

# Reviews

**Familiarity does breed contempt. But worse than contempt** is ambivalence or disregard: knowing something so well – or thinking you do – that it no longer touches you, that the joy of the experience has been diminished, perhaps irrevocably.

In this frame of mind, I traipsed off to see the retrospective 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Specific Objects without Specific Form'. Was there anything left to add to the art historical canon that attends the oeuvre of the Cuban artist, who settled in New York in the 1970s and died of AIDS-related complications in 1996 at the age of 39? The piles of candy are a comment on life's fragility; their slow diminishment is a metaphor for the process of dying... Didn't we learn that in college?

What this compelling show accentuated is that learning by rote is no substitute for experience and that, as González-Torres posited, everything does and should change, even artworks. To this end, curator Elena Filipovic conceived each stop of this travelling retrospective as a kind of play in two acts. She always curated the first act as a chronological overview. For the second act, one contemporary artist influenced by Gonzalez-Torres' work re-curated her installation half-way through the show's duration. Last year,

Danh Vo re-installed the debut at the WIELS art space in Brussels, while Carol Bove did the honours for the second stop at the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen near Basel. This spring, Tino Sehgal took on the show's third and final stop at the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt am Main.

Filipovic's presentation at the MMK did precisely what an opening act should do: set the scene and let the audience get to know the main characters. *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1987–90) appeared at the coat check: two wall clocks hung side by side, set to the same time, only to fall out of synch with their fading battery power. This installation exposed some of the artist's concerns – the melancholy of love, the fleetingness of time, the transformation of the ordinary into vessels of emotion – and one of his most basic tenets: A work does not have to be treated as sacred, installed in a white cube and lit to perfection. Accidental discoveries – in places like the coat check where one is unprepared to be confronted with 'museum art' – can be more engaging.

The first room elucidated how public and private are intertwined, emotionally and politically, with works from the late 1980s including *Untitled* (1988). This first 'stack' piece is made up of a fat sheaf of photocopies identifying important political moments that had an impact on Gonzalez-Torres' life: 'Helms Amendment 1987 Anita Bryant 1977 Cardinal O'Connor 1988', among others. While later stacks were put on the floor, Gonzalez-Torres placed this very first one on a pedestal. Visitors were allowed to take a photocopy, but the work created an uncertainty, which was augmented by the pedestal, about what can and can't be done in a public museum.

Subsequent rooms and works confounded American politics of the '80s with the artist's existence as a gay man infected with HIV. *Untitled (God Bless Our Country and Now Back to War)* (1989) – framed newspaper clippings – exposes the outward jingoism that Gonzalez-Torres felt was a smokescreen to distract Americans from untenable situations

at home, including the AIDS crisis. The combination of public and private also comes to bear in *Untitled* (1989), which consists of words painted in a continuous line on a wall as a frieze around a room: 'Civil Rights Act 1964 Our Own Apartment 1976 Berlin Wall 1989 An Easy Death 1991', among others. Some visitors might have been surprised to see 'Obama 2008' added by Filipovic, but the addition expressed Gonzalez-Torres' desire that his work continue to live: never static, always changing.

This thought was taken to the extreme with Tino Sehgal's intervention in the second act, which functioned as both a re-reading and a eulogy. Sehgal invited a team of art students to reposition the works continually, thus creating ever-changing connections between them, in a careful choreography. The re-installation lasted for about six hours straight; a room was 'finished' only to be changed again. Even individual works were arranged in a new fashion. Who knew that the candy did not have to be set up in perfect geometric shapes but could also be simply poured out on the floor? The strings of light bulbs hanging from the ceiling in *Untitled (For Stockholm)* (1992) were lined up on the floor or around the edges of a room; once handled, some bulbs burnt out.

The change in public response from the first act to the second act was spectacular. Silent and slightly reverential people – reading the guide, tentatively approaching works, whispering to one another – were replaced by actively engaged players, talking loudly to one another, to complete strangers and, inevitably, to the museum guards and Sehgal's handlers. In a 1995 interview with Robert Storr, Gonzalez-Torres addressed the topic of the guards, whom he also saw as his audience, and Sehgal brought this element back to life.

While the first act performed its didactic role elegantly, the second reinvigorated the exhibition with a degree of engagement unusual for a public museum. What Sehgal achieved was like a brilliant cover song of an old classic which allows you to rediscover the original all over again and gets you singing along.



## FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

### *Untitled (For Stockholm)*

1992/2011

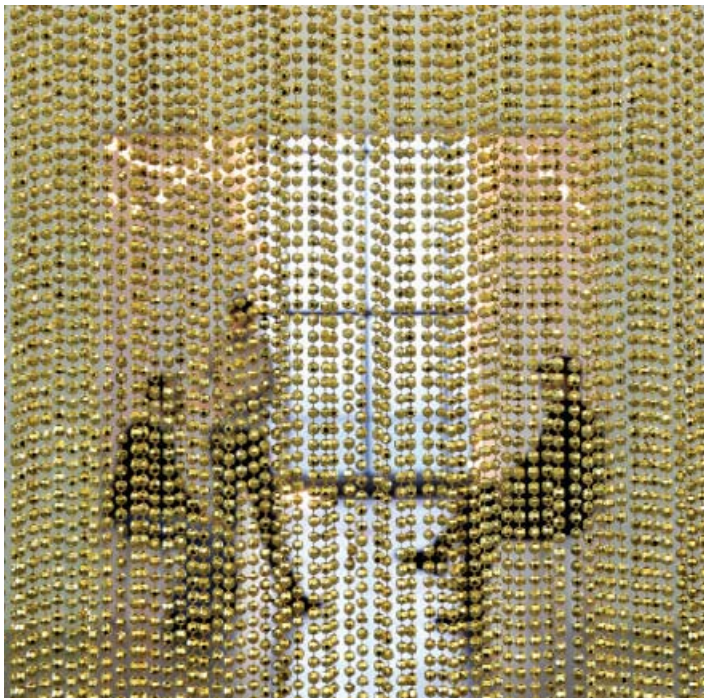
Second presentation

by Tino Sehgal

## BRUSSELS

### ELENA FILIPOVIC: A SENSITIVE RESPONSE

Marie De Brugerolle



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, *Specific Objects without Specific Form*, 2010. Installation views at WEILS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. Photo: Sven Laurent.

The new curator of Wiels, Elena Filipovic, has conceived a new project that is a sensitive and ingenious response to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work. It is an exhibition of the works that respects the works' aesthetic and political criteria.

Is it possible to show a work that challenges visible limits and questions artistic, social and institutional conventions when the artist is no longer with us? Can one put into play and activate forms conceived by someone else in a different context and challenge that same institution? Using these questions as a starting point, Elena Filipovic structured a project in three parts, inviting three artists — Carol Bove at the Foundation Beyler Basel, Danh Vo at Wiels in Brussels and Tino Sehgal at Frankfurt's Museum für Moderne Kunst

— to reshape the idea of the exhibition itself. Each artist was invited to choose new works after the exhibition's initial opening at Wiels in order to remake the show using Filipovic's original selections. It is the first Gonzalez-Torres retrospective conceived according to the challenges of the work itself, construed as a series of dualities: authority/responsibility; visible/invisible; joie de vivre/sense of loss; light/dark. Authority asks

the author's question for the artist and the question of power for the curator. The objects used by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, especially the piles of candies or posters that are at the audience's disposal, imply their collaboration but also their responsibility. It makes a difference if I take one candy or if I take ten. I remember seeing a gigantic pile of golden candies at the Guggenheim in 1995 that visitors scooped up with plastic coffee cups because they were free. It's a matter of obscenity and responsibility. When you think of sweets in colorful paper in terms of proliferation and loss, of white blood cells and the HIV virus, the act of taking them is made with a more acute conscience.

The exhibition at Wiels is built inside the common areas as well as outside; so the Salle de Brassage, the silo (Wiels was once a brewery and the silo a grain bin) and the restrooms are the respective locations for the wall clocks "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990, the mirrors "Untitled" (March 5th) #1, 1991, and a garland of light bulbs "Untitled" (America), 1994-1995. The exhibition delicately unfolds on two floors and allows us to

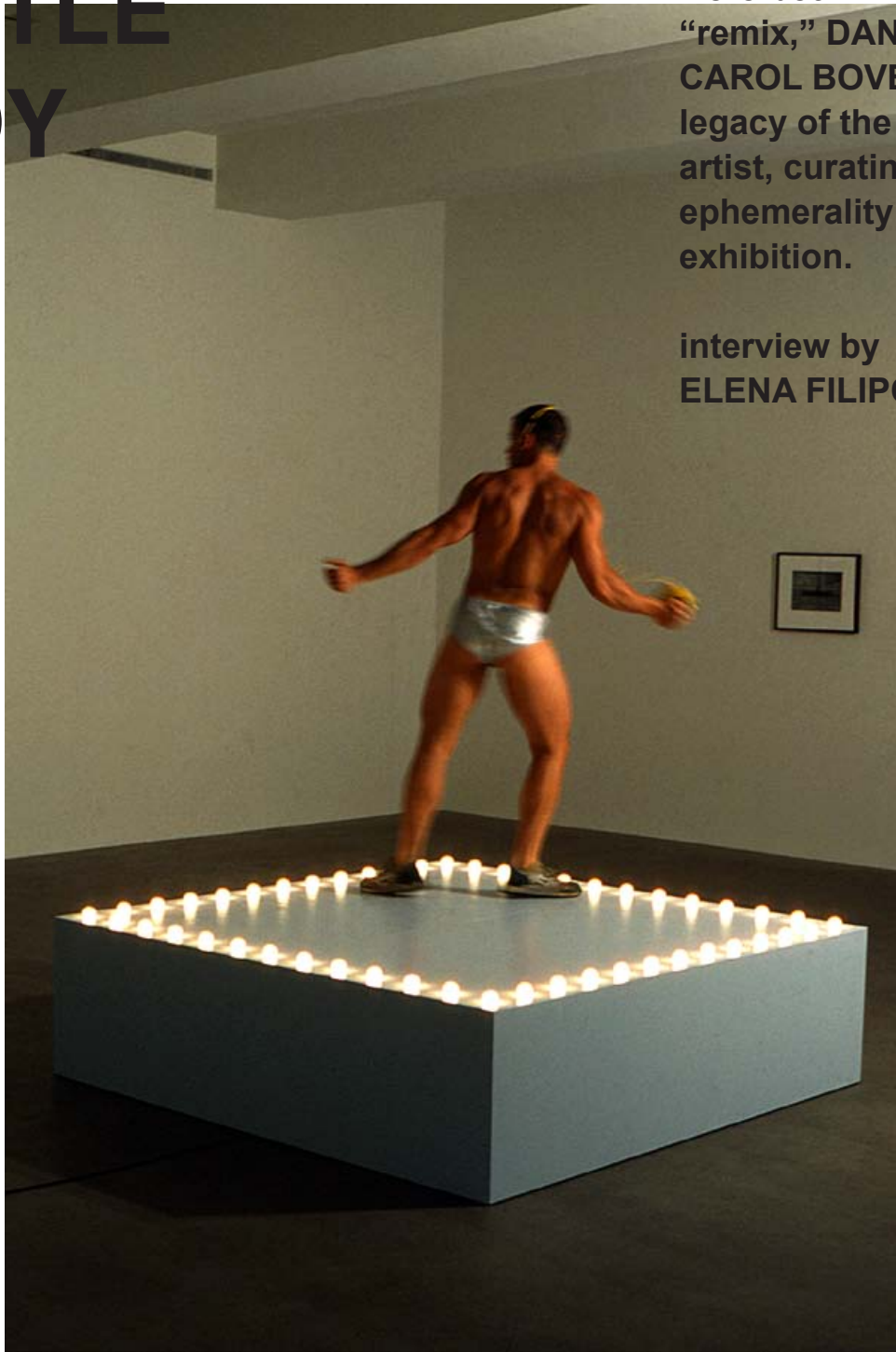
discover lesser-known works from the artist. Felix Gonzalez-Torres makes art with history: the history of Cuban immigrants, of the United States and also of his father. The piles of candies and posters — whose quantity is undefined — play with the dialectic of choice and responsibility. It's a dual path; what should I do with what I take? To take or not to take will always be the question. Like the big curtain of golden beads that completely closes off the space and forces the visitor to pass through it "Untitled" (Golden), 1995, the visitor must make a choice. Double clocks, double mirrors "Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice), 1991, build a double portrait whose presence is tangible. The gravity, the mass, the infinite and incalculable quantity requires the involvement of the viewer. From singular to universal, Gonzalez-Torres made open-ended works that allow us to follow history out of the frame. Like his billboards around New York City, his portrait is our portrait. "... a new happy crowd / a blue lake / loop into the void / a found black cat / a love meal / a room with curtains / a view to remember."



# THE SUBTLE BODY

On the occasion of a retrospective of Felix Gonzalez-Torres they were both invited to “remix,” DANH VO and CAROL BOVE discuss the legacy of the American artist, curating, and the ephemerality of the exhibition.

interview by  
ELENA FILIPOVIC



Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
*Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, 1991;  
*Untitled (Natural History)*, 1990; installation view,  
“Every Week There is Something Different,”  
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1991  
Photo: Peter Muscato;  
Courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York  
© Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

BOTH OF YOU READILY ADMIT THE IMPACT THAT GONZALEZ-TORRES HAS HAD ON YOUR WORK, AND YET I HAVE THE SENSE THAT YOU ARE EACH PROVOKED BY DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF GONZALEZ-TORRES'S WORK. I WONDER IF YOU COULD SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THAT?

DV: I have been very fortunate to have had many years of dialogue with Julie Ault, one of the founding members of Group Material, who was also the person who had invited Felix Gonzalez-Torres to join the group in the late '80s. I can't talk about the influence of Gonzalez-Torres on my work without mentioning her. Ault was also the person who gave me a profound insight into the works of Roni Horn and many other artists of Group Material, as well as into the political and cultural situation of the time. All this had also informed the work of Gonzalez-Torres. My way of thinking would not exist without this influence and insight.

CB: Yes, I think his work is a big influence for me. It's not obvious, so I was pleased that you recognized a kinship. His works have a good balance of qualities I admire and strive for. They are delicate, romantic and intellectual, but also tough and angry. Casual, easy, precise, they're also powerful and arresting. The animate quality of the objects is important. So is the self-evidence of the materials. The candies are candy to be used as candy. Both of these qualities—animation and self-evidence—talk about mortality and history, as well as the passage and experience of time.

Gonzalez-Torres was working in a time and place where artworks (as well as every other thing imaginable) were read as texts, and that perspective was a powerful shaping force, but his work takes on all of the non-verbal intelligence of human experience, too. His work takes political engagement and cultural theory as a starting point, but it also insists on an erotic dimension: that the work of art is not reducible to its interpretation and that its potential for real provocation is as much in the experience of the encounter as it is in the world of ideas.

I fantasize that there was a thrill for him in violating the taboo that kept formalism and conceptualism separate. His openness to beauty must have felt risky and totally conservative (i.e. risky for a political radical to work in a retrograde modality). Part of the pleasure in looking at art is in developing the faculties to perceive mutually exclusive positions without contradiction. But anyway, these approaches are not opposed; even if an

artwork could be inserted directly into the viewer's mind, I would consider that to be sculpture and it would still have a form.

THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME EACH OF YOU HAVE MADE DECISIONS OF A "CURATORIAL" ORDER ABOUT HOW YOUR ARTWORK OR EVEN THE ARTWORK OF OTHERS SHOULD BE PRESENTED, DISPLAYED AND INSTALLED, BUT IT IS THE FIRST TIME EITHER OF YOU HAVE BEEN ASKED TO CURATE A SOLO EXHIBITION (A RETROSPECTIVE, EVEN) OF ANOTHER ARTIST'S WORK. ARE THERE PARTICULAR CONSIDERATIONS THAT MADE THINKING ABOUT AND CURATING YOUR VERSIONS OF A FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES EXHIBITION MORE DIFFICULT THAN SIMPLY THINKING ABOUT HOW TO SHOW YOUR OWN ARTWORK?

DV: I don't think there is any comparison. I mean, making a retrospective of my own work would be impossible. But what I can emphasize is the pressure I felt of having the responsibility in a retrospective of an artist's work to present a "large" body of work (I'm still not sure if it was because of the idea of the retrospective itself or because of the large space that I was expected to fill with his artworks). I never thought of my version of this retrospective as necessarily needing to present a lot of pieces. This is probably because I always saw Gonzalez-Torres's work as being easy to enter but difficult to grasp, always escaping you. For me, it is one of the most impressive characteristics of his production. I really tried to aim for this quality in my way of structuring the exhibition. That was more important than presenting quantity.

CB: Yes! I'm so glad I'm not a curator regularly—I really don't envy you. It's so hard! On this occasion, I am thinking about what it means to be responsible in the context of presenting a retrospective, which is a new challenge. Respect is important. I've thought a lot about how to show respect for the man and for the artwork. But I've asked myself, would he want a servant? I doubt it! And even if he did want a servant, should I supply one? Admiration and regret over his short life make me feel compelled to search for clues as to what he might have wanted me to do. Part of me wants to honor him by pleasing him. But I'm not convinced that fulfills my responsibility and I'm trying not to be distracted by those ideas.

I decided it's important instead to histo-

ricize his work. No one wants the violence of historicism foisted upon his work, but this is part of the purpose of a retrospective: to separate a body of work from the fluid passage of time. When it's separate, we can see its features. I want to arrest the work so we can encounter it anew and so we can interpret it. I want to look back on it in the context of its time, but also to see how its meaning has developed in the space between its invention and the current moment. I want to show it both continuous and discontinuous with history and the passage of time.

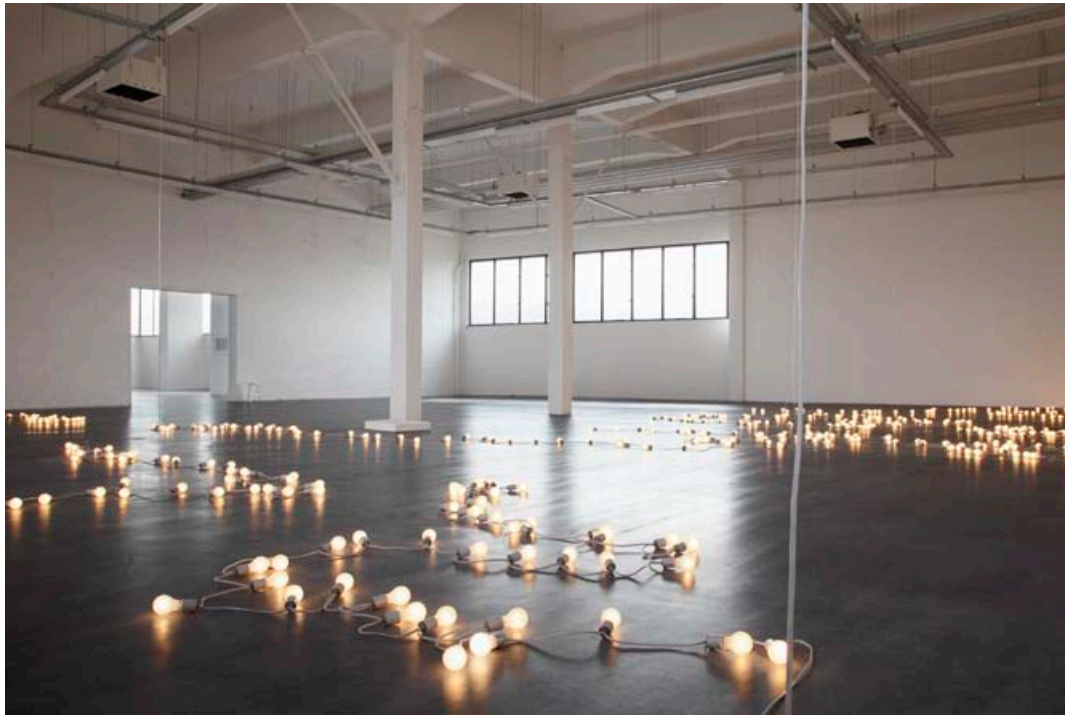
SPEAKING OF TIME AND HISTORY IN RELATION TO THE MAKING OF A RETROSPECTIVE, THE REASON I HAD WANTED TO HAVE NOT ONE BUT SEVERAL VERSIONS OF THE EXHIBITION—EACH ONE DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS AND INVOLVING CHOICES THAT MIGHT EVEN SEEM TO BE IN CONTRADICTION WITH EACH OTHER—WAS PARTLY TO BREAK DOWN THE AUTHORITY OF THAT THING CALLED A "RETROSPECTIVE." THIS WAS NECESSARY, I THOUGHT, BECAUSE GONZALEZ-TORRES HIMSELF THOUGHT SO MUCH ABOUT AND WORKED SO MUCH ABOUT QUESTIONING AUTHORITIES OF EVERY KIND. A CLASSICAL RETROSPECTIVE INVARIABLY POSITS A LIST OF WORKS AS THE MOST IMPORTANT OR REPRESENTATIVE OF AN ARTIST'S CAREER, AND THE EXHIBITION'S ORDERING OF THOSE ARTWORKS (CHRONOLOGICAL, THEMATIC, WHATEVER) AS THE WAY TO READ AND UNDERSTAND THE OEUVRE—AND THE WHOLE IS TYPICALLY PRESENTED AS A NEUTRAL, OBJECTIVE INEVITABILITY. AND IT THEN ENTERS HISTORY THAT WAY. SO MUCH OF WHAT GONZALEZ-TORRES DID IN HIS LIFE AND WORK AIMED TO COUNTER THIS, SO AN EXHIBITION DEDICATED TO HIM TODAY SHOULD FIND, I THOUGHT, A MEANS OF HONORING THAT. I ASKED EACH OF YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERPRETING HIS WORK (AS WELL AS TINO SEHGAL, WHO STILL HAS SOME TIME TO THINK ABOUT AND PLAN HIS VERSION, SET TO OPEN IN EARLY 2011), AND IN GIVING FORM TO THAT (NECESSARILY SUBJECTIVE) INTERPRETATION IN YOUR VERSION OF THE EXHIBITION. WHEN I INVITED YOU TO WORK ON THIS WITH ME,

YOU BOTH SEEMED TO UNDERSTAND IMMEDIATELY WHY THIS MIGHT MAKE SENSE IN RELATION TO GONZALEZ-TORRES'S WORK...

DV: I don't recall that... I only remember that I was both tempted and afraid. I don't feel like I have seen a good installation of Gonzalez-Torres's work, since I only saw the work after his death. I must admit that I thought it was such a scary challenge that when I accepted it, I only could focus on my part of the overall concept and my own approach to it. I don't know how you managed it, Superwoman!

CB: Speaking to your point about arranging the "greatest hits" in chronological order: There are individual pieces, but there are also pieces in relation to other pieces and in relation to the world. They indicate the things around them. They point at the world and the world points back. And they perform differently under various circumstances. It makes no sense to disaggregate them. Or, it makes sense, but important qualities are lost.

Gonzalez-Torres's work needs to be animated by the people who exhibit it. I think about his instructions as the written play and the curator as the director. If the curators don't allow themselves some freedom to get it wrong or to show their own tastes and mannerisms, the viewer senses the inhibition and insecurity and the artworks become reenactments of the originals, which is a serious loss of status. Gonzalez-Torres invites the exhibitor to co-author the piece. But this places a curator in an awkward position because in order to freely interpret the work, he or she would end up taking some credit as the author: curators might feel it's inappropriate or worse, hubristic, to act as author. They are allowed to construct the framing, the conceit, the platform, but they don't co-author artworks.



Our expectations for curators are that they aspire to some kind of neutral objective position. Of course, we all also know that what we demand is impossible. It doesn't make sense to me that curators are given an impossible job, but that's the way we have it organized right now. Artists, on the other hand, are supposed to be authors all of the time. All of an artist's gestures are read for content, so we read the presentation as an allegory of his or her own artwork. Sharks bite, bees sting, artists author.

INDEED THIS POINTS TO ONE OF OTHER REASONS THAT THE PARTICULAR CONCEPT OR METHODOLOGY (IF ONE CAN CALL IT THAT) OF THIS EXHIBITION MADE SENSE FOR THIS SPECIFIC BODY OF WORK: I THOUGHT IT IMPORTANT TO FIND A WAY TO MAKE AN EXHIBITION THAT WOULD SHOW, IN THE VERY STRUCTURE OF THE EXHIBITION, THE FUNDAMENTAL MALLEABILITY AND VULNERABILITY AT THE HEART OF GONZALEZ-TORRES'S WORK, BUT ALSO, AND RELATEDLY, THE QUESTION THAT HE POSED OF AUTHORSHIP (WITH ALL ITS IMPLICIT AND ETYMOLOGICAL LINKS TO "AUTHORITY"). WAS

#### INFO

Defying the idea of the exhibition as an immutable and the retrospective as totalizing, curator Elena Filipovic proposed that "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form" take upon experimental form indebted to Gonzalez-Torres's own radical conception of his artwork. At each of its three venues, the exhibition will be taken down halfway through its duration and re-installed by a different artist whose practice has been informed by Gonzalez-Torres's work (Dan Vo at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels, Carol Bove at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, and Tino Sehgal at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt). Dan Vo reinstalled the exhibition at Wiels in March and Carol Bove is currently preparing for her version, which will open at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel in July.

This page:  
Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
*Untitled (For Stockholm)*, 1992;  
installation view, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form," installation by Dan Vo, Wiels, Brussels, 2010  
Photo: Sven Laurent;  
Collection: Magasin 3 Stockholm  
Konsthall

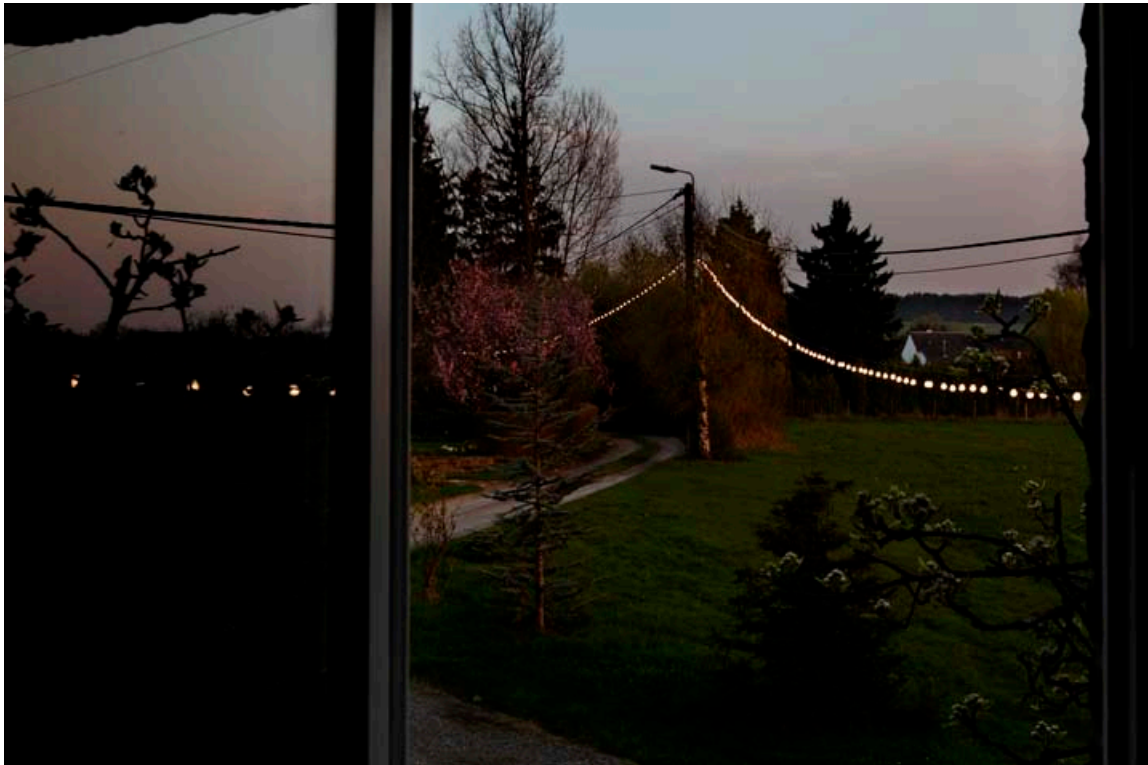
Next page:  
Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
*Untitled (America)*, 1994-1995;  
installed in Gesves  
Photo: Sven Laurent  
Collection: Whitney Museum of  
American Art, New York

IT EASY FOR YOU TO DEAL WITH THE LIBERTY HIS WORK OFFERS AND THE RESPONSIBILITY THAT LIBERTY NECESSARILY IMPLIES?

DV: There is no liberty. It's like almost anything else: there's a carrot for the donkey. We have to deal with issues like stiff institutions, economy, ownership and our own choices, which are not free. It's a trap.

CB: I don't know if it's easy or difficult, but in order to present something exquisite and delicate in an exhibition context, there needs to be some mechanism in place to protect it. I'm working on some protections. I've seen the vulnerability of Gonzalez-Torres get lost in presentations of his work, so I know it's a challenge to create the right kind of platform. The first strategy I'm using is to start with a known script—a recreation of one of the shows Gonzalez-Torres made in 1991. This limits my ability to be inventive, which would be distracting. It would place emphasis on my choices as opposed to the finer points and the invisible dimension of the works.

Then I plan to physically protect the objects in the exhibition. I plan to spend the month of the exhibition in Basel and make regular visits to maintain it. The artworks need care. They need animation by the exhibi-



**CAROL BOVE**

Born in 1971 in Geneva, Switzerland, she is a New York City-based artist. She has had solo shows at the Kunsthalle Zurich; ICA, Boston; Hotel G, London; and Maccarone Gallery, New York. Her most recent solo exhibition took place at Kimmerich Gallery in New York this spring. She is represented by Georg Kargl Fine Arts, Vienna; Hotel Gallery, London; Kimmerich, New York; and Maccarone Gallery, New York.

**DANH VO**

Born in 1975 in Vietnam, he grew up in Denmark and is currently living and working in Berlin. In 2009, he had solo shows at Kunsthalle Basel and the Kadist Foundation in Paris. He is among the participating artists in the 6th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art and in November 2010, he will have a solo show at X-rummet, Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen. He is represented by Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin and Zero..., Milan.

tor but they also flourish in conditions where they are given attention. The invisible dimension is powerful and vulnerable. Service renews them.

I sense in Gonzalez-Torres's work so much indignation, anger and rage. These qualities get underemphasized in many hangings of the work. I hope I can mobilize the violence in his work as another protective element.

