PRADEEP DALAL IN CONVERSATION WITH DAVID DEITCHER, AUTHOR OF STONE'S THROW

INTERVIEW
Pradeep Dalal
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David, your new book, *Stone's Throw*, is unusual in the way the images preface and thread through the two written sections. The footnotes are marvelously detailed and substantial. I liked how the book dispenses with the conventions of the introduction, list of illustrations, and bibliography. Could you say something about how you reached this resolution for your book?

When I am reading, I often find that the traditional location of an endnote disrupts my ability to focus on the body of the text. Footnotes are somewhat less distracting, but can clutter a page. And yet, I value substantive notes especially as a parallel text. I was fortunate to work with Secretary Press and their design partners on this project (L + L Design). Together we designed the book to provide a unique reading experience, in which notes appear on the left side of each page spread, opposite the body of the text and as close as possible to the number that directs the reader to the note. As you observed, some of the notes in *Stone's Throw* are lengthy and detailed. This is due to my tendency to digress, whether in speaking or writing, and to my corresponding desire to maintain the narrative thread of the text by relegating such supplementary framing material to notes. As for the absence of an introduction, I was able to include essential details about the book at its end, in the brief afterword/acknowledgments. I might have enjoyed saying more about how *Stone's Throw* came about, but brevity won out.

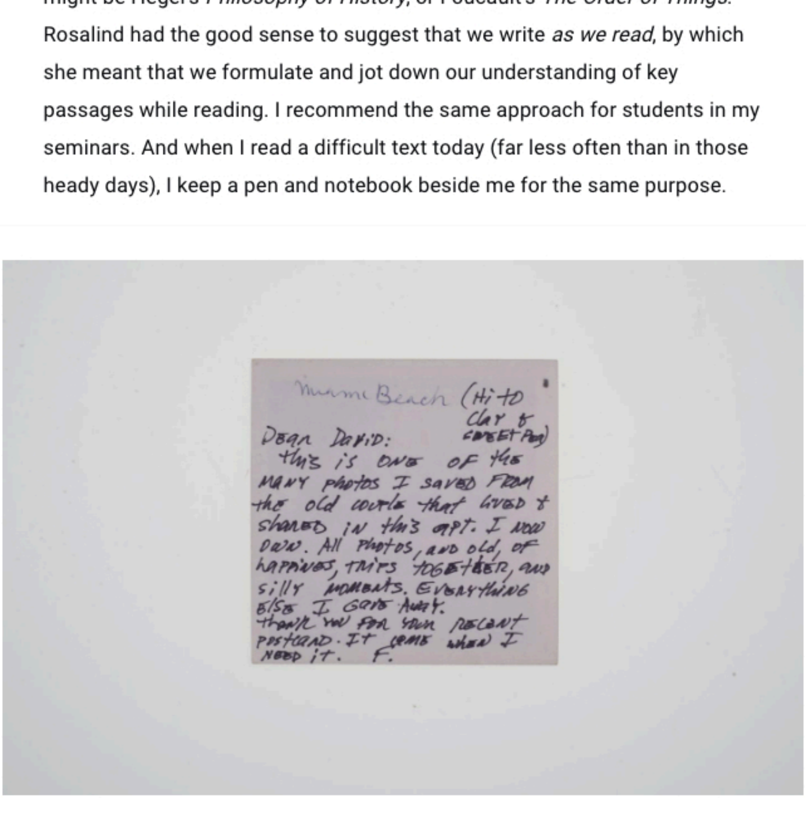
A few weeks ago, at a discussion at ICP, Nayland Blake made a point about "systems of sociability," how art history typically does not allow for the inclusion of a more personal framing of ideas. In your book the personal is woven seamlessly with both the social and political context around AIDS (for example, the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt or the work of ACT UP, Gran Fury, and Group Material), art historical arguments such as those made by Rosalind Krauss, and ideas articulated by artists like Carl Andre, Sherrie Levine, and Joseph Kosuth. How did this approach to the book develop?

I write art history by threading the art I'm writing about through such "systems of sociability" (by which term I understand both the need to contextualize the art that grounds the discussion and the decision to incorporate), personal testimony, and even anecdotes — this last much to the dismay of some other art historians and critics for whom the inclusion of personal reflection and anecdotes remains anathema. How I came to write what I've thought of as "intimate art history" is too long a story to recount here.

