

## MARIO GARCÍA TORRES

### *Je ne sais si c'en est la cause, What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger, and Some Reference Material*

Mario García Torres looks to recent history, in both its anecdotal and official articulations, to make connections between the present moment and artists of past generations who, in his words, “were fundamentally trying to legitimize a different way of conceiving art.” García Torres communes with earlier artists—particularly conceptual artists—through various means, repeating or reperforming their original gestures, obsessively researching and representing documentation of their work, and in some cases engendering imaginary conversations with them. He approaches historical episodes with a deeply subjective sense of the documentary. Each of his acts functions as an appropriation of sorts, reframing and refocusing another artist’s work through his own lens to open up a dialogue across time and space relative to the status of art objects and experiences, and the function of memory and anecdote as surrogates in their absence. García Torres’s research-based work traffics in arcane facts and quixotic episodes. His interest is not solely in reconstructing obscure incidents, but in the operations of recollection and myth-making on “quieter, almost cameo-like narratives from the recent past” that have not been solidified, canonized, classified, and codified by the fixity of history.

One such narrative concerns The Grapetree Bay Hotel, near the southeastern coast of St. Croix, which has been the victim of difficult circumstances since its inception in the early 1960s. Like many resorts in the U.S. Virgin Islands, it was planned and financed by foreign investors, who hoped the relaxing pace of island life, combined with the gracious amenities and Danish modern furniture familiar to their upper-class American clientele, would bring success. By this point, tourism had replaced the island’s agricultural economy, and local developers were adept at manipulating the interloping investors who hoped to profit from the locale’s natural beauty. The Grapetree Bay Hotel fell prey to such circumstances, and the millions of dollars

poured into it by an American, Farleigh Dickerson, Jr., were mishandled locally, requiring his lawyer, Thibaut de Saint Phalle, to intervene, negotiating difficult legal and economic disputes over the course of four years to finally open the hotel. For the twenty or so years it remained open, the resort hotel struggled financially, until it was nearly destroyed in the greater tragedy of Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Although it was recently purchased for redevelopment, for another nearly twenty years it sat abandoned, in ruins. Nature had come to reclaim the tennis courts, occupy the once luxurious lobby. And intrepid former guests explored the grounds, stepping amongst decaying furniture, rubble, debris, and the remains of the murals and mosaics that decorated the pool house and other outbuildings.

No one would suspect, in their half-demolished state, that these works were created by one of the most iconic conceptual artists. But in 1960, just out of art school, the French painter Daniel Buren was given the commission to create a series of murals due to his family’s business relationship to Thibaut de Saint Phalle. He made several works during a residency in 1960, and returned again in 1965 to complete a second set of mosaic murals. The first group were figurative in nature, depicting island leisure and sports activities in a style that bears the influence of both European modernist masters such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso and Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose work Buren had studied

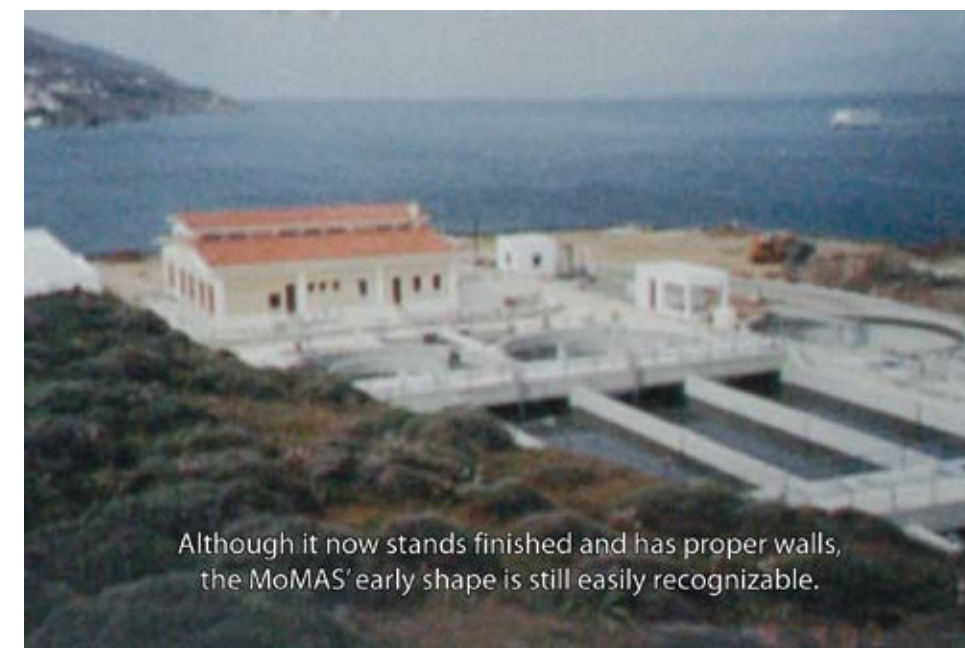


The Grapetree Bay Hotel, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, December 2006. Photo: Mario García Torres, from *Je ne sais si c'en est la cause*, 2009; dual 35mm slide projection.