EXHIBITIONS ARE, BY DEFINITION, EPHEMERAL. FOR A CERTAIN DEFINED PERIOD OF TIME, A CERTAIN CONSTELLATION OF OBJECTS OCCUPY A SPACE BUT WILL VERY LIKELY NEVER AGAIN BE TOGETHER IN THE SAME SPACE OR SHOWN IN THE SAME WAY. THE JUXTAPOSITIONS OF ONE EXHIBITION ARE RARELY REPEATED. THIS IS A FACT. YOU ARE BOTH CONCERNED PRECISELY WITH THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS EPHEMERALITY IN YOUR OWN WORK. I KNOW IT HAS MOTIVATED YOU, DANH, IN EACH OF YOUR OWN EXHIBITIONS TO HAVE BRASS PLATES ENGRAVED WITH THE FLOORPLANS AND THE LIST OF WORKS. I ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD THESE PLATES AS A WAY TO MEMORIALIZE, OR FREEZE IN ANOTHER FORM, THAT FLEETING CONSTELLATION OF THINGS THAT MAKE UP AN EXHIBITION. YOU ASKED ME TO HAVE PLAQUES MADE FOR YOUR VERSION OF THE GONZALEZ-TORRES SHOW, WHICH MADE PERFECT SENSE TO ME AS A CURATORIAL GESTURE. MY LABELS WERE IN WHITE CARDBOARD, YOURS WERE IN BRASS, BUT BOTH WERE WAYS OF CONVEYING ESSENTIAL EXHIBITION INFORMATION...

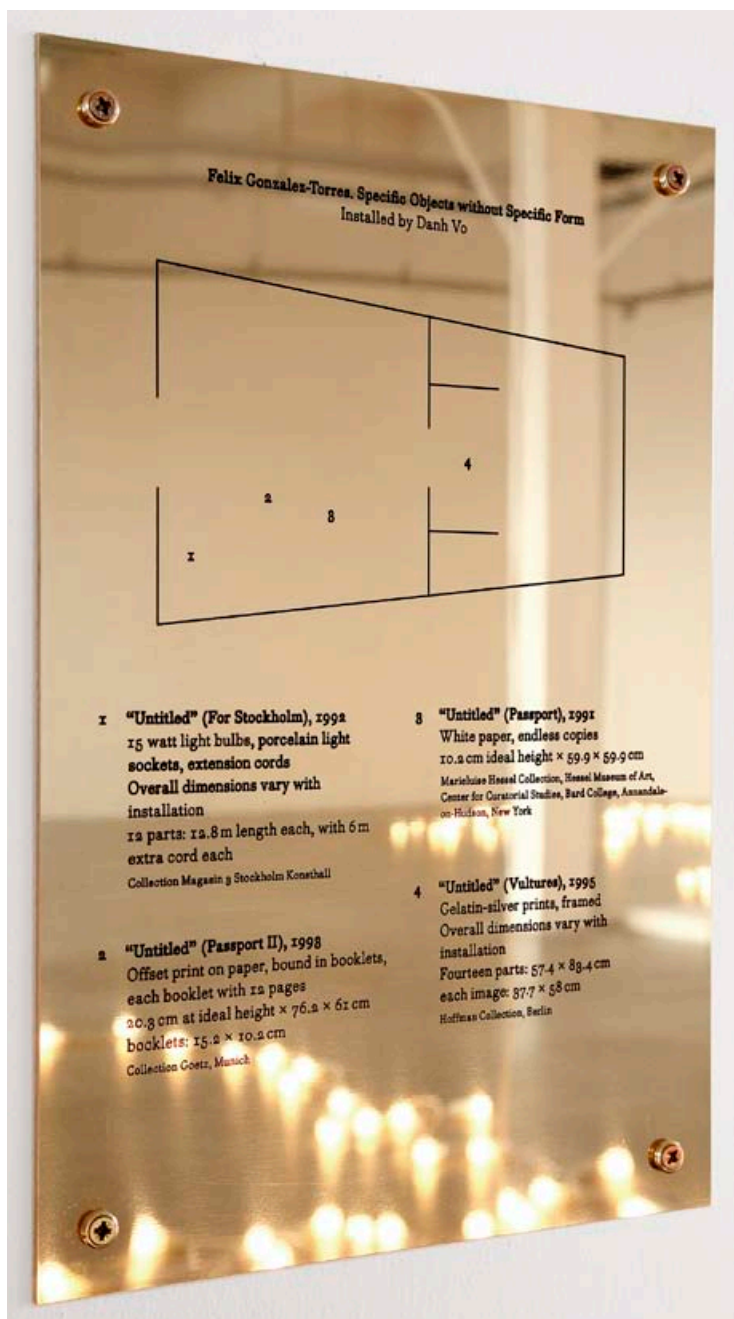
DV: I like that we memorize certain things, but they can be fleeting, even if engraved in brass. The plaque is a door sign; it doesn't mean the show will be staying there forever. I think the more important aspect of the brass plaques is their way of emphasizing information that is as important as the artworks themselves and reversing the distribution of information. Keep in mind that my brass plaques are always displayed in locations in the exhibition space that visitors reach after they have encountered the artworks being referred to. For me, the plaque was very necessary for the work of Gonzalez-Torres, because I wanted to have people see images of the sky or a bird, or a blank sheet of paper or light, without any inflection of meaning. Later, one can insert the possibility of meaning. I believe in that way we keep things more open.

I can't help but think of something Douglas Crimp once said about Richard Serra's work in which he pointed out that it would be wrong to think of Serra's sculptures as obsessed with power and masculine just because of their size and materiality, as if modesty or ephemerality were feminine. Power relations are much more complex. Yes, engraved brass is perhaps like something carved in stone... but a brass plate can also be melted down. I think my informational plaques aspire to be like the use of parentheses in the works of Gonzalez-Torres: they are not an artwork but tell something about the artwork; there is something both present but also intimated or suggestive about them.

AND FOR YOU, CAROL, IT SEEMS THAT THIS ISSUE OF MEMORIALIZING EPHEMERALITY IS EXPRESSED PARTLY IN YOUR DECISION TO RECREATE (OR RE-ENACT) ONE OF GONZALEZ-TORRES'S LANDMARK BUT LITTLE-KNOWN SHOWS, WHICH HAPPENED TO BE ONE OF HIS MOST EMPHATICALLY EPHEMERAL, SINCE HE CHANGED THE CONTENTS AND ORDER OF THE EXHIBITION DISPLAY EVERY WEEK DURING THE FOUR WEEKS OF THE SHOW.

CB: I would be happy if I could find a way to talk about the energetic qualities of an exhibition. That would be enough. The strategy of placing things and artworks in relation to each other and in relation to all of the structures and forces—visible and invisible, material and imagined, ideological, historical, etc., that comprise the exhibition context—this set of relationships between things resists objectification. It's the "subtle body" of an exhibition.

In part to show that, I'm planning to represent Gonzalez-Torres's 1991 exhibition, "Every Week There Is Something Different," which changed every week of its four-week run and will in Basel as well. I will try to faithfully reproduce the original exhibition, changing it every week and recreating the four original configurations of artworks. Because the larger project, this retrospective as a whole, will take so many forms, there's no pressure to show a complete picture of his work, to represent a little bit of everything. That's very nice, because otherwise this particular idea would be impossible to include, even though it shows an important part of Gonzalez-Torres's work that would otherwise be hard to see: artworks in their original configurations. I don't think it's fetishistic at all to want to recreate these relationships. Gonzalez-Torres was working across different media with different display strategies in part because of the demand it places on the viewer to become conscious of how he or she approaches each work in a single exhibition. I'd like to



Brass plaque with floorplan and work list by Danh Vo; installation view, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form," installation by Danh Vo, Wiels, Brussels, 2010  
Photo: Sven Laurent

see for myself what types of dialogues he set up.

Of course, it will be totally different from the original exhibition. Time-travel is impossible and besides, it's in a different place on earth. It will be a re-staging, with all of the interesting problems that that endeavor necessarily invites.

With it, I want to show how situation-responsive artworks perform with varying degrees of exertion. I try to do this by displaying both the recreation of "Every Week Is Something Different" and the storage area for the artworks that go into it. In the storage area, artworks will be present for the public but not yet "on exhibition"; they might lean against the wall or still be wrapped or in a storage crate. So, in one space, the artworks are performing while, in another, they are in a state of rest. It's a form of magic that a box of candy in one room can be transformed into a sculpture just by being unwrapped and laid on the floor in the next room.

I KNEW WHEN I INVITED YOU THAT THE SHOWS YOU WOULD MAKE WOULD BE SHOWS ABOUT AND OF GONZALEZ-TORRES, BUT THAT EACH SHOW WOULD INVARIABLY ALSO REVEAL SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR AESTHETICS AND PRACTICES. FOR ME, THAT POTENTIAL WASN'T SOMETHING THAT MENACED THIS PROJECT OR RENDERED IT AMBIGUOUS (IT IS STILL A RETROSPECTIVE OF GONZALEZ-TORRES AND NOT ANYTHING ELSE), BUT THAT IS PROBABLY BECAUSE I DON'T BELIEVE EXHIBITION-MAKING IS AN OBJECTIVE ENTERPRISE OR THAT IT SHOULD BE DONE AS IF IT WERE. I THINK THIS RETROSPECTIVE MAKES THAT EXPLICIT. STILL, IT HAS BEEN SAID BY SOME PEOPLE WHO SAW DANH VO'S VERSION OF THE EXHIBITION THAT IT LOOKED VERY MUCH LIKE ONE OF DANH'S SHOWS OF HIS OWN WORK. I WONDER, DANH, IF YOU FEEL THAT TO BE THE CASE?

DV: If people saw my Gonzalez-Torres exhibition and thought that it looked like exhibitions of my own art, that's a problem of short-term memory, because if you look closer at the documentation of Gonzales-Torres's installations, you'll discover how much I ripped him off...

AND CAROL, ALTHOUGH YOUR VERSION HAS NOT OPENED YET, I WONDER HOW YOU SEE THOSE CHOICES YOU ARE PLANNING IN RELATION TO YOUR OWN PRACTICE?

CB: The connection between the exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's work I have planned and my own shows might not be immediately legible but, of course, there is one. With my own work, I try to use a light touch, to do as little as possible and invent as little as possible. I don't want to alter materials; I'd prefer to re-present them. I think about working into the field around objects rather than on the objects themselves. I'll approach exhibiting Gonzalez-Torres's work the same way: I want to make choices that don't call attention to themselves.



Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990;  
installation view, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres; Specific Objects  
without Specific Form," installation by Danh Vo, Wviels,  
Brussels, 2010 Photo: Sven Laurent  
Collection: Dallas Museum of Art

#### AUTHOR

Elena Filipovic is curator at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. She was cocurator, with Adam Szymczyk, of the 5th Berlin Biennial, "When Things Cast No Shadow" (2008), and co-edited *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (2006). She is a tutor of Theory/Exhibition History at the De Appel postgraduate curatorial training program, and advisor at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. She is also currently guest curator of the Satellite Program for emerging artists at the Jeu de Paume, Paris (2009-11) and co-editor of *The Biennial Reader: Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*.



Annie O'Donnell

## A certain distance, endless light

mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art)

5th March - 4th July 2010

At the core of this exhibition is energy - connecting people, illuminating space, transforming place. mima's 'a certain distance, endless light' is a project with two artists, multiple exhibition sites and an international audience. It presents works ranging from new installations by William McKeown to seminal conceptual pieces by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, both renowned artists of their generation.

Gonzalez-Torres is perhaps best known for his subversion of everyday materials to express what Miwon Kwan described as "intimacy-in-distance and distance-in-intimacy as a conjoined dynamic". She's right - it's all here. The lost love, the Minimalist economy, the photographs of the sublime everyday, and the light. The light and the heat, the light and the dark.

Begun in 1992, Gonzalez-Torres' series of lightstrings are exemplars of the elegant and the eloquent. mima is exhibiting six lightstrings: 'Untitled (rue St. Denis)' in the lobby to the Ground Floor galleries, and 'Untitled', 'Untitled (Leaves of Grass)', 'Untitled (Tim Hotel)', 'Untitled (Ischia)', 'Untitled (Miami)' in the tall Cube Space. Titles/subtitles. You pick/you choose. Awareness of your own subjectivity in meaning-making immediately takes place. The lightstrings vary only in the number of bulbs and in their installation (which is left to the curator). They are beautiful, joyful and transient, perhaps especially the tall 'Untitled', which, as the two threads of light pool onto the floor, suggests a place where Derrida said 'In order to wait for the other at this meeting place, one must, on the contrary, arrive there late, not early.' They could equally be read as theatrical, urban or vernacular domestic objects.

In Gallery Two, the darkest of mima's spaces, William McKeown's installation 'The Dayroom', moves into more disturbing states of mind. He has constructed a large cube of outsides and insides. A white cube it isn't. Outside it's wooden struts and plasterboard, inside is a place we all dread, where we wait

for life to stop or start. If this is the dayroom, don't show me the nightroom. It's public space, it's private space, it's neither - it's a non-place. Lit by fluorescent tubes, painted a yellow that never existed in primroses, it's a space to spread fear in the hearts of B & B residents and hospital visitors alike. Inside, a colour pencil drawing of a snowdrop and an intimate painting of a dark sky are installed. McKeown appears to capture memory that speaks of being place-bound or perhaps of creating another kind of freedom of imagination within someone else's version of reality.

We don't need to know that McKeown was brought up on a farm but when we know, we're not surprised. The exhibition's use of William Wordsworth's rural poem 'The Prelude', with its description of an author/artist's perception opening up to everyday things and everyday relationships, is pertinent to McKeown's visual lyricism. Pushing up daisies, daisies as sunlight clocks, flowers that spring up unasked for, common things, visible things, invisible things, 'The Daisy Field' is a new work created for mima's long gallery. Each of the 70 seemingly monochrome watercolours references the colour of a single daisy. At first white and more white, slowly this continuous line of eye level 'day's eyes' reveals its true colours. Wash has been applied and removed; leaving just an edge of colour memory, reminding us of times spent splitting green stems with childish fingernails and of garlanding friends with pink-tipped chains.

The final Gonzalez-Torres' gallery develops notions of certain distances and uncertain communities. Two stacks of white paper of identical size stand at a set distance to each other, they bear the texts 'nowhere better than this place' and 'somewhere better than this place'. Within this exhibition mima says this is "an appeal to concentrate on the here and now, to raise hope and nurture local aspiration." Initiating a line of projects that allowed viewers to take away the sheets of paper, candy or candles making up the piece, this keystone work questions ideas of



Untitled - Strange Bird, (1993)  
Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
Photo Alex Slade  
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

ownership and artist's intention. The communities arising from these projects may not share a single reading of the work, but they are probably united in seeing its open-ended concepts. To this end, a small volume of literary sources, gathered in response to the work of Gonzalez-Torres and McKeown entitled 'Traces of Light' is available in the gallery spaces.

mima have also presented two Gonzalez-Torres' billboard works. One installed along two walls of the 'Stack' gallery and the other outside in locations across Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle. The billboard of a single flying bird on Middlesbrough's Newport Road can be read as a reminder of how frenetic is the rate of change in the area. This darkly sublime image is a moment of quietness in a cacophonous urban space.

Gonzalez-Torres said that culture foregrounds a thing because it is needed. Certainly, while his exhibition career spanned less than a decade, due to his untimely death in 1996, his work continues to have a contemporary resonance, as does that of McKeown. The nationalities of both artists is often mentioned (Gonzalez-Torres was an American born in Cuba and McKeown is Irish), and while these influences can be read in their practices, they can also be seen to carry universal concepts relevant to place and community globally.