But as you know, I am also working on a longer book project that I call *Once More, with Feeling*, in which I explore that development at length. My schooling coincided with a significant turning point in art, as well as in art history and criticism. I was trained, sequentially, in two contrasting forms of art history: first, the empirically based, German-derived, postwar American art history that I was introduced to as an undergrad at New York University during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when I studied with such avatars of *Kunstwissenschaft* as Peter (H.W.) Janson, Robert Rosenblum, Gert Schiff, and Lucy Sandler. That learning sharply contrasted with a very different art history that, informed by continental critical theory, I became aware of starting at the end of the 1970s as a student of Rosalind Krauss at the Graduate Center, CUNY. At the time, she and some of my more illustrious classmates were responding to developments in contemporary art with texts essaying early theories of postmodernism. After receiving my doctorate, it took time before I found my voice as a writer. Finding that voice was, in part, a benefit of the many years I spent in more than one psychoanalytic treatment facility in order to come to terms with being queer. By then, the emergence of the North American AIDS crisis lent urgency to finding such a voice. It took equally as long for me to find the courage to reject aspects of both approaches to art history that I'd learned as a student, and to disobey respected elders, which enabled me to find my way to practice a kind of art history and criticism that felt meaningful and consistent with lived experience — my own, of course — but not without also finding ways to acknowledge in my work how very remote my personal experience has been as a white man of privilege from most other people. Finding ways to teach and write that enables readers to identify across such lines of difference always poses challenges.

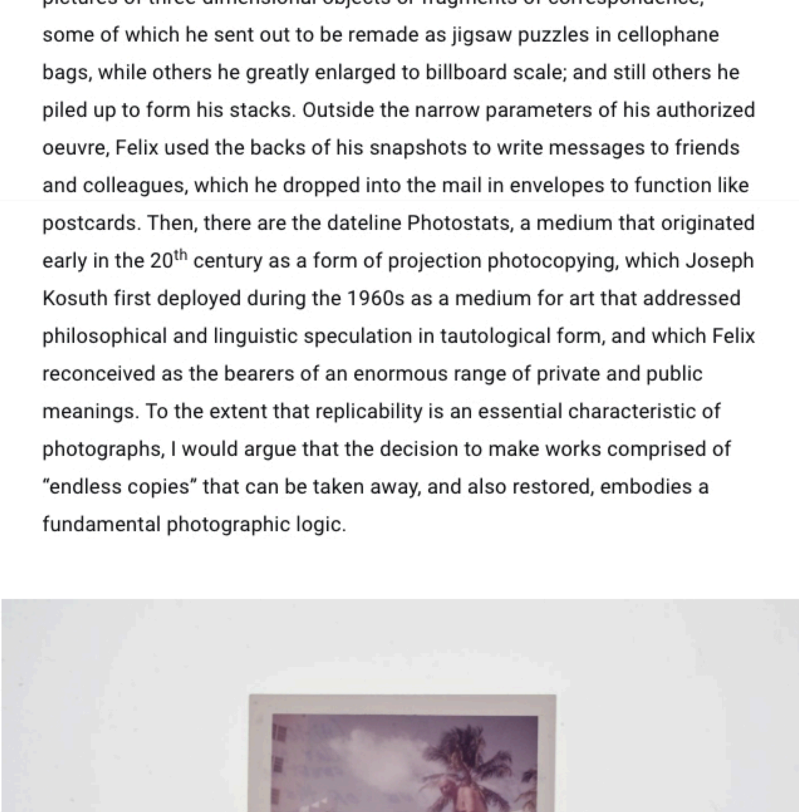
I remember you showing me Moyra Davey's book *The Problem of Reading* when I was your student at ICP-Bard. In it, she says, "the most compelling vision of reading is the one that implies a relation to writing, to work." What are your reading habits and how have they nourished the precision and fluidity of your writing?

Moyra, a dear friend, has maintained a deep and generative relationship to reading, which for many years has nurtured and figured in her own artistic practice, which includes writing. Something Rosalind Krauss once said comes to mind, though it bears only a tangential relationship to Moyra's assertion. During the late 1970s and well into the 1980s, Krauss's seminars featured syllabi packed with difficult texts. A weekly reading assignment might be Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, or Foucault's *The Order of Things*. Rosalind had the good sense to suggest that we write *as we read*, by which she meant that we formulate and jot down our understanding of key passages while reading. I recommend the same approach for students in my seminars. And when I read a difficult text today (far less often than in those heady days), I keep a pen and notebook beside me for the same purpose.



