe perhaps, it did just get developed with the group. But I was very interested in these issues already before that because as a gay man, you question this whole myth of public and private. That it doesn't really exist, there's no such division. And when there is such a division, then we had to question whose agenda has been served by that myth, by that fallacy of the division between public and private? I mean, what is public money? Public money is basically money that we, as private citizens, give in through taxes and then it's defined as public. It's very funny what's happening in America right now. You have all these right-wingers defending the public, right? Suddenly, the public becomes very, very, very -- public money, public interest. Or now even one-step further, it's called community standards. As if that was some kind of unified entity that you could address very easily. And I question that because in our culture, everything has a history. Things don't come from outer space except if you believe in God, of course. But in our culture, everything has a history, everything

has a trajectory, everything has a need. Things happen in history, in our culture because they are needed not because they come from outer space. I mean, they're not born out of the earth, just suddenly, one day we wake up and say, "Voila, there is the public." I always question, what is the public, what is the definition of the public? When did the public really become into existence as another entity? And, of course, I know that the word has been around for hundreds of years, but when did this public, this easily addressed public, this public that suddenly responds to a political issue by interactive technology, when did this public come into being? Was the public always there and was just waiting to be discovered by a marketing strategy, by advertisement? I don't know. I really don't know. Or when is the public a taxpayer, when is the public a churchgoing public, when is the public a God-fearing public? I mean, suddenly, it's like this entity can have many drags that can be used for any purpose. But I'm always wondering whose purpose has been served by this supposedly homogenous entity called 'the public'?

HUO: And was there, in a certain way, a dialogue with artists, like Jenny Holzer --

FGT: I can talk about the work of Jenny Holzer because that's work that I respect very much and admire very much especially the time that it happened. As we know, it happened in the '80s at the time in which there was a rebirth of the Bohemian painter in New York. You know one of the most historical and scary moments that we had, which was just this group of kids, white boys just running around splattering paint on the big canvases to serve the needs of an emerging junk bond market. They're no longer there. I don't know if that answered your question, probably not. But I really cannot talk about the group…well, I guess I can talk about the use of the streets. How Jenny took her work out in the streets and how that became one of the framing devices to read that work.

HUO: Yes, how Jenny Holzer as an artist started to use text and conceptual citations and loading them emotionally.

FGT: And also, we cannot leave out the forms, which is -- or the medium, which was an LED, the electronic -- ELD, electronic light or LED? I think it's LED or ELD, but anyway, those electronic signs. And I think that that's also very peculiar and very important, and it's something we have to

always mention, which is a woman trying to have a voice, but again, rejecting traditional medium, which has been controlled by men for a long time. In this case, instead of using a painting or a sculpture in marble, there's not -- none of that, but is this offset printed piece of paper or a photostat or LED message or TV. That kind of stuff, which is very peculiar in that time in the '80s, most of the women or most of the artists that happened to be women that did the most interesting work used alternative media or media that didn't have such a loaded history and such a controlled history in terms of male domination.

[BREAK]

HUO: So in '89, you started making your first stack pieces. They are very different from the idea for billboard where you have art for all in the sense that it is on the street. With the stack pieces, it was much more about the distribution idea that people can really --

FGT: Take the work.

HUO: Take the work, yeah.

FGT: Well, actually, it started in '87 when I started making these pieces, but in '89 I made them into stacks. The first piece I made, the text pieces were almost like a collage, right, except that I don't have to use scissors or glue. Which I hate, I mean I hate to get my fingers dirty with glue. With something or some other things, I don't mind. But I think at this point if I tell you *Prague 1968*, you probably have a few images you can give me about that, that particular historical moment. But if I said to you *Go-Go Boots 1965*, you also have a certain type of image. Or if I say *J.F. Kennedy 1967*, I mean *J.F. Kennedy 1961* or whenever, you might have some ideas or you might have some images to give me. So in those text pieces in which there's like a caption running on the bottom of the page and then the whole page is black, it was an attempt at doing or reworking the idea of collage by giving you all this historical and all this information that perhaps is not clearly related to a time or to that historical event. But in a way, it is because when we think about the '50s, we also think in terms of fashion. We see the people dressed in a very particular way, the same way with the '60s, '70s, whatever. But the way they follow each other in a nonchronological