A result of several close partnerships, including mima, Middlesbrough Borough Council and AV Festival 10, 'a certain distance, endless light' allows its audience – its community – to drive past art billboards and to take home a 'Felix', as well as to think reflexively about how "town, country, home, family, love and loss" can be expressed in a gallery setting.

# S.A. LIFE

## CONCEPTUAL WORKS



STEVE BENNETT : STAFF

**CREATING LOCAL BUZZ:** The billboard featuring an Image by Felix Gonzalez-Torres has been a conversation piece at a tire shop off Southwest 36th Street.

# PUBLIC ART REDEFINED

Billboards by artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres will blend into a landscape near you throughout the year

By **STEVE BENNETT**  
ARTS WRITER

**I**F you've been driving around town and noticed a small billboard of a swatch of rippling blue denim – no slogan, no ID, no rhyme, no reason – then you have encountered the art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. “The billboards become a part of the landscape, which is the whole idea,” says Matthew Drutt, executive director of Artpace and the guiding force behind the yearlong billboard project, which celebrates the San Antonio art organization’s 15th anniversary.

“I wanted to bring contemporary art into the public eye and further demystify it.”

The statewide billboard project features 13 images by

Gonzalez-Torres in four Texas cities – El Paso, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio.

The images, created by Gonzalez-Torres between 1989 and 1995, are “drawn

from poetic moments in the artist’s life,” says Drutt, and will rotate throughout the year on six billboards in each city.

Democracy – breaking

down barriers between viewer and artist – ruled in the art of Gonzalez-Torres, the internationally renowned Cuban-American artist whose conceptual works included piles of giveaway hard candy, stacks of souvenir posters – and public billboards.

“I want to make art for people who watch *The Golden Girls* and sit in a big, brown, La-Z-Boy chair,” Gonzalez-Torres said in a 1995 interview with Robert Storr, then-senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art.

That year, with Storr curating, the artist participated in a fledgling San Antonio project. Please see **BILLBOARDS**, Page JE

### BILLBOARD LOCATIONS

Where to see Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ billboards:

- Interstate 10 East and Loop 410

- West Avenue and Cherry Ridge

- Southwest Military Highway and New Laredo Highway

- Eisenhower Road and Corinne Drive

- Old Highway 90 and Southwest 36th Street

- South Zaramora and Ross streets

# BILLBOARDS: First comprehensive survey of works

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1E

Antonio art organization's inaugural residency program.

That was Artpace, a labor of love for artist and patron Linda Pace, who poured a portion of her hot-sauce fortune into an artist-centric public institution housed in an old Hudson automobile dealership in downtown San Antonio. That "laboratory of dreams," as Pace called it, has grown into a ground breaking force in international art circles.

Today, artists all around the world consider the three-month International Artist-in-Residence Program a plum assignment in the world of visual art grants.

"Artpace is the Rolls-Royce of residencies," New York artist Teresita Fernandez has said.

Gonzalez-Torres "is one of our most renowned alums," Drutt says.

His work has been shown at such major institutions as the Guggenheim in New York, the Hirshhorn in Washington, D.C., and the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. (In his now infamous *60 Minutes* report, Morley Safer lambasted Gonzalez-Torres' stacks of candy as symbolic of the silliness of contemporary art.)

"I question someone who tells me what I'm supposed to do or be," Gonzalez-Torres said in a catalog interview for that first Artpace exhibition.

The artist died of AIDS in 1996, but his legacy lives through his personal foundation and through his art. In 2007, for example, he was chosen as the United States' official representative at the prestigious Venice Biennale. (The only other posthumous representative from the United States was Robert Smithson in 1982.)

Most important, Gonzalez-Torres' work continues to touch lives. The other day at Artpace, prominent local arts patron George Muellich said that when he wants to clear his mind and forget the stress of the world, he envisions the work Gonzalez-Torres installed at Artpace in 1995.

"That piece was just so beautiful...so serene," he said, referring to the curtain of green and silver beads, flashing gold, that the artist hung across his studio space and called *Untitled: Beginnings*. The piece, meant to be walked



STEVE BENNETT : STAFF

**LABOR OF LOVE:** Artpace has installed an image by artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres on six billboards around San Antonio as part of its 15th year celebration.

through, has since become revered by curators as a minimalist evocation of passage.

One of Gonzalez-Torres' most personal – and populist – works was *Untitled (1991)*, a billboard installed in 24 locations throughout New York City of a monochrome photograph of an unoccupied bed. It was made after his lover, Ross Laycock, died from AIDS.

"When people ask me, 'Who is your public?' I say honestly, without skipping a beat, 'Ross,'" Gonzalez-Torres said in that 1995 interview, which appeared in *ArtPress* magazine. "The public was Ross."

Artpace decided to invoke a similar labor of love with the billboard project spread across Texas. Undertaken with the blessing of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, major support from

## ONLINE

For more information on Artpace's Felix Gonzalez-Torres billboard project, including a map of billboard locations in all four cities, visit [www.artpace.org](http://www.artpace.org)

the Linda Pace Foundation and the in-kind support of Clear Channel Outdoor, it is the first-ever comprehensive survey of Gonzalez-Torres' billboard works in the United States.

"His approach to public art was to do something the opposite of what public art had come to mean, which was primarily plop art, a big, imposing piece plopped in the middle of a plaza," Drutt says. "Felix said it doesn't have to be big and heavy, it can

be inexpensive and impermanent, and because there are no identifiers, no taglines, the image or text speaks for itself. It causes people to ask questions, which is what contemporary art should do: provoke thinking."

The San Antonio billboards, which currently feature that photograph of rippling blue denim, are spread out across the city, from a busy residential area off of West Avenue just inside Loop 410 to the parking lot of a tire and muffler shop off Southwest 36th Street, deep in the heart of the city's West Side.

"I was at the tire shop and asked the guys in there what they thought of the billboard," Drutt says, "and they said, 'Yeah, man, we've been talking about it.' They wondered if it was an ad for jeans, and I told them it was an

art project and they said, 'Hey, that's cool.' They didn't just ignore it. So it's creating a local buzz. The work begins to acquire meaning through the dialogue that surrounds its existence."

Part of Anpace's mission, articulated by its founder, is the belief that "art is a dynamic social force that inspires individuals and defines cultures."

Gonzalez-Torres certainly understood that, and with a wide range of his work, he counted on you and me to complete the equation. As the artist stated, "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."

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## Robert Gober, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “A Shadow Leaving an Object”

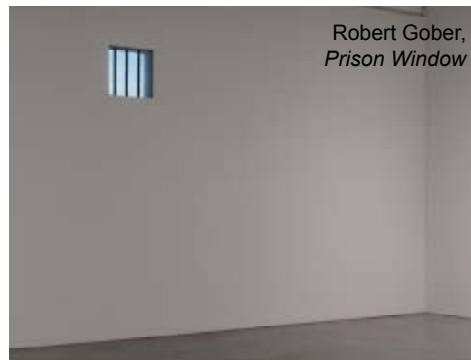
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★★★★★★

**Andrea Rosen Gallery**, through  
Jan 31 (see Chelsea)

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This flawless two-man show—its title taken from the caption on Robert Gober’s cursory sketch hanging in the gallery’s foyer—has only two works. *Untitled (March 5th) #1* (1991), by Felix Gonzalez Torres (1957-1996), comprises two round mirrors set flush into the wall at eye level. Gonzalez-Torres often paired objects to evoke a kind of psychological twinning, as in Joseph Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer.” Those who know that Torres lost his other half, Ross Laycock, to AIDS-related complications five years before the artist himself died can extrapolate a personal narrative, though the artist himself resisted such associations. Stand in front of this work with a friend, and the mirrors create a perfect double portrait. Stand there alone, however, and you see yourself doubled and fragmented, as in a Cubist fracturing of the world. Installed high up on an opposing wall, Gober’s 1992 sculptural tableau, *Prison Window*, reveals an illuminated square of blue sky blocked by three vertical bars. This scene is actually a niche: the



Robert Gober,  
*Prison Window*

romantically streaked heavens are a painted backdrop, while the irregular surfaces of the bars and window frame reveal that they’ve been manifestly handmade. This effect lends a sense of patent theatricality to the whole, yet it still conjures an almost spiritual longing for escape.

Gonzalez-Torres’s work directs vision back onto itself, while Gober’s leads the eye into the empyrean. This exquisitely restrained pairing of two of the most poetic artists of their generation does what only the greatest art can do: Endow aesthetic experience with amazing grace.

—Joseph R. Wolin

When he was not particularly inspired or motivated, González-Torres would turn to the dictionary. In his 1974 edition of Merriam-Webster, he would look up one or several words; he would ponder the definitions and uses, check which word came before and which came after. It was less a trick than a method. This resource might seem overly theoretical, like a kind of ideal neurostimulant for conceptual artists in case of emergency. But, in fact, it is material, material to the core; it is as determined by a specific weight, height and volume, and as quantifiable, as the candies, light bulbs, voile curtains and sheets of paper in González-Torres's most well-known works. At the same time, what object, what portable machine better than a dictionary to stir the imagination of an artist aware of—or, rather, obsessed with—the meaning and use of language, an artist always watchful of the invisible way that politics operates in the forms, orders and institutions that declare themselves immune to its influence? The dictionary is “neutral,” cold, formal, scrupulous. It is less a text than a matrix of texts, less a discourse than a body that regulates discourses, less a book than a law. A political artist (in the often antipolitical or at least disconcerting way that this term began to be used in the late 1980s), González-Torres was at his most political when he let himself be taken in by objects so seemingly mute, austere and sterile that the mere mention of the word “political” would upset them. A sentimental artist (in the political way that this term began to be used in the mid-1980s, when the HIV explosion turned the intimacy of the bedroom into a battleground), González-Torres was at his most sentimental when he staged the supplement of affect exuded by an object, a scene or a situation when it is disciplined by a clear outline. In this sense, González-Torres's “need for the dictionary” is the direct heir to Barthes's sentimental celebration of the dictionary, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, which spelled out in alphabetical order the overwhelming superstitions of the lover.

The political and the sentimental artist partake of the same ethics, an ethics of procedure and form. There is no poetic of content: every poetic is a poetic of the silhouette, the border, the frame. Perhaps that is why González-Torres's art, rooted in its way in the minimalist myth of presence, has been able to survive his loss and looks so remarkably vivid and elegant in reproductions in art books. Whether the garlands of lights, the stacks of paper, the written portraits or the billboards, what shoots forth is the sharp line, the graphic distinction of an outline. Everything is black on white (or vice versa), the edges are always clear and visible. There is a lot of air between the works. There are no layerings, no mergings, no amalgams, no displays of imprecision. The incessant use of the stark outline—a formal and political, minimalist and Brechtian notion—defines an essential visual quality of his work—cleanliness—and indicates his *bête noire*: confusion. The enemy is vagueness, imprecision, mixing. When he does the portrait of Karen and Andy Stillpass—“Untitled” (*Portrait of the Stillpasses*), 1991—and installs on the edge of the roof of the couple's house in Cincinnati the words *Watergate 1972 Hitchcock 1973 Turquoise Apartment 1972 E.T. 1982 Fortieth floor 1974 S. de Beauvoir 1980* . . . , González-Torres is not mixing American history with the personal life of the Stillpasses; he is *editing* them, making them coexist on the same “anachronological” plane on which, misarranged but unmistakable, dates and eras coexist.

González-Torres liked to boast of his inconstancies. He said, “Sometimes I make the stacks, sometimes I do the curtains, sometimes I do texts pieces, sometimes I do canvases, sometimes the light strings, sometimes billboards or photos.” He could be an intimate or militant artist; he could make works to test out the ideas of a philosopher or to say farewell to the love of his life. Sometimes—almost always—he did all of this at the same time, and they called him contradictory. One critic reads his work and extols his “generosity, designed fluidity of the meaning, this repudiation of artistic control.” Another observes that his works are “private, inasmuch as they were made for private ownership,” and yet public, “inasmuch as the individual parts of such works can be freely distributed.” Cuban in New York, Marxist and gay, Latin American and conceptual-minimalist, González-Torres had a unique skill: that keen “visual power” that Brecht recognized in exiles who, forced to extraterritoriality, always “have a good eye for contradiction.” Contradiction, longstanding enemy of the ideological police, is for González-Torres a strength, not a deficit. Weakness, the true alibi, is confusion. Asked about his theoretical references, González-Torres named Louis Althusser: “I think Althusser started pointing out the contradictions within our critique of capitalism. For people who have been reading too much hardcore Marxist theory, it is hard to deal with those contradictions; they cannot deal with the fact that they're not saints. And I say no, they're not. Everything is full of contradictions.” The artist, who was also a teacher, advised his students to read Althusser once, a second time if they encountered difficulties, and a third if those difficulties persisted, but this time drunk and with a glass of wine within reach. But contradiction is a strength, even a method, if and only if the outlines of each position don't budge a millimeter, if what is at stake stands out like a haiku, if everything is equally visible. One of the first *stacks*, from 1989–1990, consists of two piles of printed pages. The sheets in one pile say, “*Somewhere better than this place*,” and the sheets in the other say, “*Nowhere better than this place*.”

Contradiction is a strength insofar as it opens up discontinuity, encourages distinguishing and creates a sort of air, an inner flow, that brings to the surface a certain disparity in the homogenous and bares the more or less hidden logic of a voice, a discourse, a work, an institution. When cornered, González-Torres translated the ethics of the contradiction into the language of drag: “I think I just have many fronts,” he said. “It's almost like being in drag. I'm in a different drag persona as needed.” But that chameleon policy is anything but pragmatic: each “character” who the artist dresses up as demands a specific silhouette, a composition, an effort at singularization, distinctive traces that identify it—frame it—and render it unmistakable. Not only a classic of gay culture, the drag model, in this context, is the very incarnation of a type of sedimentation that runs through all of González-Torres's work: the stereotype, that is, the height of categorized, pat, exhibited meaning. Only the starkness of the stereotype can rival minimalist formal purity. González-Torres's work moves with remarkable skill on the line between those two radical extenuations: form and meaning. We see, for instance, the series that exalts the romanticism of twinship (the pair of synchronized clocks, the duo of lawn chairs, the two silver rings whose circumferences touch but never overlap, even the two pillows on the bed in the famous 1991 *Billboard*) and it's hard to resist its iconicalness, its synoptic representation, the laconicism of its eloquent logotype. Graphic and portable like teenagers' pins, the works of twin objects are a true lesson in semiotic productivity: minimal means, maximum meaning. It could be said “all” love is there, concentrated in that impeccable formula (or, much more than love, the “loveness” of love . . .). Or the black-and-white photographs “Untitled” (*Natural History*), 1990, that González-Torres takes of the façade of the Museum of Natural History in New York. Each photo (there are thirteen in all, and they are framed) displays a word etched in the building's stone that epitomizes an ideal attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: “Statesman,”

“Scholar,” “Patriot,” “Explorer,” “Soldier” . . . The formal framing of each photograph (a frontal shot with the word always at the center) seems to replicate the semantic and ideological value of each word (which crystallizes a facet—a partial stereotype—of the Great North American Man—a total stereotype).