in Mexico in previous years. In the second set of murals, Buren experimented with abstraction, inching toward his mature form, the stripe paintings and installations for which he is known and that he continues to produce today. Occurring early in his career, and evincing important shifts in style, the St. Croix works have taken on the status of lore within Buren’s oeuvre. Despite the retrospective importance ascribed to them by scholars and even the artist himself, Buren expressed great frustration with the works in a 1965 letter, calling them disgusting.

Mario García Torres has spent years researching these murals, piecing together facts from the biography of de Saint Phalle and from Buren monographs, and traveling to the abandoned site to experience and document the murals firsthand and trace anecdotal information about the hotel’s troubled history. He has unearthed archival materials, from the few extant photographs of the murals at the time of their making, to Buren’s disparaging letter to his family, to a record made by the hotel with the famous steel band musician Pedrito Altieri in a blatant promotional effort.

García Torres has typically conveyed his research through the juxtaposition of image and text in slide-show format, as in *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger* (2008), which also appears in the MATRIX exhibition. The work chronicles his attempt to revive the Museum of Modern Art Syros (MOMAS), initiated by the artist Martin Kippenberger in an abandoned building on the Greek island in 1993.



Still from *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger*, 2007; 35mm slide projection.



Exhibition poster for *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger*, 2007.

Kippenberger had been attracted to the space as a kind of contemporary ruin and invited artists to exhibit there. In the slide show, García Torres explains social and cultural aspects of the island, illuminating the curious circumstance of creating a museum in such a context, before articulating Kippenberger’s actions and intentions. The space existed largely as a concept, as a space of artists and ideas apart from the objects they might create, since actual visitorship and subsequent documentation were scarce. García Torres re-created MOMAS a decade later, through the design and deployment of an exhibition poster for the museum, which by this time had already been repurposed as a waste treatment plant. Faithful to the re-creation, García Torres did install an exhibition as well, but its visitorship consisted only of the artist and the plant’s workers. García Torres’s gesture was as much a statement of his intent to reimagine the museum as a space of absence as it was a call to the island’s inhabitants to consider the histories layered in buildings, the invisible and ephemeral actions lost to time, except for their attachment through anecdote to physical locations.

Like *What Doesn't Kill You*, the Grapetree Bay work has a little of the character of a travelogue, images of distant places tied to anecdotal occurrences. In this case, instead of subtitles, he uses the device of the folk song (a collaboration with musician Mario López Landa) as he constructs an alternative lore in scripted narration

and lyrics quoted from Buren's letter. Echoing the promotional vinyl produced by the hotel, García Torres's record has a melancholy air—in a sense functioning like a promotion for the hotel and the murals as they currently exist, in ruins—with the complexity of a larger narrative, concerning the artist's doubt and frustration in the making of the work and the aftermath as the hotel's failure and the entropy of nature conspire in the murals' eventual undoing. Buren acknowledges that the remote location of the resort hotel provided the context for him to "virginize" himself, purging outside influences. And within his oeuvre, art historians understand them as seminal works in his early development. But because of the remoteness and strangeness of the murals' location, the discussion surrounding them is anecdotally derived from documentation—static, distant, self-contained dispatches from the past that acknowledge none of the circumstances of the site or of the murals' future state. García Torres's project opens the accepted art historical reading of the facts of the murals' existence to larger narratives of failure, doubt, and entropy. His subjective documentary approach, moreover, presents this work not as an isolated instance in Buren's career, but as inextricably tied to questions about European influence in the Americas, and how the context of landscape and tourism informs these proto-conceptual works.



The Grapetree Bay Hotel, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, December 2006. Photo: Mario García Torres, from *Je ne sais si c'en est la cause*, 2009; dual 35mm slide projection.