way is very important for me because that's the way our memory is constructed. That's the way we are constructed. We are constructed in a nonchronological way by things that affect us, although we might not think so. For example, if I said, *Black Monday*, the stock market crashed in 1987, well you can say, "Oh well, that didn't affect me at all, I don't have investments in the stock market." Well, you might not have direct investment in the stock market, but it will affect your chance of getting a job or not because the job market shrunk after the stock market collapsed. So that in itself would affect your chances of perhaps not moving to L.A. because you cannot find a job there. Like you could have done that if you wanted in 1984. Because in '84, we still had the balloon years, the fake economic prosperity years of the Reagan empire. But that blank space on top of this text function as a space where the viewer can project. the public can project an image that is being given there. And again, it's a real definition for me of a collage.

HUO: The sheets are very often empty and there are also often very few colors used in a certain way; white, blue, and then in our poster project for museum in progress in Vienna; silver and green. So how about these very precise limitations on color?

FGT: Well, I also use red too, red and black. When I started making the stacks in '89 it was because, I mean this might sound funny, but at the time in New York, everyone was fighting for wall space, right? The walls were already taken. You got into a show, you had to get into a fistfight to get two inches in the wall, right? So I said, "Fuck the walls, let's just do something on the floor." No one was doing sculptures. Now, everyone is doing giveaway stuff. It's becoming really something, you know? People just don't know what else to give away, which is pretty funny. I think that's the reason why I'm now back on the walls -- no, not really. But I mean that's just one point. The other thing is that I've always been very interested in the writings of Walter Benjamin, especially at that time, I was just coming from the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, and where I have read for the first time in 1981, in 1983, Walter Benjamin. I was very influenced by the writing and the relevance of that writing in our time, in our culture, and I wanted to make a work that took

some of those ideas into consideration. That work doesn't really exist; therefore, the work can never be destroyed because there's never an original.

HUO: It's like unlimited?

FGT: Yes, it's an unlimited edition.

HUO: But that's also interesting with regard to what you described about the nonchronological issue of time, as in when ~~hen~~ Deleuze talks about this idea that the real issue is not the beginning or the end of a thing, but the in-between. In this sense, this also leads to the issue of instability of the work.

FGT: Well, the work is extremely unstable. First of all, there's only ideal heights or ideal weights or ideal papers, but that's one thing I enjoy very much. I enjoy that danger, that instability, that in-betweenness. I think if you want to relate it to a personal level, as a gay man that has a lot to do with my way of being in which I'm forced by culture and by language to always live a life of in-between, one thing or the other. I think in that case and the work is pretty close to that real-life situation that I'm confronted with daily as a gay man. But, yes, it was an attempt at, especially that time in the '87, '89 in which it was still at the height of the '80s. I mean you still have pretty strong, you want to call it, art marketing, right? And certainly, you had this stack on the floor that was not original, as you know, you can never have an original. You could show this piece in three places at the same time and still be the same piece. And it was almost like a threat or not even a threat but reinterpretation of the art market. And, the marketing of an original piece, which it really never is an original like I say before. At the same time, it's almost like a metaphor because you cannot destroy something that doesn't exist; therefore, it will always be there. The same thing like with the billboard, right? It just disappeared, but it will come out again in a different, hopefully a different cultural, historical context.

HUO: Like appearing and disappearing. In Venice when the stack was very small, it was less visible but can reappear at any other place.