But González-Torres is not an “image” artist: everything said about the composition of his works, the form of his objects and the rhetoric of his photographs, any description of the traits or characteristics of his work is inadequate or marred by a strange impertinence. It is clear how much González-Torres owes to the ready-made tradition and the extent to which each time he ventures into an already colonized territory the question of the cliché, of the *déjà-vu*, of the stereotype arises. But what González-Torres does with that predigested reserve of meaning—his intervention in the stereotype, which is his critical *modus operandi*—is never “in” his works, never serves to contribute to the supposed unity, identity or self-sufficiency of “things in themselves.” In González-Torres, there is no “art in itself,” and if there is it never stands alone or has the last word; one idea of art is never stated unless something else, another idea of art, is at its side, on an equal footing, challenging it or making it vacillate. González-Torres isn’t too hard on the stereotypes that he uses. His work is not satirical, it doesn’t rely on cutting remarks, it never sullies that hackneyed meaning of which his work is made. A good Brechtian, he knows that criticism is a question of distance. As soon as meaning arises and produces the effect of authority, the critical artist takes distance, distances himself from meaning, distances meaning from itself; that is, he *defers it*. Here, distancing operates in both space and time. Brecht’s epic theater and Godard’s discontinuous film (to cite just two of the critical influences that González-Torres always recognized) provided an arsenal of devices for putting quotation marks around the different false natures that intervene in representation, releasing the viewer from the trap of illusions of reality. Distance is the antidote for adherence; criticism, for adhesion. If his proclivity for frames, clear borders and ready-mades give him away as an advocate of distance, González-Torres extends this procedure to the domain of time and *impregnates his work with a sort of hereafter*, a posterity, a promise that, beckoned to come true in the future, deactivates now, in the present, the danger that meaning become isolated and crystallized. It is this temporal beyond that both pierces and sustains the work, that “resolves” the two threats that operate in his art (that is, that weigh it down and feed it): the minimalist tautology (Frank Stella’s “*what you see is what you see*”) and the universal generality of the stereotype.

This is the great invention of González-Torres’s “temporal” installations: on the one hand, a pair of identical clocks—“*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987–1990—that start off synchronized and, as days go by and batteries wear out unevenly, gradually go out-of-synch, finding individual paces; but above all the series of stack pieces, those piles of rectangular sheets of paper, blank or with texts or images printed on them. Placed directly on the floor, these pieces make the gallery into a sort of “improvised print shop,” and the candy pieces, made from candies, fortune cookies or chocolates that the artist spreads on the floor, like rugs or graves, or piles up around a column or in a corner of the exhibition space. Limpid, transparent, innumerable yet enumerated, both the stacks and the candy pieces are “participative”: the viewers—as they were often informed by the gallery or museum guards—are invited not only to touch the work but also to appropriate it, to pick up a sheet of paper, a piece of candy, a Baci Perugina from the stack and take it home. As conceptual as the installations themselves, the certificates of authenticity that González-Torres signed included—amidst the detailed specifications of the type of candy, the color of the wrapping paper and the ideal weight of the work—the caption “endless supply” and the prevision, or rather the wish, that “third parties may take individual candies from the pile.” “*Untitled*” (*Lover Boys*), for instance (“blue-and-white candies individually wrapped in cellophane, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight: 161 kg”), has a meaning: the total weight of the candies is the same as the weight of the artist and his lover, Ross Laycock. Conceived when Ross, an HIV carrier, became critically ill, the work “metaphorizes” death’s work in progress (as the light bulb garlands metaphorize the drip of weeping and the red bead curtains metaphorize the blood dripping). But as soon as it is presented, the meaning wavers; it is found to be inhabited by something else, something that doesn’t belong to it and that forces it out of itself. Meaning is no longer what matters; what matters is *use*. The question is not what the piece means but how it works, what it is for, what “lives” it can have beyond the one granted by the artist, the gallery, the museum, the art institution. Meaning is use. González-Torres said:

“Well, I mean it was not just at that time 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 . . . Just to quote Sigmund Freud: ‘We rehearse our worst fears in order to lessen them.’ So at that time I 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. So I wanted even to lose the work, this stuff that is very important in my life. I also wanted to learn to let go.”

The meaning of the work is its use: the visitor sinks his hand into “*Untitled*” (*Lover Boys*) and takes a little art with him, a little of González-Torres home, a bit of the bodies of González-Torres and Laycock to his mouth, tongue, stomach. And the theory’s only aim is to take us “somewhere less dark.” As González-Torres remembered when he told his students to read Althusser with a glass of wine in hand, Benjamin (and his reflections on the original and the reproduction, the loss of the work of art’s aura, etc.) only has something to tell us if his ideas serve to “construct realities that help us live better.” This tension between meaning and use is one of the keys to González-Torres’s conceptualism. It’s not that meaning caves into use (as if before a greater instance), nor is it that use “goes beyond” meaning (as if artistic value surrendered to a social dimension). It is, rather, a true vacillation, a relationship of reciprocal threat that upsets but does not wound, and from which neither comes away unscathed. In González-Torres, *meaning and use make each other tremble*. It is not ludicrous to imagine that that mutual disturbance was what the artist, forlorn by inspiration, was looking for in his 1974 Merriam-Webster. The dictionary is precisely that theater where meaning and use (definition and way of employing, sedentary meaning and nomadic contexts) never cease to disturb each other. That is why, for the Brechtian minimalist that was González-Torres, no object was more irresistible than a dictionary.

The question is: what does this trembling do to the aura? Annihilate it? To what extent does a critical art like González-Torres’s demand capitulation, the banishment of that archaic sensitive exhalation? After accepting that there was aura even in minimalist art, where it was thought to be banned, Michael Fried, who called it “theater,” accused aura of being the unbearable and antimodernist component in this sort of work. González-Torres, let alone his art, was not so susceptible; it stood in that slippery terrain from which orthodoxies flee. It’s easy to question the vitality of the aura in works like the stacks or the candy pieces, calls to a gradual but inexorable

disassembling that condemns disuse and even mocks the prohibition to touch on which art's magic was based. (*Please do not touch. Even clean hands can damage the fragile surface of works of art*, warned recently a sign in MoMA. But, for González-Torres, the fragile is the opposite of what must not be touched: the fragile is what needs to be touched, what demands it). It seems, then, that all distance has been abolished (and aura, according to Benjamin, was above all a "power of distance"). Nonetheless, we stand before those candy tapestries as if before something we are seeing for the last time, something that is dying down and chooses us not only as witnesses but also, perhaps, as accomplices or executioners. But that—the thing that we are seeing disappear, to whose disappearance we contribute when we put a piece of candy in our pocket or put a rolled sheet of paper under our arms—that is, we know, something that can *reappear* at any moment, anywhere. *Endless supply*: the work is infinitely reproducible. If, like Ross Laycock, it is doomed, its fate is double and extremely paradoxical, because the very death sentence that condemns it also resuscitates it. Where? Somewhere, sometime. *In the distance*: in the same both spatial and temporal beyond where the 100 percent auratic experiences in which González-Torres's art is steeped "take off": desire, dream, mourning, amorous rapture. Distance is the very concept of the stacks, the candy pieces: in the moment they seem abolished they are reborn and deepened. Disappearance operates by contact; maximum presence confronts us with loss. Approaching the work, touching it, tearing out a sheet is placing it in another scene, the dimension of distance where it turns in on itself and comes back to life. Thus, though the work does not stop being what it is, a simulacrum of death and an anticipated form of mourning—there can be no illusion here—there is something at its core that only thinks about survival and the hereafter, something that works towards the future formula of reproducing life. "The absence of illusions and the decline of the aura are identical phenomena," said Benjamin. To "reactionary" illusion, González-Torres opposes enthusiasm and hope, two forces without which there would be no criticism and, perhaps, no art. But enthusiasm and hope might be the two most "auto-genous" factors we have.

González-Torres always took pains to point out that a candy is not a candy piece, that a piece of paper is not a stack: what we, turned into official looters by the work itself, take home with us, is not the work; it is its elements, units, "members," and it is the very discrete nature of these components—which authorizes quantitative excess but hinders confusion—that enables the work to join production and consumption, illustrating with crystal elegance the classic *dictum* of Marxist political economy. Because if there is something surrounding the work of González-Torres, it is economy. Economy in the strictest terms: the macro version that can be read between the lines of the press (in 1990, when he was invited to participate in a group publication on the artist Roni Horn, González-Torres opened his intervention by spouting data about the tripling of the national deficit that had made the "economic boom" of the Reagan era possible), but also—and mostly—the specifically artistic economy, insofar as his work—like the work of Brecht—never stops asking decisive questions about the means and modes of production, about private property and common property, about the circulation of artistic goods, about the logic and values of the art market. Works like the stacks and the candy pieces are small aporetic traps in the institution of the market. What is a person who buys a candy doormat destined to run out, come apart and vanish in the pockets and mouths of others actually buying? What sort of good is appropriated by the person who buys a work like the billboard of the unmade bed with two pillows ("*Untitled*", 1991), whose certificate of authenticity stipulates that the person who buys it must exhibit it in public places?

But there is a third economy at stake in González-Torres's art: a strange economy, at once domestic and social, private and communal, primitive and utopian, one regulated by a logic that challenges even the most egalitarian exchanges: the logic of the gift. The photos of the installations with people capture the tone of the archaic ceremony to which they summon; especially one of "*Untitled*" (*Revenge*), taken in 1994 at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. A number of children are at the edge of a large candy rug. Two of them are stepping on it as if they were rehearsing dance steps, two others are busy unwrapping the candies, three or four are putting a handful in their pockets, five or six are squatting to gather candies. The image has an air of urgency, voracity and delight; it portrays an almost tribal scene, one of those trances both communal and self-absorbed that art rarely incites in ten-year-old kids. If not as the fruit of a singular generosity or a joyous drive to loss, how can we conceive this exuberant distribution of wealth that crowns a party? Taking candy from a stranger—classic prelude to a dreadful sex scene—is here the basis for a painstaking communion, both euphoric and focused. The fact that everyone in the photo is a child reveals two things that were there all along, waiting for us: the banal, prosaic, wholly common nature of the wealth given out—it is not stone, not steel, not metal, it is candy, paper, light bulb, plastic, bead curtain. The use of these cheap, everyday materials that can ensure an *endless supply* is another of the specific traits of González-Torres's democratic minimalism. And the likeness that binds this scene to children's birthday parties, especially the *piñata*, that apotheosis of domestic waste, and to party favors, plebian variation on the gift. And, come to think of it, even González-Torres's most circumspect work has a touch of twilight, something of the brusque and sentimental end-of-the-party: things and people begin to thin out, the space expands, a tired but happy silence where before there was laughter and music. Everything is slightly inherited, the ghost of what just happened. That is, in a way, the theatrical, intensely auratic setting that underlies González-Torres's art. Candies and sheets of paper are party favors, the both exceptional and everyday booty that the artist releases, places in the hands of a community that begins to exist at the very moment it takes something home, something that might perhaps survive beyond, in settings and worlds that the artist never imagined. Candies and sheets of paper are that perfectly senseless thing that the work of González-Torres renders perfectly plausible: a *basic luxury*. Tourism—another plebian practice—has a specific name for those trivial and joyful treasures, that only seem to be embodied in the most common gadgets of mass consumption: *souvenir*. Unlike the tourist photo, that always steals or violates something of what it sets out to cherish, the *souvenir* (like a birthmark, a scar, a loved one's wrinkle) is part of the memorable experiences; it belongs to that experience and, at the same time, represents it, takes it on the road, introduces it to other lives; maybe, in the best case, makes it change . . . That is, most certainly, a "generous art": an art that is not limited to remembering (even though González-Torres's work has much at stake in memory, the memorial, *in memoriam*), an art that dares to give, to let memory go.



## Tough Art With a Candy Center

THURSDAY, JUNE 7, 2007



Quietly Political art: "Untitled (America)," a 1994 work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, at the entrance of the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The strings of bulbs can be organized any way a curator sees fit.

By **RANDY KENNEDY**

VENICE, June 6 — The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who died of AIDS in 1996 at 38, did not exactly fit the profile of a secret agent, an infiltrator foiling lines of defense. He was a generous man with a handsome, cherubic face and wicked sense of humor. He loved cats. And some of his best-known art is made of candy, mounds of it, free for the taking and endlessly replenished, a Willy Wonka vision of Post-Minimalism. But Mr. Gonzalez-Torres also firmly believed that all art was political, whether it intended to be or not. He knew that his was, and for it to be effective he thought it should not

preach or proselytize or even too fully show its hand. "The most successful of all political moves," he once said, "are ones that don't appear to be 'political.'"

Such a strategy could be called subversive. You could also say that it worked on many levels: candy as candy; as art object; as a questioning of art objects; as a metaphor for mortality and depletion in the age of AIDS; as a means for his art and ideas literally to be spread, like a virus — or maybe like joy — by everyone who took a piece.

Whichever way his art is seen, Mr. Gonzalez-Torres undoubtedly would have considered it a

huge victory that it will be exhibited here beginning Sunday as the official representative of the United States at the 52nd Venice Biennale, the kind of slipping past the gatekeepers that delighted him. And because his work often dealt squarely with the reality of death, including his own, he might have been pleased that he managed to pull off such a coup without even being around, people who knew him say. (He is only the second artist to represent the United States posthumously in the Biennale in its modern history; the work of Robert Smithson was chosen for the 1982 exhibition, nine years after his death.)

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, JUNE 7, 2007

"I was shocked that he was chosen, frankly," said Nancy Spector, chief curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, whose proposal was selected last year in an open competition by a committee of curators, museum directors and artists that advises the State Department.

Mr. Gonzalez-Torres, who was born in Cuba and raised in Puerto Rico before moving to New York, had a complicated but unabashed love of America and the ideals it represented. His work was often a way to express his bitter disappointment when he felt that the country was failing those ideals, during the early days of AIDS, the Gulf War and the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, a time when he feared that civil liberties and other democratic protections were eroding.

Ms. Spector, the curator of the exhibition at the Palladian-style United States pavilion here, said she chose Mr. Gonzalez-Torres as her Biennale candidate partly because his work had become more influential since his death, inspiring many prominent young artists like Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Tino Sehgal.

And, Ms. Spector said, the work seems more relevant now, with the war in Iraq and domestic battles over government eavesdropping,

gay marriage and the concentration of wealth in America.

"I feel pretty confident that he would have felt this was the right time and the right place," she said, "because it would have signaled that notion of both total infiltration and of really arriving at the center and being able to speak the narrative that he wanted to."

As excoriating and critical of the United States as his work can be, she said, she thinks he would have seen his selection as a sign of "total acceptance" by his adopted country and would have been "overjoyed, a very proud American."

## Political art made of piles of paper (please, take on) and spills of chocolate and licorice.



"Untitled" (Public Opinion)" is made of licorice pieces

Mr. Gonzalez-Torres made the short list for the 1995 Biennale, a year before his death, and at that time, even as he was becoming more ill, he spoke of wanting the work in the exhibition to be "tough." The work that Ms. Spector chose includes many of his greatest hits: a candy spill; cubelike stacks of paper, also free for the taking and replenished to an ideal height; cascading strings of 15-watt frosted light bulbs that can be arranged however the curator sees fit. But many of the pieces here are also tough, among his most stridently polemical.

One paper stack, with blank pieces edged in black like funeral announcements, is called "Untitled (Republican Years)," from 1992. Two other stacks, from 1989, bear the typed words "Memorial Day Weekend" and "Veterans Day Sale." (Mr. Gonzalez-Torres, who thought of such stacks as anti-monuments, said he came up with the idea for the two phrases after reading the paper and thinking "that in our culture we no longer celebrate historical events at the public plaza — we go shopping.")