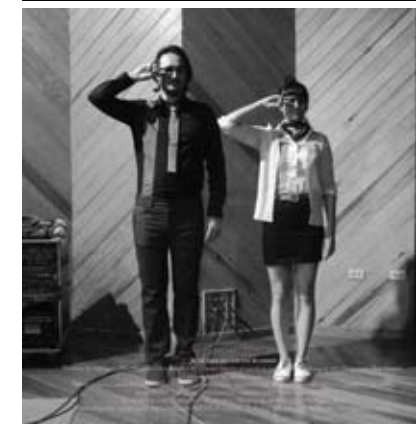
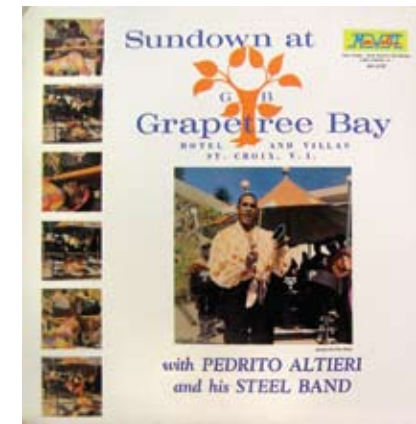
The question of that which does not exist, whether it never did or no longer does so, is a notion at the heart of conceptual art. And it remains a question of great interest to García Torres. In other works, he has animated the character of Alan Smithee, the fictional "auteur" credited with failed films from which the original creator's name has been removed, commenting on the absent author and the significance of failure in the creative arc of a biography. Or he has written imaginary letters to Dr. Atl, a famous Mexican painter, about failed negotiations to build a branch of the Guggenheim near the Barranca de Oblatos, a canyon of stupendous beauty that was Atl's frequent subject. The work considers tourism and the landscape, not just through the lens of concrete reality, but through the implications of what once threatened to exist, but never came to be. In their state of ruin, half-destroyed, it can be said that Buren's murals cease to exist. MOMAS, which existed as a physical exhibition space at its inception, was reanimated by García Torres through the mere promotion of its existence, absent the actual space. In his retelling of both episodes, García Torres consciously absents the artist, shifting the protagonist to the periphery of his own narrative, opening up space for the construction of an alternative narrative that would not be told by any art history that operates largely to contextualize through biography.

And so García Torres sees the construction of history, and the functions of both remembering and forgetting that attend to the writing of histories, for the political acts that they are. Categorically, histories claim a kind of fixedness, presuming to represent the empirical truths of a situation. But each historical account is a repositioning, through omission or inclusion, of events within the context of their time. And that kind of subjectivity becomes more complex when one considers how the writing of histories allows us to apply circumstances retrospectively, so that the meaning of an historical event changes in relation to what follows it. García Torres isn't interested in creating fictions; his research is exhaustive, his documentation real, his narration factual. But his work is deeply invested in how his construction of history functions as a subjective and speculative means of understanding the present.

#### Elizabeth Thomas

PHYLLIS WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

Mario García Torres was born in 1975 in Monclova, Mexico, and is now based in Los Angeles, California. Solo exhibitions include *Jeu de Paume*, Paris; *Kunsthalle Zurich*; *Kadist Art Foundation*, Paris; and *Stedelijk Museum*, Amsterdam. He has participated in group exhibitions at venues such as *CAC Vilnius*; *Yokohama Triennale 2008*; *De Appel*, Amsterdam; *Museo Tamayo*, Mexico City; *Barbican Gallery*, London; *52nd Biennale di Venezia*; *Frankfurter Kunstverein*; *Centro de Arte Reina Sofía*, Madrid; *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris*; *mca Chicago*; *Tate Modern*, London; *Artists Space*, New York; and the *2nd Moscow Biennale*. He was the recipient of the *Cartier Award* at the *Frieze Art Fair* in 2007. He received his B.F.A. from the *Universidad de Monterrey*, San Pedro Garza García, Mexico, and his M.F.A. from *California Institute of the Arts*, Valencia, California.



#### PUBLIC PROGRAM

##### Artist's Talk

Sunday, February 22, 3 p.m.  
Museum Theater  
Reception follows in Bancroft Lobby

#### IN THE MUSEUM STORE

*Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*, edited by Julie Rodrigues Widholm. \$39.95, paperback.

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All images, unless noted, courtesy of the artist; Jan Mot, Brussels; and White Cube, London.

The artist would like to thank Julie Rodriguez Widholm, Shantal Leal Krska, Federico and Jorge Caballero, and Luis Ezequiel Domínguez.

**FRONT** Detail of Daniel Buren's *4 Mosaïques* at The Grapetree Bay Hotel, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, December 2006. Photo: Mario García Torres, from *Je ne sais si c'en est la cause*, 2009; dual 35mm slide projection.

**LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM** Album cover for *Sundown at Grapetree Bay* with Pedrito Altieri and His Steel Band, 1962. Photos: Fritz Henle; copyright Marvel Records, San Juan, Puerto Rico. Album cover for Mario García Torres (in collaboration with Mario López Landa): *Je ne sais si c'en est la cause*, 2009; vinyl record, 11:50 min.



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MARIO GARCÍA TORRES MATRIX 227 FEBRUARY 22 — MAY 17, 2009  
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