FGT: Well, it wasn't just about a time of dealing with the ideas of Walter Benjamin and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and trying to destroy the aura of the artwork. But also on a more personal level, it was about learning to let go. When I first made the show with Andrea Rosen, which was only stacks. I mean, the show could have disappeared if you had had a big load of people going to the show because everything was free for the people to take at that time. And just to quote Sigmund Freud, we rehearse our worst fears in order to lessen them, right? So, at that time, it was losing Ross, so I wanted to lose everything in order to rehearse that fear and just confront that fear and perhaps learn something from it. I wanted to even lose the work, the stuff that's very important in my life. I also wanted to learn to let go. And it's very weird when you have a show and people come into the gallery and take your work, and they walk away with it, you know? You wonder what they're going to do with it. You want to like run after them and say, "What are you going to do with that thing?" The same thing actually was happening in my life because this man that I loved was disappearing in front of my eyes daily. You know, a slow process. The stacks almost became a parallel to that learning of letting go, which is a process that never really ends because with that, we never really learn to let go. And fortunately, the stacks can always be replicated somewhere else, always because they don't exist, so I can always have them made, printed, or just cut, whatever, because some of the pieces have no -- like you said, no text, no color, just paper, blue paper, white paper, black paper.

HUO: And maybe the light strings in this sense, are quite close. I think of the light strings for the current Paris show at Jennifer Flay but also the light strings project for a street in Paris.

FGT: That's true, and also, these are very utilitarian pieces. These are light strings, light pieces. This is light, right? So --

HUO: So nothing is hidden?

FGT: Nothing is hidden, yeah. And also this is about having a show, and you're supposed to bring artwork. Suddenly, I just bring in the light. It's like have lights will travel, right? I don't need real spotlights in the gallery, I bring my own lights, and that becomes the artwork itself. And also,

those pieces are very democratic. The first pieces I made, those lights have to do with America, have to do with the freedom in America, have to do with the desire for freedom in America. And, again, it's very important to mention that those pieces are very democratic, too, because whoever has them, whoever installs them decides the installation of the piece, how the piece is going to look, how it's going to be installed, they were all exactly the same, so they're very democratic. They're all exactly the same, but they all are different, but they're all different titles. And they always get installed differently because, again, once I install them for the first time, maybe, because sometimes I don't even install them for the first time, after that, whoever gets them, a collector, a museum, or an art handler, or art installer at a gallery will decide how this piece gets installed. I have no say on that. Once it leaves my domain, the piece is on its own, and it gets installed any way the person wants. It can be on, off, whatever.

HUO: So it's not this idea like very often with a conceptual work or a minimalistic work that there are these certificates, which are like controlling and….

FGT: No, no, no, none of that stuff. I am not that anal retentive, you know? I don't have that phobia of the two inches. You know that either the work is two inches to the left; you have to destroy the work. No, that's just too... That's those big guys from the '60s that they were like so, I don't know, constipated. I always say, "Honey, take a Valium, relax, that's no big deal, two inches, three inches." But it's funny because when I send this stuff -- when this stuff goes into museums, art handlers and installers have the hardest time trying to decide what to do with things. They keep faxing us back like, "What do we do with this thing?" And we'll keep faxing them back saying, "Whatever you want," and they just don't believe it. They say, "This just cannot be true."

HUO: It's actually refusing this kind of control?

FGT: Right. They want the traditional conceptual instruction and say, "Five inches to the left, six inches to the right twenty-two feet down. And I said, "No, you do with it whatever you want. You are responsible for the piece. You are responsible for the construction of this piece. You do with it whatever you want." The same way I asked to the viewer, "You are responsible for the final

meaning of this piece of paper that is part of this stack." And again, it's problematic on many levels because for the stacks, it's like, what is the piece? Is the piece the single sheet of paper, or is the piece the stack? Well, it could be both, and I never define, which one is which. It could be both for me because a piece of paper from a stack on a wall is in itself a piece, but at the same time, the stack is also the piece. So what we're talking about here? Which is this, a sculpture, is it a two-dimensional object, two-dimensional object, what is it? And I like that. Like I said before, I like that in-betweenness. It's just not easy to define this stuff, hopefully.

HUO: And the light bulbs and the light strings also take these very available materials as found! It was amazing to experience the big emotion set free by the simple light string in Paris. In a certain way, maybe this leads to the Vienna project, the poster project where you take the closest and most available element of an airplane company, which is their timetable and their list of destinations that they fly to. And all of a sudden, as if it came through the back door, something very unexpectedly set free many emotions.

