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TRAGIC OPTIMISM: ANGST,
AFFECT, AND AFFIRMATION IN
THE WORKS OF DARIO ROBLETO
AND FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES

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In 1996, Dario Robleto entered his university library, and began searching through books for references to the end of the world. He systematically altered, with white-out and pen, all the dates referencing Armageddon by adding one hundred years. In the text that represents the artwork, Robleto writes that this project will continue indefinitely until he is satisfied all references have been changed and that the action was taken “in an effort to buy us all a little more time.”¹ He titled the work *Tonight I’m Gonna Party Like It’s 2099*, a riff off of Prince’s top hit and Y2K anthem *1999*. Robleto does not tell us the specifics of how he found the books, how many he altered, or if the project actually continues to this day—allowing the work to exist somewhere between the concrete and the speculative. On the surface, this work reads as an attempt to save the world, but with a deeper analysis it is clear that it isn’t a refusal of the end. Rather, it is a surrender coupled with a tender gesture that intently accepts that someday the world is going to end, but also offers a consolation—a little more time.

Robleto is a self-identified “tragic-optimist” and “materialist poet”² whose massive archive of work ranges in subject matter from pop music to dinosaur extinction, civil war to teenage heart-break. Drawing from a collective history and a collective material archive, Robleto deploys objects like meteorite fragments, vinyl records from his mother’s collection, woolly mammoth bone marrow, 1900s antiques and artifacts, and human bones recovered from battlefields across America. Most importantly, Robleto destroys many of these rare and sought-after objects so he can convert them into another form and include them in his sculptures. While the subjects and materials are vast and varied, each piece resonates deeply with a few pertinent concerns: love, loss, longing, and art as a means to heal from despair. Within Robleto’s practice love doesn’t just refer to romantic love, it extends much farther, to the love we feel for our fellows, for the world, for art. For songs that become anthems, for idols who place us in the role of unrelenting fans, and for moments both banal and profound that suspend us in awe.

In an interview about his work, Robleto shared the questions his practice aspires to answer: “Can art give someone the thing they are missing? Can art complete something that is unfinished? Can art right a wrong? Can art heal past wounds?”³ Looking at the

1. *Tonight I’m Gonna Party Like It’s 2099*. A library. Whiteout. Ink. Liner Notes. “In an effort to buy us all a little more time on January 26th, 1996, research was begun in the University library, searching for all references to the end of the world. The dates were then white-out, and Armageddon was delayed by

writing in an additional 100 years to these predictions: for example 1999 became 2099. The piece will continue indefinitely or until I am satisfied all references have been changed.” Dimensions variable, 1996 – Present.

2. Dario Robleto. Interview with author. December 2016.

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long trajectory and evolution of Robleto's work, it would seem that he believes art can do these things, that art can embrace what is tragic and transform it into something more.

Because tragedy is a subjective experience, what we consider to be tragic can vary between remarkable bounds. There is no limit as to what might emerge as a tragedy. The end of the world is tragic, but so is teenage heartbreak—Romeo and Juliet taught us that. When tragedy occurs, grief follows, and humans have the common propensity to question the meaning and purpose of such occurrences. The despair that arises when one cannot make meaning of such events, when there is no meaning to justify profound suffering—this is what Friedrich Nietzsche defined as nihilism and what he spent his career as a philosopher trying to understand.

Nietzsche wrote his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in 1872. The book is a philosophical consideration of art and can be characterized as a love letter to his contemporary, Richard Wagner. Nietzsche championed Wagner's music, and wrote of it as a composition of aesthetics that could succeed in affirming life's value in the face of nihilist despair by performing a synthesis of the Apollonian and Dionysian aesthetics—a doubling of oppositional, yet complementary, affects such as tragedy and beauty or desire and fear. The concept of the Apollonian and Dionysian originate from Greek mythology's Apollo and Dionysus, sons of Zeus. Apollo is the god of rationality, logic, and reason; Dionysus is the god of impracticality, irrationality, and chaos. While their traits are oppositional, the Greeks did not perceive them as opposing forces. They were embraced as intertwined and harmonious.

Nietzsche further illuminates the nuances within the Apollonian and Dionysian while focusing much of his writing on the opera *Tristan and Isolde*, which has since been written about extensively. Contemporary Philosopher Bryan Magee writes:

The first chord of *Tristan and Isolde*, known simply as "the Tristan chord," remains the most famous single chord in the history of music. It contains within itself not one but two dissonances, thus creating within the listener a double desire, agonizing in its intensity, for resolution. The chord to which it then moves resolves one of these dissonances but not the other, thus providing resolution-yet-not-resolved.⁴

3. Elizabeth Dunbar, *Alloy of Love: Doris Robleto* (Saratoga Springs, NY: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2008), 215.

4. Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2002), 208.