While some of his signature spills and piles are composed of silver-wrapped chocolates or brightly colored hard candy, the carpetlike one that covers the floor in one wing of the American pavilion, called "Untitled (Public Opinion)," is made with grayish licorice pieces vaguely shaped like missiles.

The largest work in this exhibition, conceived by Mr. Gonzalez-Torres during his lifetime but not made until now, does not appear to have political overtones at all. Commanding the courtyard in front of the pavilion, it is two shallow circular reflecting pools, touching to form a figure eight. The pools, weighing 8 to 10 tons each, are made of solid pieces of Carrara marble, the same kind Michelangelo used. (They are the largest pieces taken intact from a particular quarry in northern Tuscany since 1523, according to the exhibition's stone supplier.)

The pools arrived at the pavilion on Monday, caught up in some

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, JUNE 7, 2007



Felix Gonzalez-Torres's marble reflecting pools echo his other double objects, expressing a homosexual affinity and togetherness

characteristically Italian-style traffic and paperwork problems on their way to Venice. "We were starting to get pretty worried," Ms. Spector said. As she and assistants made the last adjustments to the exhibition on Tuesday afternoon, the pools were filled for the first time, and the water almost spilling over their edges caught the sunlight as yellow flowers from a Linden tree floated down onto the surface.

But the pools are more than simply beautiful, echoing other doubled objects that Mr. Gonzalez-Torres made as expressions of homosexual affinity and togetherness, like a pair of round mirrors or a pair of synchronized clocks, also touching, called "Untitled (Perfect Lovers)." He said he thought such works were more powerful because they refused to engage critics by playing on their terms.

"Two clocks side by side are much more threatening to the powers that be than an image of two men" performing oral sex, he wrote (though he used a much more descriptive phrase).

Of course many of the art pilgrims and tourists who file past the pools from now until Nov. 21, when the Biennale ends, will not think of sex or politics when seeing them. "They're beautiful, and I think people will probably throw coins in them, or might actually get into them if it's hot," Ms. Spector said, smiling. "I wouldn't mind.

Andrea Rosen, the dealer who represented Mr. Gonzalez-Torres from 1990 until his death and who now oversees his estate, said she did not think he would mind either. He would probably jump in himself. As he once said, he did not want his art to be just for people who read postmodern

theory but also "for people who watch 'The Golden Girls.'"

Ms. Rosen said: "His work has the ability to change with people's intentions and to be read through the filter of any given moment. I'm proud that he was chosen. And I'm proud that Nancy has chosen to do a show that is darker and more political. But I think different people are going to come away from this with very different experiences. That's Felix's magic."



## The U.S. Pavilion Offers a Glowing Tribute to the Artist and Us

By BLAKE GOPNIK

Washington Post Staff Writer

VENICE, June 10

Americans, as any European will tell you, are brash, insular and arrogant, incapable of subtle thought but happy to shove their simple-minded, flag-waving ideas down the world's throat. Since that impression has been gaining ground over the last few years - the wars in Iraq and on terror haven't helped - it's a lucky thing that the U.S. pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale is being filled

**"Untitled (America)," cascading bulbs in the U.S. pavilion, by Felix Gonzalez-Torres**

with the art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. It fights every one of those cliches. Gonzalez-Torres's work, though deeply involved with "Americanness," is as subtle as could be - understated; wry, witty and shrewd. It ranges from fine-art photographs of a Teddy Roosevelt memorial in New York to piles of free posters that visitors can't take away; from a room carpeted in penny candy to a pair of vastly expensive outdoor reflecting pools, carved from single disks of marble 12 feet across. This art doesn't ever offer easy answers or, for that matter, ask esoteric or tendentious questions. It provides resonant objects for us to look at and think about.

The Venice Biennale, now in its 52nd edition, functions as a world's fair of contemporary art. It opened to the public on Sunday. Thirty-one permanent pavilions, representing some of the more established nation-states, are scattered across dedicated fairgrounds at the far eastern edge of Venice. This year, 45 other countries more than ever before - have also found space for their, displays in buildings all around the city. Visi-

# American Art Without the Cliches

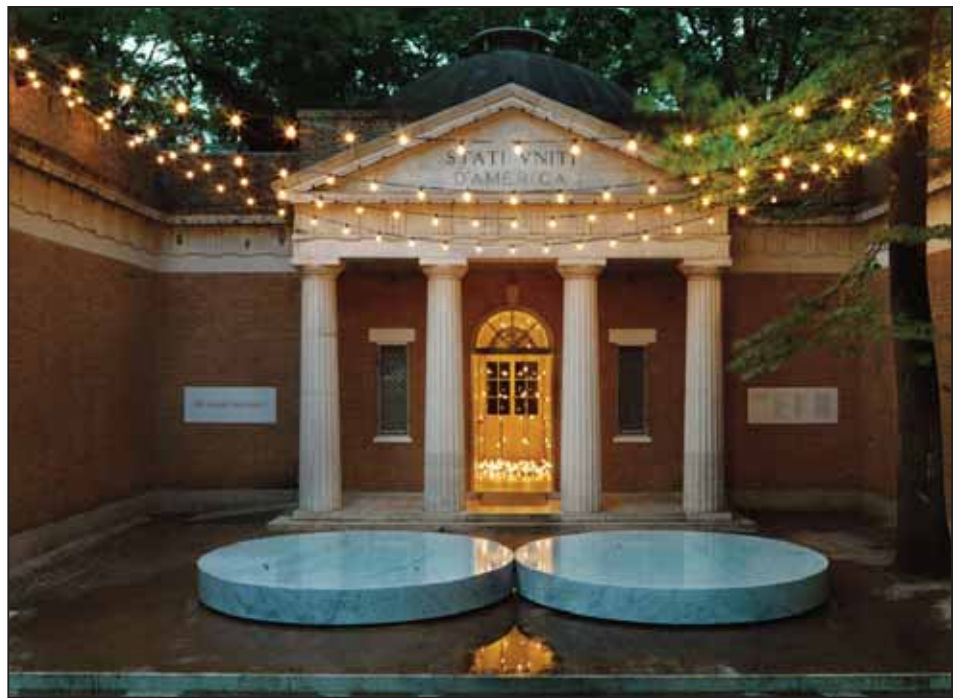
BIENNALE *From CI*

tors with the stamina to do the whole lot come away, in theory at least, with a good idea of where the planet's art is heading. It makes sense to start, as many Biennale-goers do, with the U.S. pavilion, set smack in the middle of the exhibition grounds on the most prominent site. It fills a grand building designed in 1930, with the look and feel of an imposing neoclassical courthouse. The building radiates authority, and seems to presume status and privilege. But maybe that's not the kind of message the United States wants to, be sending right now. (There has already been griping that, at this of all moments in history, the Biennale has chosen its first American director, curator Robert Storr, Smartly, however, he's gone out of his way to present art that questions imperialism of all kinds.) The art by Torres that is now filling the U.S. pavilion sends an absolutely different kind of message than the building it is in. In this project, 'fny hint of a boastful,' all-American vibe gets tempered' and probed.'

For one thing, Torres - who was selected for this exhibition by the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs - was an orphan, born in Cuba in 1957 and raised in Puerto Rico, who ended up in New York'as an adult. He died quietly of AIDS in 1996, after barely a decade of artmaking. That makes him a notably unheroic figure. His death also makes him unavailable for the celebrity treatment that big-ticket artists tend to get these days, and which helps turfr'the opening days of the Biennale into such a zoo,' (Could that be art star 'Matthew Barney over there,' wearing the same outfit he was shot in for last month's cover of Italian Vogue? You bet.) Some American visitors have complained that it makes no sense to have a dead guy in their national pavilion. But I think it helps the United States rise above the fray of 'career-building and market-priming that rules elsewhere at the Biennale. And it also happens to make the art of Gonzalez-Torres seem all the more alive.

Nancy Spector, a curaior at New York's Guggenheim Museum who knew Gonzalez-Torres well and has organized the current project, has made death a dominant theme in the pavilion, as it often was in the artist's work.

There's a two-foot-tall stack of posters, free for the taking, that are nothing more than plain white sheets of paper, but with black mourning bands running all along each edge. They are like invitations to a funeral, left blank and . then sized



Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled (America)" hangs across the courtyard of the U.S. pavilion behind his Italian marble discs

up to the festive scale of a Farrah Fawcett pinup. They suggest that mourning's always something worth attending to, even when there's no single object for our grief. Or that there's always something worthy of filling Gonzalez-Torres's black-edged blank. On offer in this venue, they seem to encourage public mourning for unspecified loss. Another similar , stack of posters shows an almost all-black image of the sea at night. It strikes equally elegiac notes.

Gonzalez-Torres himself, however, might have tempered the pavilion's mostly dour tone with some campy fun. He once got a scantily clad man to go-go dance his way around a room full of his solemn photos of the memorial tributes to President Theodore Roosevelt inscribed on the facade of New York's American Museum of Natural History.

I bet he'd also' have wanted to throw some color into" this show, which is now resolutely black and white. Spector, for instance, has realized the reflecting pools, sketched out by Gonzalez-Torres as needing to be made in "local stone," in cliched white Carrara marble, from quarries hundreds of miles south of Venice. Gonzalez-Torres might have preferred the rose-colored stone, from nearby Verona, that the

Venetian empire used for its most showy buildings. One reading of the pools is as a pair of "perfect lovers," which does suggest an image rather sweetly pink.

But even as it stands, the pavilion isn't all mournful. That poster' piece'strikes a delicate balance between celebration and elegy, and this continues across the whole project. A piece called "Untitled (America)" - there's a joke in giving a subtitle to something that claims it has no title in the first place - consists of 12 strings of incandescent bulbs, suspended across the entrance courtyard and hanging in the building's vestibule.

It's meant to evoke the twinkle of a Paris cafe's lights, except that in this case the bright bulbs screw into black sockets hanging from black wires.

The carpet of licorice' hard candy that fills the middle of one room rejoices in the sparkle of its cellophane wrappers, and in the joyous gesture of offering the public an unlimited supply of sweets ---, as with the posters, you're supposed to help yourself. And yet that frivolity is similarly tempered by the candy's jet-black color, by its potent, darkly earthy flavor and by the stomach-turning quantity of sugar on offer, fully 700

## American Art Without the Cliches

pounds of it. Too much of a good thing can be bad for you, as this entire planetful of humans needs to learn. (Spector likens the candy piece to an "oil slick in space.") The splendor of consumption has its dark side, too.

I don't want to imply that this work can or should be reduced to such simple sloganeering. Like all the best art, it suggests not only these notions but also very different ones as you take a longer look. Biennale pavilions usually depend on quick reads and instant appeal to score their points; they grab visitors as they speed by and give them something clean and clear to take away with them. This U.S pavilion has the rare courage to resist the rush: To read this art, you have to take close note of the specifics of what it looks like; to make its good looks matter, you have to think through its meanings more than once. It's not about receiving a message, or getting a punch line. It's about having a rich experience of images and ideas, different each time you look.

Those 12 photographs of the memorial to Roosevelt are lovely, subtle things. They're shot in tender black and white, and capture the contemplative state that good commemoration is supposed to foster. But they also seem to question our commemorative, contemplative platitudes. Each photo shows one blank wall from the New York memorial, with a simple, all-capped noun - "PATRIOT," "HUMANITARIAN," "STATESMAN," "SOLDIER" - carved into it. Since no one's in sight in these images to do the contemplating, the commemoration on offer can quite suddenly begin to seem reductive, simple-minded, just a bunch of empty, portentous words.

When Gonzalez-Torres took his shots, there was trash trailing on the ground in front of "PATRIOT" and "SOLDIER." So much for honoring our glorious dead.



Cellophane-wrapped licorice candies, above, and black posters, left, both free for the taking, are among the art installations by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the United States' representative at the Biennale. A curator likened the licorice to an "oil slick in space."

**The Venice Biennale** continues through Nov. 21.  
Visit [www.labiennale.org/en](http://www.labiennale.org/en),

**FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES**  
**EDITED BY JULIE AULT.**  
 NEW YORK: STEIDL DANGIN  
 2006 410 PAGES. \$85

**IN 1996**, the year Felix Gonzalez-Torres died, I made a version of his "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987-90, by hanging two identical battery-operated clocks side by side on my living-room wall. I had always admired his work, and, like friends who had foil-wrapped candies sitting on their bookshelves or a sheet of paper from one of his stacks pinned to their walls, I too wanted to live with a Felix. A decade later, I still have my Felix. It's hanging in my studio, and when I look up at it, I'm reminded of the economy, toughness, and beauty of his multifaceted practice, its wit and generosity, its impact on us all. Now, I didn't know Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Felix Gonzalez-Torres wasn't a friend of mine. And I'm no Felix Gonzalez-Torres. But Felix is the artist that artists of my generation feel on a first-name basis with. It is his interviews and writings that we pass along to students; his work that we make pilgrimages to see; his passing that we most deeply mourn.

*Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, rigorously and lovingly edited by artist Julie Ault (his close friend and sometime collaborator), is a giant step toward understanding the ongoing vitality of his practice and presents a new model for what an artistic monograph can be. The book is a mixture of newly commissioned essays and reprints; writings, interviews, and lectures by Felix; and texts by Bertolt Brecht, Marguerite Duras, and Susan Sontag, among others, that served as touchstones for his practice. All of this is standard fare for a monograph, but what makes this one so extraordinary is the heterogeneity of the texts that Ault has assembled and the visual and critical intelligence with which the material has been arranged. How, for example, does one reconcile Simon Watney's passionate claim that at the core of Felix's art are issues of "systematic remembering and forgetting, of memorializing and calumniating gay men who have died from AIDS" with Miwon Kwon's contention that the "consistent presence of intimacy-in-distance and distance-in-intimacy as a conjoined dynamic" is "the key to FGT's overall artistic practice, a fundamental preoccupation of his life, and the foundation of his politics"? By presenting seemingly divergent viewpoints in the same volume, Ault



**View of "Felix Gonzalez-Torres", 1997**, Sprengel Museum of Hannover, Germany. Foreground: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled", 1989/90. Background, from left: Felix Gonzalez Torres, "Untitled"(Perfect Lovers), 1987-90. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Beginning), 1994

avoids the totalizing, summing up quality that monographs of this scope often have. Ironically, despite the multitude of voices in the book, Ault claims that it is not an anthology.

She asserts that it is best read in a linear fashion, and its twists and turns, subplots, and Sterne-like asides give it the feeling of an exquisitely constructed novel, one in which the "story" of Felix is rendered as rich and complex as his life and output. By dividing the book into six sections with headings such as "Social Relations and Pro-

**Felix is the artist that artists of my generation feel on a first-name basis with. It is his interviews and writings that we pass along to students; his work that we make pilgrimages to see; his passing that we most deeply mourn.**

duction of Meaning" and "Passion of Remembrance: History and Memory," Ault has forgone the usual separation of artist writings and interviews from critical essays and other material in favor of a more conversational structure. The section "*Perfect Lovers: Context and Romantic Union*," for example, contains a synopsis of a film by

## My Felix

GLENN LIGON ON FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES



From top: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Madrid 1971), 1988, color photograph jigsaw puzzles in plastic bags and wall lettering, Overall 15 x 18". Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991, wall paint and clocks on wall, dimensions variable

Duras, an essay by Felix on the artist Roni Horn, a short story by Virgilio Pinera, letters from Felix to collectors and his dealer, Andrea Rosen, and an essay by bell hooks on "subversive beauty." Each text plays beautifully off the others, and together they present a rich meditation on the section's theme. The photographs of individual works and installations are extraordinary throughout, many of them showing the same pieces in different contexts, as well as the public's interaction with them. In addition, reproductions of clippings and other material from Felix's archive illuminate his thought processes and reinforce Ault's statement that "connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting Gonzalez-Torres's biography with his art practice" was a guid-

ing principle of the book. connecting Gonzalez-Torres's biography with his art practice" was a guiding principle of the book.