In your book, you include Felix Gonzalez-Torres's more documentary-style photographs from his *"Untitled" (Natural History)* series, and in your essay "Contradictions and Containment," written for Gonzalez-Torres's catalogue raisonné, you discuss his use of the snapshot and its enlargement into billboards. Gonzalez-Torres also used photographs in his puzzle pieces and paper stacks, such as *Untitled (Death by Gun*). Was photography central to Gonzalez-Torres's art? How experimental was his conceptual use of photography?

You may know that in 1987 Felix received an MFA from the graduate program then run by the school of the International Center of Photography and NYU. I do not know much about the courses he took or the impact they had on his formation as an artist. But I do know that the material and structural properties of photographs, as well as their capacity to capture the look of people, places, and things would come to dominate so much of his art. He used cameras to create series of images like *"Untitled" (Natural History)*, or the alternately dreamy or menacing pictures of birds in flight; pictures of three-dimensional objects or fragments of correspondence, some of which he sent out to be remade as jigsaw puzzles in cellophane bags, while others he greatly enlarged to billboard scale; and still others he piled up to form his stacks. Outside the narrow parameters of his authorized oeuvre, Felix used the backs of his snapshots to write messages to friends and colleagues, which he dropped into the mail in envelopes to function like postcards. Then, there are the dateline Photostats, a medium that originated early in the 20th century as a form of projection photocopying, which Joseph Kosuth first deployed during the 1960s as a medium for art that addressed philosophical and linguistic speculation in tautological form, and which Felix reconceived as the bearers of an enormous range of private and public meanings. To the extent that replicability is an essential characteristic of photographs, I would argue that the decision to make works comprised of "endless copies" that can be taken away, and also restored, embodies a fundamental photographic logic.



Gonzalez-Torres's Photostat and silkscreened dateline text pieces also, perhaps, read like photographs. I am drawn to the terse, distilled language in these pieces — simply a title or phrase and a date, not chronological and without punctuation. Here is "*Untitled*," (1989) that is included in your book: *People With AIDS Coalition Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1891 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969*. You help fill in the background, for example explaining the Supreme Court 1986 reference to the ruling in the case that enabled the police to arrest two adult men having consensual sex. Can these spare, elegant works convey the harshness of discrimination and the anger against the cavalier government response to AIDS? David Wojnarowicz's *Sex Series* and his *"Untitled" (death certificate)* incorporating Hujar's diagnoses of pneumocystis have the ferocity, bite, and provocation that gets under my skin and stays there. Is the understated coolness of Gonzalez-Torres's conceptual approach its strength but also a limitation?

Due to the fragmentary, non-declarative lines of words and dates that appear in Felix's dateline Photostats, as well as their non-chronological sequencing, and the often idiosyncratic character of the items on such lists (with notable exceptions, like the unusually coherent and gay history-oriented *"Untitled"* (1989)) I do not find that such works convey the kind of "ferocity and bite" that you correctly associate with Wojnarowicz's work, which takes no prisoners and never minces words when addressing cruelty and injustice, and the social and economic systems that perpetuate them. Felix did not want his art to be reducible to polemics — or to any other one thing. As proof, I offer the fate of one billboard design that Felix ultimately omitted from his oeuvre catalogue. That billboard (realized in 1990 in observance of the National Day of Mourning) was fire-engine red, and stacked in two blocks of white lettering, first in English over the second in Spanish, proclaimed: "HEALTH CARE IS A RIGHT/ A government by the people, for/ the people must provide ade-/quate health care to the people./ NO EXCUSES."

To return to the dateline Photostats, one ferocious example comes to mind. During a visit to the installation that Jim Hodges organized in 2009–10 for the FLAG Art Foundation (*Floating A Boulder*), I couldn't help but notice one of the smallest of the dateline Photostats — *"Untitled"* (1988) — which drew me close in an otherwise luminous gallery, at which point I realized its dreadful force. The sheer blackness of this small, framed object combined with its single-minded text ("B-2 Stealth Bomber 1982 V-22 Osprey Anti-sub Plane 1983/ A-6 Intruder Fighter 1984 Aquila Drone (remote-piloted) 1987/ F/A-18 Jet Fighter 1982 Wedtech 1986 Stinger anti-aircraft/ missile 1985 Dirty Harry 1988 Maverick Missile 1987 SDI") to put me in mind of black holes. Not unlike a black hole, this diminutive, black object, which optically punched a hole in the wall on which it hung, practically sucked the light and energy away from everything else around it, which included a number of luminous, large-scale, glittering works by Hodges — large panels covered, edge to edge, in mirrored tesserae — as well as Felix's own queer take on the Minimalist box, *"Untitled", (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* (1991).