What Magee is emphasizing here is how the chords and progressions of this music have been crafted to push and pull at the viewer, creating moments of tension and resolution, and a constant oscillation between the two. This oscillation is synonymous with Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian and is from where I extend my analysis. I will examine the works of Robleto and his artistic influence Félix González-Torres within this frame to illustrate how art and its practice can in fact ease the ache of certain meaninglessness.

One can see the Apollonian and Dionysian synthesis present in Robleto's *Tonight I'm Gonna Party Like It's 2099*. The work was not shown publicly until 2008, and until then was solely intended for those who might unexpectedly come upon these subtle interventions—for the student researching global warming, for the teacher preparing a lecture on religion, for the librarian returning books to the stacks. In an intimate moment with the trace of another's hand in the midst of a public place of research there is a tension that is sparked by the simple, anonymous gesture that simultaneously eludes and gives. The work is funny, but remains earnest. It is realistically ineffectual, but unimaginably time-consuming. It references pop culture while engaging humanity's very real fear of the end. It is vandalism, but it's also a remedy. It is tragic and futile and completely satisfying.

What Magee and Nietzsche are speaking to in the music of *Tristan and Isolde*, without naming it, and what I am speaking to in Robleto's work, is *affect*: the gathering of sensation, emotion, and feeling, both physical and otherwise, and the movements in and around, through, and beyond these states, instigated by events, objects, and encounters.⁵ Nietzsche believed in art's ability to harness these affects to create a profound and curative experience for the viewer. He writes:

Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence. He is nauseated.

Here when the danger to his will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live.⁶

5. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: and the Case of Wagner*, Trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage, 1957), 130. *The Birth of Tragedy* first published in 1872.

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For Nietzsche it was Wagner's operas that succeeded in this task. For me, it is Robleto. For Robleto, it is Félix González-Torres. In 2001, Robleto wrote an essay about González-Torres that could be characterized as a love letter, titled "When You Cry I Only Love You More." Robleto writes, "It amazes me that his [Félix González-Torres] work can so amorphously adapt to any pain or joy that enters my life. I don't want to know a world without it. If art can be anything anymore, then it must be this."⁷ In these few sentences, the themes that Nietzsche expresses as being so important in art's purpose are highlighted.

As a gay man making work about his loves and losses in the 1990s, citing the AIDS crisis as an incomprehensible reality, González-Torres used his great disappointment in the world around him to operate within a strategic framework of harmonious opposition. González-Torres made prolific, often minimalist artworks reflecting on various subjects such as capitalism, loss, violence, and love. Robleto has made artwork out of the artifacts of González-Torres's takeaway works, illuminating a similar dynamic to that of Nietzsche and Wagner.

Robleto's 1997 work *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away* (fig. 1) is made of candy wrappers from González-Torres's sculptural work *Untitled (USA Today)*. Robleto folded the candy wrappers into airplanes and hung them from the ceiling with white thread, emulating fighter jets caught mid-flight. From afar, tiny metallic specks of red, blue, and silver collect in a suspended cloud. Their colors signify the American dream, airshows, and sunny days at the carnival. González-Torres's *Untitled (USA Today)* (fig. 2), the work from which Robleto retrieved the candy wrappers for his airplanes, manifests as a large pile of candy wrapped in metallic red, blue, and silver cellophane and spilled into the corner of a room. Again, the colors signify things closely linked to the American dream and the carnival, but in this configuration—candy wrappers wrapping candy—the colors also hint at Memorial Day contests, half-off sales, and the American adage, "Go big or go home."

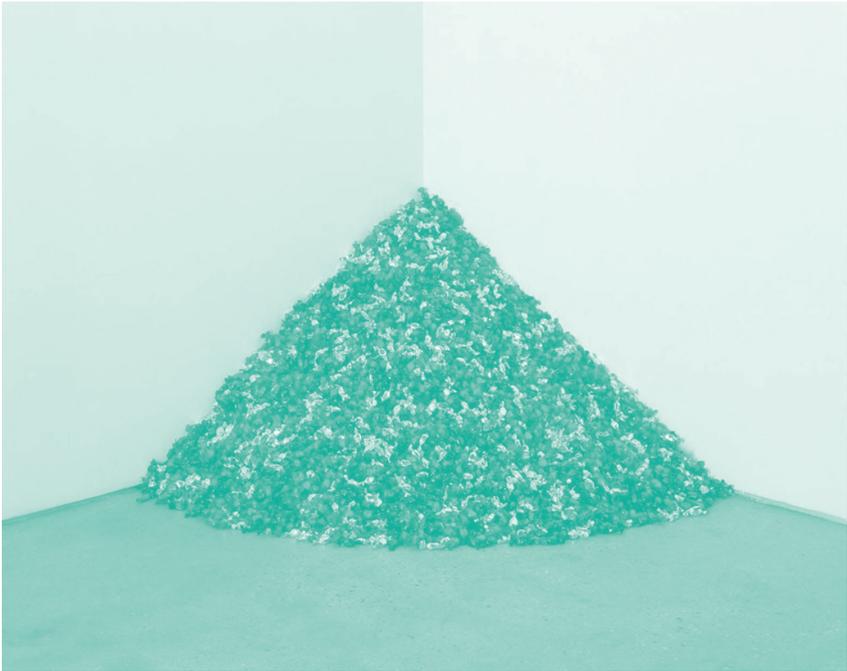
Weighing 300 pounds at its initial installation and again with every replenishment, the pile shrinks because viewers are invited to take as much candy as they like, devour it, and throw away the wrappers (or keep them and make art with them). Viewers consume the candy, the art, and the ideas, and they engage in the