The journey, in contributor Nancy Spector's words, from "the self-as-referent to the social-as-mirror and back again" is a motif that runs through a number of the texts, which commence with an efficient survey by Robert Storr and are followed by solid contributions from David Deitcher, bell hooks, Anne Umland, Rainer Fuchs, and Russell Ferguson, among others. It is Felix's interviews and writings, however, that convey the fullest sense of his intellectual and artistic gifts. His conversation with Tim Rollins (maddeningly excerpted) is one of the most wide-ranging, honest, and underlineable dialogues between artists that I have ever read. Similarly incisive, Felix's brief essay on Horn's sculpture *Gold Field*, 1980-82, beautifully describes how art, at its best, gives one a tool to see the world differently. In fact, his interviews and statements are so good that they point to a problem inherent in editing any book on Felix: He was more subtle, engaging, and intellectually nimble than most of his critical commentators.

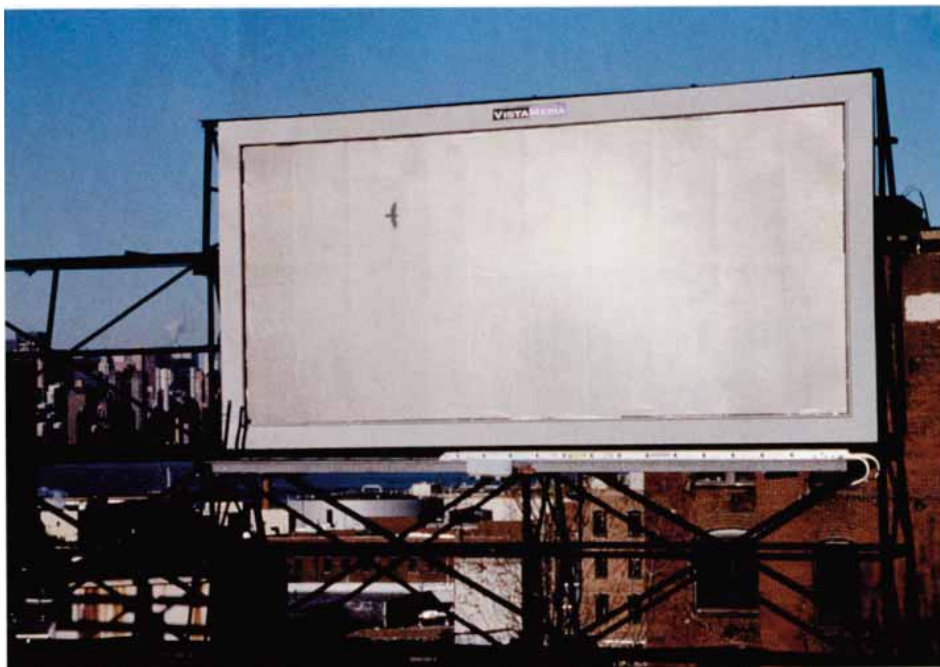
Many of the essays in the book adopt a hushed, awed tone toward his work and writings, a tone that he himself was at pains to deconstruct.

In interviews, Felix often said that when the culture foregrounds something it is because that thing is needed, and one has the sense that he was the artist that everyone in the early 1990s was waiting for: articulate, bright, clean, and a nice-looking guy. Felix was the artist of color whom curators and critics buzzed into the corridors of power, while the angry, torch-and-issue-wielding "others" were told to go around to the service entrance or to wait by the coatroom. To be sure, his work had "issues" too, but the discussion of them rarely leaves predetermined intellectual comfort zones. For example, while many of the essayists in the book are happy to quote Blanchot and Althusser, or to explore references to Minimalism and Conceptual practices, there is little discussion of Felix's relationship to "multicultural" or "identity" art. Most of the contributors simply repeat that he was careful in his practice to avoid being "labeled," without seriously considering the space that those supposedly reductive categories aimed to open up, to say nothing of Felix's own complicated relationship to them. Only Ferguson's essay, "Authority Figure," begins to unpack what that moment was actually about. Similarly, in an interview with Joseph Kosuth, Felix talks about the importance of feminism to art production in the '80s, yet scant discussion of his work's relationship to feminist theory appears anywhere in the volume.

There are a few pieces in the book, however, that engage Felix's practice on equal footing or attempt to link it to different artistic frameworks. Kwon's "The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce" is a brilliant investigation of the familiarity and unknowability that almost paradoxically coexist in his work, as well as a rethinking of the notion of community engendered by his candy spills, paper stacks, and billboards. Kwon also offers a fascinating reading of the certificates of authenticity and ownership that accompany these works as examples of how Felix figured "modes of exchange in the marketplace as integral rather than extrinsic to his work's artistic meaning." "The point of FGT's certificates," she writes, "was to work against the security of his own versions of the stacks or piles, strings of light or beaded curtains, as unchanging, original, and finite ideals for eternity,



## BOOKS



Top: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled", 1995, billboard. Installation View, South Fifth and Berry Streets, Brooklyn, New York, 2000. Bottom: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Placebo), 1991, candies individually wrapped in silver cellophane, endless supply. Installation View, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, 1994

which others coming after him must worship as immanently better than all other versions." The certificates continue a dialogue with the artist and ensure—even after his death—that the work evolves and becomes new again and again, thereby reimagining the responsibilities of ownership and the sanctity of his intentions.

Carlos Basualdo's "Common Properties" covers territory similar to Kwon's by investigating the notion of community based on shared ideas or experiences.

For Basualdo, the community that Felix's work produces is one bound by "dissonance" and "enigmatic and multiple reverse of meaning." He takes a toughlove stance toward Felix's writings,

at one point admonishing him for adopting a "didactic attitude when referring to his work." Basualdo writes, "The meaning of these images—the unmade bed, birds among the clouds, sequences of words and dates—is perhaps nothing but the enigma of its meaning," and they reveal "the profound incommunicability that dwells in the very heart of meaning." Like Kwon, he proposes that the community brought into being by the public projects is premised not on a shared understanding of their imagery but on those images' ultimate opacity. Such a model of sociability proposes welcome points of contemplation and resistance at a time when civic participation is equated with voting for a singer on American Idol or going shopping so the terrorists don't win.

Another essay that differs in tone from most in the book is Gerardo Mosquera's "Remember My Name." In Ault's preface, she details both how her intimate knowledge of Felix was crucial to structuring the book and how the use of that knowledge runs a risk, among others, of positioning her as the authority on all matters Felix. Mosquera has no such qualms. With a casual familiarity that made me squirm, he writes, "Felix possessed an almost Caribbean warmth and sense of humor .... He also set aside a good deal

of time for his family and friends, a rather rare phenomenon in the hectic, careerist art world of New York. 'There are times,' he would tell me, 'when you need your grandma's black beans.'" "TMI" (too much information!), I wrote in the margin, but I appreciate Mosquera's insistence on the "Latinness" of Felix's project and his linking of the artist to a trajectory including the likes of Helio Oiticica and Cildo Meireles (whose *Insertions in Ideological Circuits*, 1970, Basualdo aptly relates to the strategies of circulation in Felix's work). At the end of his essay, Mosquera wryly notes that the accent marks in "Felix Gonzalez Torres," as he insists on writing it, will probably disappear with the translation of the text from Spanish to English. One imagines that Felix would have seen the loss of the accents (and the gain of a hyphen between his last names) as the inevitable, even welcome, result of cultural in-betweenness, of the movement toward new spaces, of always being in process. This hybridity was not particular to Felix; it is something we all live with. Accent marks and hyphens in our names or not, we are all products of a historical moment characterized by an unprecedented mixing of cultures and the erosion of physical and psychic boundaries. What we might call "identity" or the "self" is a storage room with a busted lock: We go in looking for "me" and instead find "we." In Felix's work, the line between "me" and "we" is constantly put into question. His highly personal images and references act as devices that simultaneously bring us deeper into the work and thrust us back into the world. The magnificent achievement of Ault's book is that it collects the models Felix presented through his art and life in a form that is complex, contradictory, and elegant. We all have the powerful fantasy that we'll one day meet someone who will be everything, who will know us as well as we know ourselves. Sometimes that person is a lover. Sometimes that person is a friend. Ault has given us Felix as she knew him, and the result is the book I imagine Felix would have wanted for himself. 0

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## **The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal. a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce**

Miwon Kwon

Being is a becoming. And this becoming does not achieve stabilization even with death. Long after a given being has ceased to be physically in the world, it remains there, mnemonically, “housed” in all of the psyches that have ever affirmed it. In each of those psyches, it is not a coherent and stable entity, but a constellation of diverse and highly particularized sounds and images, caught up in a ceaseless process of flux and transformation.

-Kaja Silverman<sup>1</sup>

I never met FGT. It is surprising that we never did meet, since we knew so many people in common, some very close to each of us. In confronting the task of writing about his art now, which seems impossible to do without trying to remember the artist, I thus find myself in an odd position of feeling very close to and even part of his world, and at the same time being completely alien from it. I only have other people’s memories, other people’s stories. Then, in looking at his art, I am forced to ask myself: Is it possible to miss someone that one never met, to feel the loss of something one never had? I think FGT’s work teaches us that you can, and that we do. All the time.

The words I have borrowed from FGT for the subtitle of this essay – “a possibility of renewal, a chance to share, a fragile truce” – come from a scribbled note, a quick yet thoughtful greeting, found on the backside of a snapshot taken by the artist of the Hollywood Hills at sunset. It is a view through a window of a unit at the Ravenswood Apartments building in Los Angeles where he and his boyfriend, Ross Laycock, lived together in 1990 when FGT was teaching at CalArts. The scene is of what FGT called the “golden hour,” the brief passage of time, a threshold moment, when the final rays of the day seem to gently resist then acquiesce to the darkness that inevitably comes. Addressed to his friends, and neighbors during that year, Ann Goldstein and Christopher Williams, and retrieved from their personal archive of correspondences for my inspection, the photograph and the message (describing the artist’s sentiments in revisiting Los Angeles in 1994 for his exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, a few years after Ross’s death from AIDS) provoke in me an uneasy sense of distance and proximity, of voyeurism and identification. It is a peculiarly resonant feeling that comes from knowing that this image and these words were not meant for me, but they address me nonetheless.

What do I mean by this? On the one hand, the simultaneous feeling of intimacy and distance that I am trying to describe is not untypical of a researcher’s encounter with material left behind in any archive. Digging through accumulated letters, photos, tapes, journals, notes, memorabilia, sketches, and other ephemera that once belonged to someone – saved for everyone and no one at the same time

'Untitled' (Album), 1991  
C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag  
7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.  
Edition of 3, 1 A.P.



the researcher finds herself an intruder (albeit one with exceptional privilege of access). Propelled by the hope of discovering unknown information or as-yet unarticulated insights, even secrets, regarding an artist and his or her work, the researcher moves through the archival terrain understanding its ultimate indifference to the specificity of her identity and desire. Nonetheless, she harbors the fantasy that, surely, the buried information, insights, and secrets have been waiting precisely for her gaze, for the narration that only she could give them. A world of private thoughts, feelings, and exchanges that were never meant for her eyes or ears coalesces as a palpable reality in her imagination. She thinks what she finds is familiar, even if her discoveries are contrary to her expectations. The researcher is rewarded with a sense of connection and continuity – with history, with ideas, with persons, with the reality of others, with truth. And even though this sense of connection and continuity is premised on insurmountable separation and discontinuity, the misrecognition provides a kind of solace that affirms her sense of self as a knowing and intelligent person, as if she's fallen into some intimate alignment with the logic of a remote and foreign cosmos (of another person, time, place).

On the other hand, my impression of being addressed by a photo and words addressed to persons other than myself – image and text reflecting FGT's friendship with Goldstein and Williams – is not strictly due to their now archival status and my nosy, perhaps narcissistic, art historical interest. Because the feelings engendered by my "discovery" of this piece of correspondence are not like what usually accompanies other archival encounters as described above, which involve an imaginary "overcoming" of the distance of the unknowable (history, truth, an other). For what I am struck by, in fact, is the realization that I have had similar sensations of an intimate familiarity and profound distance before in altogether different, public en-

counters – on streets, in museums and galleries, in the pages of art magazines – in confronting FGT’s public address, that is, his works of art.

For instance, a gigantic black-and-white image of an empty bed, with fresh imprints of two bodies that recently occupied it, hanging high above or on the side of buildings in Manhattan, offers me, like the small photograph of the “golden hour” in Hollywood, a view to the traces of an intimate experience, a private exchange. Both of these images left behind by FGT – one a snapshot encountered in someone’s living room, the other a billboard on a city street – give me an opportunity to occupy the images, to become their protagonist. The images beckon me to do this in their very ordinariness, to project myself into the scenes that they picture and the social and discursive exchanges that they mobilize, as if they are, or could be, pictures of love and loss from my own life. Yet FGT’s images also resist such projections, too, not allowing me to imagine away my position of alterity to the specific intimacies that they relay. No matter how familiar or intense the quality of feelings the images evoke – of solitude, of tenderness, of longing and loss – they somehow do not belong to me in any secure way in the end. These are not scenes from my life after all.

Many critics have described this doubly affecting quality of FGT’s work as the result of the artist’s framing of an existential void (to be filled by the viewer, like me), or his insinuation of the private into the public and vice versa, terms I will return to later. For now, I want to hold onto a slightly different set of terms and highlight the consistent presence of intimacy-in-distance and distance-in-intimacy as a conjoined dynamic (some might prefer to call this a presence-absence dialectic) in almost all of FGT’s output – from personal notes and gifts to friends both close by and far away, to commissions for private collectors, to projects for public spaces and institutions. Whether figured in the content, form, or distributional structure of his art, and, perhaps most complexly in the positioning of its viewer and audience, this dynamic seems to me to be the key to FGT’s overall artistic practice, a fundamental preoccupation of his life, and the foundation of his politics.

## A CHANCE TO SHARE

I start with a minor piece of personal correspondence – a piece of ephemera that the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation does not consider a work of art – to attempt an understanding of FGT’s vision, or more accurately his theory, of the public? It should be clear by now that I believe FGT tried to produce a public (and not only through his art) that is predicated on a kind of intimacy. But this intimacy, as I have already tried to show through my own encounters with his work, is not one that idealizes or realizes a self-other identification or communion. On the contrary, the intimacy that is often pictured in FGT’s work, and always produced by it, is predicated on there remaining something or someone that stays unreachable, not unlike those quietly shocking moments of estrangement when one senses an abyss of distance while lying next to the most familiar body of a lover. Simultaneously offering and failing the possibility of being fully present to another, FGT’s work captures the profound alienation and distance at the very heart of all intimacy. The power of his work lies here for me, to the extent that this paradox of intimacy is not betrayed or disavowed in his effort to imagine a public.