ACT UP's window installation on Broadway at the New Museum in 1987, *Let the Record Show …* was tough, path-breaking, and surprisingly relevant today. I was moved by William Olander's powerful statement for the installation that you include as a double page spread in your book. He argues, "throughout history, all periods of intense crisis have inspired works of art whose functions were often extra-intrinsic." He ends by saying, "Let the record show that there are many in the community of art and artists who choose not to be silent in the 1980s." Is this true for artists making work today? Do you see your students make work that engages with larger social and political issues?

Bill's eloquent advocacy of and support for socially engaged art resulted from a combination of factors, beginning with his career-long dedication to art that is "extra-intrinsic," by which he presumably meant art that exceeds purely aesthetic concerns and in some cases aims to effect social change. Then there is the fact that his curatorial working life coincided with the emergence of the kind of postmodern art that explored the interface between representation and ideology — the storied "critique of representation." Finally, there was the North American AIDS crisis during its initially mysterious and most virulent first decade, which took Bill's own life in 1989. Our students today are well aware of the complex of crises that affect their lives. They are aware of the perpetual war on "terrorism," and through the work of artists like Laura Poitras they grasp the consequent erosion of human rights and privacy. They know how unjust the American justice system has become within the context of Black Lives Matter and the system of mass incarceration that has revived social relations of production akin to slavery. They know about as much as they can bear about the implications of this presidential campaign, in which crypto-fascist Republican candidates prey on the uniquely toxic American combination of fear and anger to spawn racist xenophobia and perpetual war. Especially after losing faith in the social efficacy of the critique of representation, such a complex tangle of issues might help to explain why our students do not share Bill's fundamentally hopeful predisposition to art that effects social change. From my perspective, our students do not seem particularly interested in contemporary art that gets classified under the rubric of "social practice," though they are enthusiastic about working collaboratively on a wide variety of projects. In Nayland Blake's introduction to this year's group thesis exhibition, he maintained, I think correctly, that our students have deployed the camera in ways that foster social connection, as opposed either to the assertion (promulgated by Sontag) that the mediating effect of the camera separates us from experience, or to the isolation that is one of the risks of conventional studio practice. Our students create works in and across mediums that can give poetic shape to their experience, and, not unlike what used to be called relational aesthetics, they carve out spaces in which to foster humane, life-affirming, often playful social relations. Their decidedly anti-dogmatic projects cannot be mistaken for agitprop.

I am grateful for the many discoveries that your book has led me to, David. A chance to look more closely at Gonzalez-Torres's work and understand it in the context of your experience of the 1980s and the devastation wrought by AIDS. And a valuable introduction to Olander's sharp curating and thoughtful writing. The premise and installation of another show that Olander curated at the New Museum in 1986, *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History*, is prescient: "At present, it is not a matter of whether or not one is capable of remembering, but of what is remembered and its relation to what is not remembered, or to its 'reality'." In the tiny installation images on the New Museum digital archive, I loved the wall with the Sarah Charlesworth *Herald Tribune* series flanked by the photographs by Louise Lawler. And the marvelous portraits and frame paintings by René Santos, whose work I did not know. You have written about him before and are embarking on a new project on his work. Can you share more on this research and also other writing projects on your wish list?

Should you want to know more about Bill's work, I know of at least one graduate thesis, though I haven't yet read it: Gladys-Katherina Hernando, *Fragmented Memory: William Olander and the Exhibition as Criticism* – USC, May 2012. I loved Bill's *Memory/History* show at the New Museum, and worked closely with him on planning it. The show included another, less familiar, work by Sarah Charlesworth. Less political in its implications than it was oriented around the vicissitudes of remembering and forgetting, this ravishing, large-scale, white-on-white photographic print depicted a tabletop still life by Nicéphore Niépce — among the very first photographs, but not as familiar to contemporary viewers as some others. Although I'm growing increasingly eager to move the focus of my writing away from more critical reflections on the 1980s, the book project you refer to, tentatively titled *Once More, with Feeling*, will include a chapter on the first half of that decade, when Bill and I both met and befriended René Santos. While some of René's papers reside at the Archives of American Art (having been donated in 1995 by Brad Baker, René's partner), René's brother Felix Santos keeps the vast majority of René's papers, the slides that served as source material for paintings and photographic prints, his library, and the many works of art that remained after he died of AIDS suddenly on May 1,1986. I leave for San Juan tomorrow morning, and look forward to working with that material and spending time with Felix Santos and other family members to deepen my understanding of René and his development as a formidable artist and intellectual.

Stone's Throw *is available for purchase on Amazon.*