Z. Dario Robleto, "When You Cry I Only Love You More," *Artiles* (2001).

Figure 1: Dario Robleto, *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away*, 1997.
Liner Notes: "Candy wrappers, thread. Paper airplanes constructed out of candy wrappers from Félix González-Torres's piece *Untitled (USA Today)*."

Figure 2: Félix González-Torres, *Untitled (USA Today)*, 1990.

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activities of everyday capital. Three hundred pounds is the combined weight of González-Torres and his lover Ross Laycock, measured soon before Laycock died of AIDS-related causes. Not much context is given, but if the viewer is thoughtful, they might consider how light 300 pounds is for two men—though it makes sense if one of them is dying. In the moment, as a sugary communion of the dead is taken and taste buds are emboldened with sweetness, the body of someone’s lover dissolves. The opposition of tactile enjoyment and metaphorical loss confront each other, and the affective qualities of the Apollonian and Dionysian synthesis are engaged. As viewers, we participate in love, whether we intend to or not, and we participate in the disappearing of a lover as well.

González-Torres’s gesture compels us to ask what loss tastes like, what it smells like. It asks, “How heavy is love?” It compels us to reckon with affect—with our senses and emotions in a critical way. González-Torres writes about his works and the public’s interaction:

Perhaps between public and private, between personal and social, between fear of loss and the joy of loving, of growing, changing, of always becoming more, of losing oneself slowly and then being replenished all over again from scratch. I need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in.⁸

By taking the candy wrappers from González-Torres’s work, saving them, and turning them into something new, Robleto replies to González-Torres’s ask with a clear and concise, “Yes, I will help, I will take responsibility, I will become a part of this work.” This commitment includes not only the artwork itself, but the work of affirming life’s value in the midst of great and incomprehensible anguish. Robleto takes the candy wrappers and elevates them to a new height, communicating that the loss, love, and lessons of grief will not be wasted. They will mean something still, long after the candy has dissolved on the tongue.

In taking a closer look at the paper airplanes in Robleto’s piece, one can see that some of these airplanes have been made from cut and reshaped pieces of foil. Some have been given wings

8. Nancy Spector and Félix González-Torres, *Félix González-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995), 28.

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that have been adhered with glue, creating a union between two distinct pieces. This gesture insists that the artifacts of loss can be pulled apart and recuperated by art. They are lifted up in monument as emblems for what Gonzalez-Torres lived and died through, reminding us that while we will never learn to defy death, we have learned to defy gravity. In this, planes become metaphors for the profound events that humankind has navigated through, for the histories of impossibilities becoming possible: the first airplane flight, the first space exploration, setting foot on the moon. We might also be reminded of the moments in which humanity has failed itself: the Challenger disaster, the 9/11 attacks, the fact that airplanes are used to drop bombs. The same vessel that becomes an emblem of hope becomes an emblem of hopelessness, creating a space where tragic optimism resides.

I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away also points to the power we have as subjective individuals to affect and be affected. As we move around the almost weightless hanging airplanes, they drift and swing and sway. Our presence animates them and allows them to live out their potentiality. The closer we get, the more the airplanes are jostled alive. The work reaches poignant flight as we approach, or as a breeze runs through the space. The work's existence relies on other forces for completion. Its existence at all would not be possible without the life of another, foregrounding that we rely on each other for survival, and that those we rely on will be the sources of both our greatest joys and our greatest disappointments.

These works ask the viewer to acknowledge that while the world is a tragic place, we can still have joy, and laughter, and we can still be together, feeling awe as we see an airplane fly loop-de-loops over our heads. Like the moment a crowd of strangers comes together when moved by a single chord. It's not that we need these representations to know these tragedies exist. It's that art as a form has the power to demand more than despair in the face of certain meaninglessness. These dualities will always be present, and when they can be present in one single moment—an embrace of everything—despair is no longer despair as we know it, but despair as we need it, a moment of nourishment.