FGT: Well, I mean, again, it's part of our language structure how we see things and how we don't see things, right? In our culture, we're not supposed to see or we don't usually see a clock as something personal, right? What's personal, what's public, what's not personal is always pretty much defined by our culture. But what defines who we are is not just what we have here but also what we are not, right? So if I'm here and then I was trying to define myself, which it will take me a long time, I'm also defined by not being that chair that is there or by not being that camera that is doing this recording, right? But at the same time, lots of objects are invested with a lot of very personal and very emotional context. And as Roland Barthes says, "All these objects, they have a language, they speak a language, and it's the language that we put into that," right? When Ross died, and I was in Toronto, and I was wondering suddenly, what am I going to take back with me? I didn't take back anything. I just left everything there. I left everything, absolutely everything. I only took back a photo of *Piss Christ* that Andres Serrano has given us because Ross wanted to donate it to International Center of Photography. But it was because I looked around and said,

"Okay, I'm going to take those glasses, I'm going to take that vase, I'm going to take those plates, I'm going to take that chair." But then suddenly, it doesn't make any sense because then I say, "Well, I also want to take the room," and the room has meaning, and it has a very specific feeling because of the window. And also the window, outside the window, there is a beautiful maple tree that I also wanted to take. And then there's also the house in front of the street that I also wanted to take and then the whole street and then the lady that also goes down to the supermarket, that's all part of the meaning of this place. And at the end, of course, I will probably have to end up bringing back with me to New York the whole city of Toronto, and that's a little bit difficult. So I decided not to take anything because all those objects had a meaning not only by being there themselves but also in relationship to another object. And a light string is something that we don't have to go too far to explain what they mean. I mean when you see the light strings because a party is about to take place, there's some kind of feast, some kind of fair. And the same thing with some of the other materials I have used, candies, cut papers, clocks, and curtains, beads, and now billboards. Stuff that is there. And the thing with Vienna and the Austrian Airlines project is that, as you know, the Austrian Airlines logo has to be there on the billboard. So I am someone who says that it's better to embrace the monster than to reject in order to suppress them. So I said, well, if I'm going to be doing something for Austrian Airlines that has to have the logo, I might as well just go all the way and do this piece based on Austrian Airlines.

HUO: Like a re-portrait.

FGT: Yeah, like a portrait of this entity that is a real entity, has a history. I mean Austrian Airlines has a history. It was not always there from the beginning of time, right? It started somehow somewhere for some specific purpose. They had a reason for being. And it was as you know, it was a complicated project because also, it had to look good because it's advertisement, and it's something that's going to go out in the streets. And if people are going to look at it, it has to look good, it has to be interesting.

HUO: At the same time, it has a political and historic dimension, by connecting the destination to years.

FGT: When you see Timisoara or when you read Timisoara, when you read Beirut and when you read Tijuana, there's no way that you can escape the political and historical connotation that Timisoara has in terms of it having been where the Romanian liberation started. And also when you see Beirut, when you read the word Beirut and the year that the Austrian Airlines starts flying there, you cannot get out of your mind the fact that there was an incredible, cruel civil war in Beirut based on the worst of all things, religion. So that's impossible to escape.

HUO: Could you describe maybe a bit more in details this (Portrait of Austrian Airlines)?

FGT: Well, I had to go back there and explain my idea of portraits because this is a way of doing portraits with people, right. Let me go back. When I'm going to do a portrait of someone or a couple or somebody, I ask them to give me a list of personal events and public events that have affected their life. And then I just read them and add new ones or start new ones or go back and ask them for more information because it's based on the idea of a photograph. In our culture, we read photographs two ways, what's denoted and what's connoted. What's denoted is the kind of thing that we, as an entity, have very little to argue about. For example, if it's a black-and-white photograph, if it's a photo of a man or a woman, if this woman or this man has long hair, short hair, or blond hair, or black hair, brown hair, or curly hair, big eyes, small eyes, whatever. That's the stuff that is denoted, right? If the person is wearing a shirt or wearing a coat or is wearing nothing, that's denoted. But what's connoted is the other way of reading the photograph, which for me is the most interesting, which it has to do with the text that we have in our heads. Is this person with the long hair, is that a '60s haircut or is that a Vidal Sassoon '70s haircut? Or is that just a simple T-shirt, or is a Dolce & Gabbana T-shirt, or is it a Pierre Cardin T-shirt? And is that building in the background an Adolf Loos or is it a Corbusier, right? That's what's denoted. So in order for us to read the photograph, we have to have a language transaction. It's the only way we can read a photograph, through language. So I decided to go then the other way, get rid of the image and just use language in order to read a photograph. And when this person who is getting the portrait made gives me a date, let's say for example, *Silver House 1964*. Well, none of us have

a fucking idea what *Silver House* is, but the person does have a very specific idea as a subject of what *Silver House* meant in his or her life. And they say the same way that in photograph when we look at a photograph, that photograph really, as Barthes said, it doesn't have an index. It's just not telling us much. It's just a photograph of a woman, but where was this woman? Was she in Vienna, Berlin, Cuba, Havana? I mean, where was this woman? Where was this photograph taken? There's very little that these photographs can tell us. So, in a way, this "Untitled" (Portrait of Austrian Airlines) is very related to that same work I've been doing for the last five years, of portraits. And I, again, have to say that these portraits get painted directly on the wall in a room way up, high up like a frieze, like a Greek frieze all around the room hopefully.

HUO: Like, again the places and dates.

FGT: Right. And when Austrian Airlines asked me to do the portrait, the Museum in Progress asked me to do the portrait. I mean they asked me to do a piece, a billboard for Austrian Airlines, I didn't know what they needed, right? So when I got here, and I realized what they needed, I said, "Oh my God, I cannot do this thing. This is just too complicated. This is really impossible" because I had an idea of something that I had been doing before, right, which was the same old shit, like a bird or something like that. But I got here and said, "No, I cannot do that," and I was pushed to a different place. I was pushed to a limit that I was not ready for, and I enjoyed it very much. I enjoyed very much certainly being in a situation, which I said, "No, I cannot do it." But then, I guess because I like perversion, and that's one thing that moves me a lot, I said, "Well, what if I just push the limits a little bit more? What if I just push this idea and do something that is just related specifically to Austrian Airlines?" And that's why I decided to do the portrait, the history of Austrian Airlines. Because in many ways, it's a fascinating concept for an airline to ask an artist to do a billboard, to do publicity. In the States, you know, that could not even be imagined. So I wanted to find out when this airline started, where this airline flies to. And also, in another level, or parallel to these ideas that I had in terms of the company, I wanted to give to the viewer, to the public, to the people that are walking down the street who are looking ~~this to~~ this billboard,

something very beautiful, something very uplifting. And these billboards are going to be in Vienna in the middle of the winter, which is, as we know, very, dry and very gray and very flat kind of landscape because it's very gray. I wanted to give them something very beautiful and something that they could travel in their mind to all these places. When they see *Amman*, when they see *Minsk*, when they see *Moscow*, when they see *London*, or when they see the word *New York*, some of them either have been there or had seen pictures of these places or maybe want to go to this place or maybe they don't want to go at all, but at least, those places are there. And hopefully, when they read this, this text, something will be triggered in their minds about these places.

HUO: Like everybody connects to the city they want!

FGT: Right.

HUO: It's also like in a big encyclopedia or any encyclopedic scheme where everybody finds…

FGT: Whatever they want. They go for the things that interest them personally. But that's the way meaning is created. Meaning is created usually at a personal level when we can bring things that are out there in the public sphere that we think have no relationship to us. When we can bring those things and put it into this kind of puzzle that makes who we are. How long have we been talking, you know --?

HUO: Can we continue or...?

FGT: It's up to you. Do you have more questions --

HUO: Yeah, lots. We could talk for five hours. [laughter]

FGT: -- because you seem to have like a lot of paper there, God. I wish we have some music in between this thing. I wish I brought my guitar. I hope I'm getting a suntan with this light. You know, we didn't do any makeup either.

HUO: So maybe we can go from the specific Austrian Airlines project to more general terms. I think that the (Portrait of Austrian Airlines) includes, like almost all of your works, this idea that on the one

hand, it's extremely emotional, and on the other hand extremely dependent on the reading or an individual reception of the viewer, who enters the action.

FGT: Right. But if nothing takes place, then the work is just very limited. But for me, the ideal thing is when something takes place, when there's some action, when there's some movement, when there's some travel in the mind, when the work becomes some kind of catalytical element for something to happen, for something to be possible. And I think with the light string at Jennifer Flay in which the viewer is allowed to, I mean the public got into the dancing, they started dancing, which was completely unexpected for me. Because as you know, I had two couples that were supposed to come and do it, and then suddenly, the viewer or the public started doing it.

HUO: And it kept on going --

FGT: And it kept on going. That was a very nice surprise for me. But, again, the viewer is something that I love, is something that I need for the work to exist, to happen, and for the complete meaning of the work. Because otherwise, like I said before, it's another boring, minimal piece of shit sitting on the floor, and that's not what my work is all about. And it's a problem when I applied for grants because they scan these slides of these things sitting on the floor and especially when it's like sculptures, as part of the panel, they look at this stuff, and they say, "Oh, a sculpture?" And it's not, not really. This is about -- this is almost like... This is an excuse to redefine my role as an artist. Because I see myself then almost as a theater director, directing a very spontaneous performance. With the stack, when the viewer takes the paper from the stack or the booklet from the stack or when the viewer takes a candy, eats it, and then shits the candy piece at the end. Because that's the final piece when the candy or the sweet gets eaten and then expelled as shit from the body. That's also, again, the ultimate collaboration too because I'm giving actual energy to this body to function --

HUO: But isn't it at the same time also a presence in the absence?

FGT: It's in-betweenness, again, the in-betweenness, which is the thing I find very, very exciting because it's almost like straight acting. Like I said before, as a gay man, I think that has a lot to do

with the way I do work because I always said, I want to be the spy, I want to be the one that looks like something else in order to infiltrate, in order to function as a virus. I mean, the virus is our worst enemy, but it should also be our model in terms of not being the opposition anymore, not being very easily defined. So that way, we can attach ourselves to institutions, which are always going to be there. And as Althusser said, these ideological institutions are always replicating them self. And if we attach to them as a virus, we'll replicate together with the institutions that every time the institution replicates itself because now we know its ideological apparatus is I'm never going to go away. They're always going to be there. And the minute we think we have pinned them down, they replicate themselves somewhere else. And I think that's a fascinating aspect of being an infiltrator or working as a virus being attached to these institutions.

HUO: So that's why it's very important. It's coming back to the beginning to the *MoMA Project* that it's in the inside and at the outside at the same time.

FGT: Right.

HUO: Like oscillating and in this sense also, dynamizing both.

FGT: Right, absolutely. And, also the context of the work. I mean, it's not just about two empty beds -- but it could be about the way people -- some people read in the street, it was about emptiness, it was about homelessness. It was about love -- man-man, woman-woman, men-women, whatever. It was about an announcement for a movie that was about to come. It was about an advertisement for a White Sale at Bloomingdale's. It could be about anything. And that is exactly the way I wanted it to function because some of those readings could be right, but that reading that I wanted, I want to give in to the work is very subtle. It's not about confrontation. It's about being accepted. And then once you accept this thing to your life, then I say to you, "But I just want you to know that this is about this," and then it's already too late. It's already inside the room.

HUO: If I think about the billboards, which are very often about the one image or if I think about other works, which are like one situation. Compared to the faster and faster moving flux of information and faster and faster moving flux of images, the works also correspond to a standstill.

FGT: Right.

HUO: Like this standstill, which is dynamic and dynamizing at the same time.

FGT: That's a very good question, and actually, I'm going to frame it in a different way. I think that in order to be successful as a cultural producer, in order to be successful in terms of getting a voice, we can do two things: Either be very smart and join the narrative, and I'm not that smart for that, or we could break the established narrative, right? And yes, I think at this point in our culture and our history, we have an explosion of information but an implosion of meaning. Things don't really have meanings, or if they have meaning, they have meaning for a very short time, right? Or it's very hard to ascribe meaning to things, and I can give you as an example. Let's say in the US, we have an enormous deficit. We as taxpayers are paying for certain things and we had nothing to do with it; at the same time, we have a lot to do with it because now we're paying for it. And one is, for example, the savings and loans industry. Well, I didn't buy any co-op, any condo in New York, and I didn't buy any BMW, but I still have to pay. As a taxpayer, I had to pay for all those motherfuckers that spent the money in the '80s. The same way for example, in the Everglades in Florida, now, the taxpayer and the sugarcane growers are paying to clean up all the damage that has been done to the environment by the sugar growers, right? No one asked me if it was okay with me that they pumped millions of pounds of pesticides in the sugarcane fields that later on was going to contaminate the Everglades, right? No one asked me for that, but now, I'm being taxed in order to pay for the cleanup of those people. So that doesn't mean anything to the American public. That doesn't have any meaning. But what has meaning for the American public because we are talking about billions and billions and millions of dollars, right, we cannot as an individual, as an everyday individual, you cannot really comprehend what is a billion dollars, but we can comprehend more or less what is $10,000. And what then has real meaning for the American "family" or the American "public" is the fact that $10,000 was given by the National Endowment for the Arts to support a very boring, "homoerotic" exhibition of two men kissing, right, in this case, the Mapplethorpe show. And that really had a meaning for the American public. That was

that real threat, "real threat" to the weak or the beleaguered American family. And I think that at this point in history as a cultural producer or as an artist, one of the most interesting ways of working is by looking at what the master narrative is doing, analyzing that, and then sort of doing something completely opposite to that in order to interrupt. For example, we go out in the outside world, and we see all these advertisements. It's just very colorful and all that text, right? Suddenly, the thing that stops the viewer in all this -- in this salad, this incredible explosion of text and images and color and stuff like that in various advertisements is a very simple black-and-white photograph.

HUO: Which almost breaks the inertia image.

FGT: Right. It's just a simple, black-and-white photograph of a bed with no text.

[BREAK]

HUO: And so you're talking about the black and white image, sort of a rupture in this inertia?

FGT: Well, like I was saying before, there is this explosion of information but this implosion of meaning. Saying that this whole utopia of information or a lot of access or everyone having access to a lot of information was going to create a very literate public, a very democratic situation. Well, it didn't happen because in order for that to happen, people have to make sense out of that, you have to be able to. You have to teach the public, the viewer, to be able to make sense, to create meaning out of all that information. And as information comes and goes in and out of the brain without any relevance -- it's a very inert landscape in which you have the most horrible news next to the cooking oil ads, next to the shopping channel, you know? And it is really complete inaction. The only thing you can do is probably, which will be like the most active thing you can actually do as a viewer is just to call back and order something on the phone from the TV from the shopping channel. Well, I mean it's also related to the early work, to the text pieces, I mean like this kind of inert, empty screen. But I think also going back to the billboard, when you're on the streets and you see all these advertisements that is very hard to compete with, I think one of the most successful things to do or one of the strategies to follow is to do the opposite of what the

master narrative is doing. And instead of using, in this case, I'm only speaking in formal ways, I'm not talking, of course, about the master narrative, the super narrative that is related to the symbolic order. What we can do then as artists, and I think that at least I try to do, is just to interrupt that narrative by just using a very simple black-and-white photograph that is actually very boring and has no text at all. It has no text there. So when the viewer looks at this thing, it's denoted that it's just black and white. It's a photo of, for example an empty bed, but what's there? What is the anchoring text for this image? Where is the indexing of this image? There's no index, and there's no anchoring, there's no caption. So therefore, I'm asking the viewer, I'm asking the public to give me as much as possible, to denote as much as possible out of this image. And it usually happens. With this project. I think, hopefully, it will happen the same way with the (Portrait of Austrian Airlines) billboard.

HUO: I think that's very good --

FGT: And it's --

M1: I think that's probably a good ending.

FGT: Okay.

HUO: As it happened, yeah.

FGT: So -- kill it, spider.