'Untitled', 1991  
 Billboard  
 Dimensions vary with installation  
 Installation in Turin for Quotidiana: The  
 Continuity of the Everyday in 20th Century Art at  
 Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea,  
 Turin, 2000

We should consider this assertion in greater detail. It may be surprising to some readers that FGT thought of his first paper stack pieces – rather than his well-known billboard projects in the streets of New York City, for instance – as the beginning of a conscious intervention into the public art discourse in the late 1980s. He recalled in a 1995 interview:

One thing that amazed me at that time was that the difference between being outdoors and being public was not spoken about. It's a big difference. Public art is something which is really public, but outdoor public art is something that is usually made of a good, long-lasting material and is placed in the middle of somewhere, because it's too big to be inside. I was trying to deal with a solution to that that would satisfy what I thought was a true public sculpture, and that is when I came up with the idea of the stack.<sup>3</sup>

So what did FGT envision as being “really public,” to the extent that his paper stacks qualified for him as “true public sculpture” – a work of relatively small size and scale, shown inside commercial gallery or museum spaces, and made of “bad,” short-lived material? Clearly, he rejected, as many other artists and critics have done in the past two decades, the simplistic attribution of an artwork's publicness based on size (too big for inside), placement (outdoors), or material permanence



“Untitled” (Portrait of Austrian Airlines), 1993  
 Medium varies with installation  
 Dimensions vary with installation  
 Installation in Vienna, for “Untitled” (Portrait of Austrian Airlines) organized by Museum in Progress, Vienna, 1993

(long-lasting).<sup>4</sup> But his “solution” to the public art problem entailed more than a contrarian’s strategy of merely doing the opposite of what is normally expected. It also involved more than the audience participation aspect of these works. The capacity of members of the audience to take a piece of the artwork, a sheet of paper (or morsel of sweets in the case of his candy piles), is certainly a part of what FGT had in mind in nominating his stacks as public sculptures. And there is now a substantial accumulation of interpretations of his work, verging on doxa, that diffusely champion audience participation and interactivity as a transparent index of a socially engaged, “truly public” work of art. But I want to insist that audience participation per se is not a decisive or even a relevant factor in distinguishing FGT’s paper stacks, or any other artwork for that matter, as being more meaningfully engaging of a “public.” Indeed, if there was an orthodox view of public art in the late 1980s, which FGT sought to critique with his work, then a different orthodoxy has emerged in recent years concerning the public, democratic obligation of art that seems to have missed some important subtleties of the artist’s critique.

For example, in the popular theorization of “relational aesthetics” by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, FGT is positioned as a central father figure, a source of direct influence, having “foreshadowed” the kind of “convivial,” “user-friendly,” “festive,” “collective,” and “participatory” artistic projects of a group of artists that emerged in the 1990s: Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Jorge Pardo, Dominique

Gonzalez-Foerster, and Philippe Parreno, among others. Bourriaud asserts, “What strikes us in the work of this generation of artists is, first and foremost, the democratic concern that informs it. For art does not transcend everyday preoccupations, it confronts us with reality by way of the remarkable nature of any relationship to the world, through make-believe.”<sup>5</sup> This democratic concern is evident, according to Bourriaud, in the way that these artists prioritize, like FGT, “the space of human relations in the conception and distribution of their works,”<sup>6</sup> how they “explore the varied potential in the relationship to the other,”<sup>7</sup> how the “public is . . . taken into account more and more,”<sup>8</sup> how the social interaction of the audience becomes the very medium of an artwork. He argues, “What nowadays forms the foundation of artistic experience is the joint presence of beholders in front of the work, be this work effective or symbolic.”<sup>9</sup> And this joint or collective presence of beholders is the new source of artistic aura to boot: “The aura of art no longer lies in the hinter-world represented by the work, nor in form itself, but in front of it, within the temporary collective form that it produces by being put on show.”<sup>10</sup> Which is to say, what is “auratic” about a work of art is now external to its unique form; it is located in the social gathering and relations, themselves conceived as a form (i.e., “temporary collective form”), that are instigated by it and that unfold in front of it.

What such an argument attempts to challenge, through a rhetoric loosely echoing the neo-avant-garde, is the longstanding investment in the art object as a premier and exclusive site of artistic meaning. It also seeks to dispute the autonomy of the work of art as separate and distinct from the social, as an entity that transcends worldly conditions. But when Bourriaud distinguishes the “relational art” of his group of artists for “prompt[ing] models of sociality,” he elides the fact that all art prompts models of sociality.<sup>11</sup> Given this, we can understand that Bourriaud is forwarding a particular model of sociality, or “temporary collective form,” over others as a more legitimate democratic engagement of and with the public. As he puts it, “relational art” opposes “authoritarian art,” an undemocratic art defined as forms that are “peremptory and closed in on themselves,” forms that “do not give the viewer a chance to complement them.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, “relational art” transforms the exhibition into a social situation governed by a concern “to give everyone their chance.”<sup>13</sup>

But perhaps we do not need a generation of young artists converting exhibition spaces into semicasual, make-believe dinner parties, living rooms, cafés, stores, bars, and lounges, etc., to remind us that all aesthetic experience is deeply and always already part of everyday social and political realities. More significantly, I question: Why must I, or any other beholder, be enfolded into a model of sociality that is framed, if not programmed, by another author for my encounter with a work of art to count as a legitimate exercise of emancipated engagement and viewership? Is not the imperative to perform as an actor in someone’s vision of “conviviality,” in a staging of overcoming alienation, of everyone “getting their chance,” itself deceptively authoritarian? Is this not a reification of sociality affecting a peremptory closure, too, in the guise of a new kind of “democratic” realism? Is this not, in fact, symptomatic of what Bourriaud himself diagnoses as the “dawning of the society of extras where the individual develops as a part-time stand-in for freedom, signer and sealer of the public place?”<sup>14</sup>

Such reification of sociality is precisely what FGT’s work refuses, even prevents. His paper stacks and candy spills may activate the exhibition into a

*"Untitled" (Revenge)*, 1991

Light-blue candies individually wrapped  
in cellophane, endless supply  
Overall dimensions vary with installation  
Ideal Weight: 325 lb.

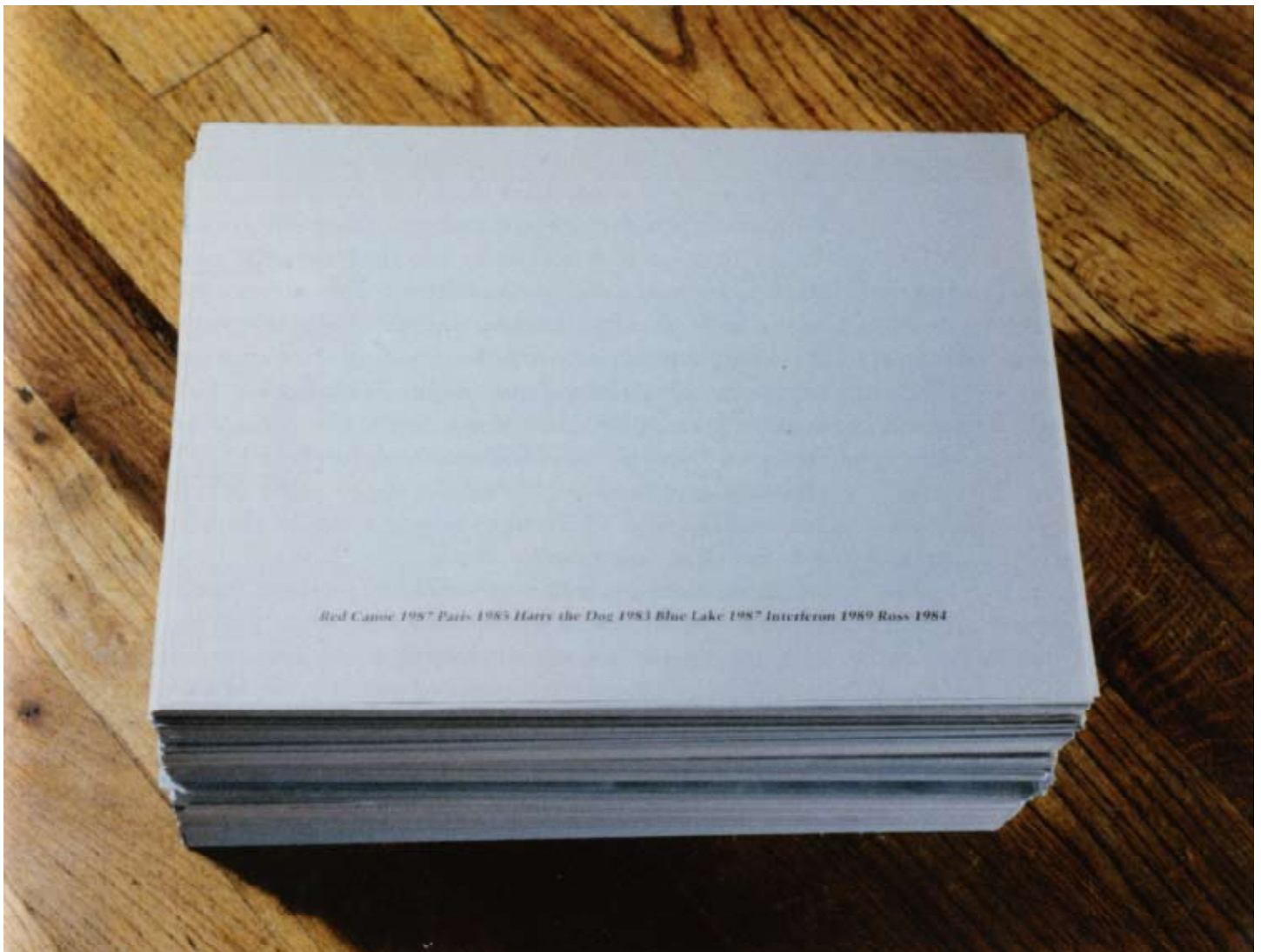
and

*"Untitled" (Loverboy)*, 1989

Blue sheer fabric and metal rod  
Dimensions vary with installation  
View of the artist installing the work for *Felix  
Gonzalez-Torres: Traveling* at The Renaissance  
Society at the University of Chicago, 1994

*"Untitled" (Still Life)*, 1989

Offset print on paper, endless copies  
6 in. at ideal height x 11 x 8 1/2 in.  
Installation view at Terrain, San Francisco, 1990

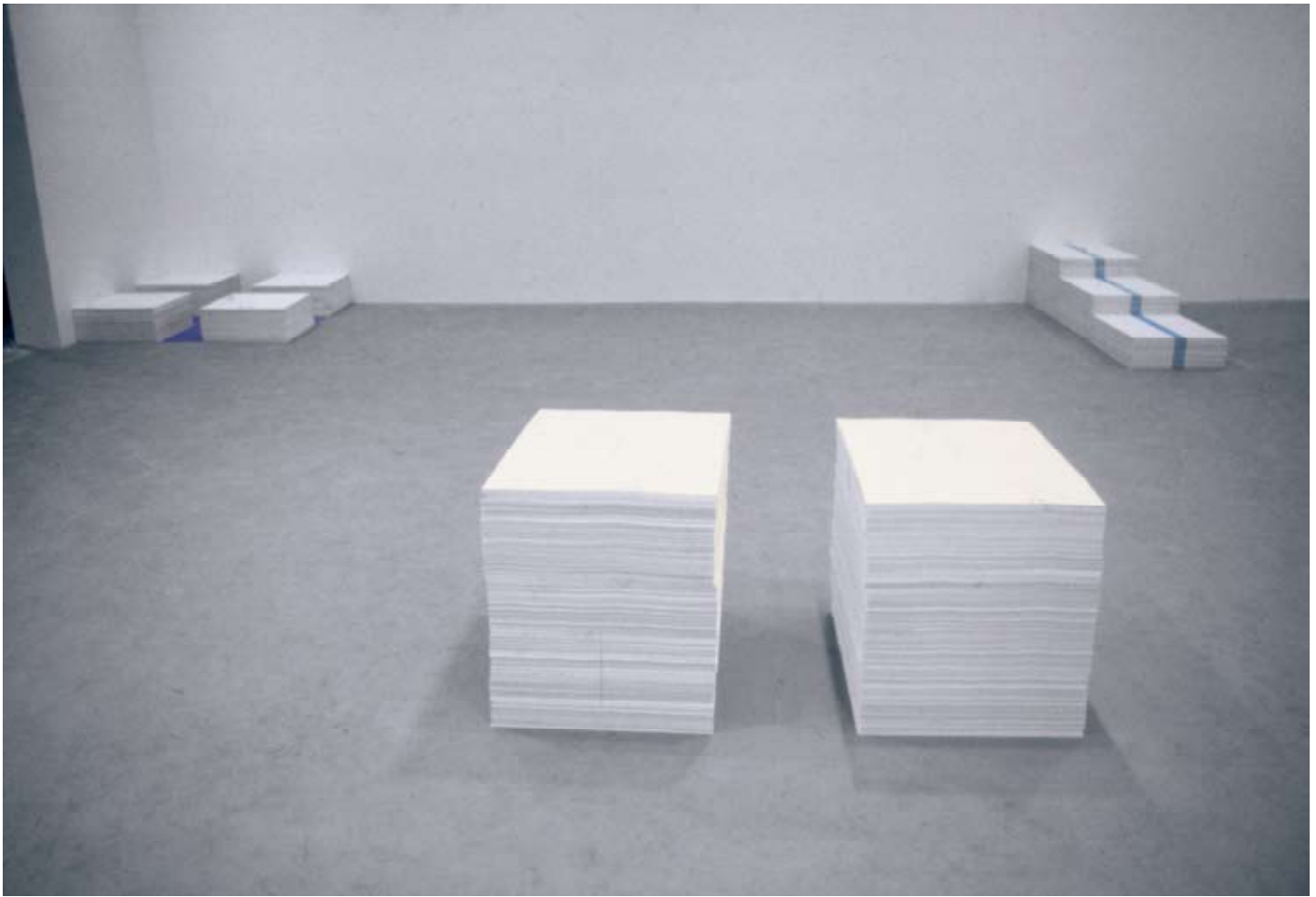




participatory or interactive situation, but it is crucially important that they do not result in the subsuming of the audience into a “temporary collective form.” Instead, these works create opportunities for viewers to engage with an artwork in which each act of engagement – the taking or not taking in the case of his stacks and spills – maintains its utter singularity and private meaning no matter how many other viewers, even a crowd, may perform exactly the same act or be witness to it. Which is to say, FGT’s work does not automatically position the viewer as a validating “extra” in a public scene of conviviality occurring in front of the work. If we can characterize what FGT does as a staging at all, it is not one of a collective partaking in a public display of “inter-human communication.” It is rather a clearing of sorts in which the particularity of each person’s gesture retains its irreducible, ungeneralizable, un-abstractable, un-collectivizable singularity. As such, there is no collective sociality, temporary or otherwise, that coalesces into a “form” here, defined by Bourriaud as a “structural unity<sup>15</sup> imitating a world . . . bringing heterogeneous units together on a coherent level.”

“Unity” and “coherence,” in fact, are antithetical to FGT’s endeavor. For one thing, these terms describe qualities that are contrary to the eternally, not temporarily, provisional condition of all his works. Even when ideal height, weight, size, or installation conditions are known for a work, such information indicates, always, a passing state in the work’s continual becoming. One state of the work’s being is not any more legitimate or conclusive than another. As well, “unity” and “coherence” are antithetical to the kind of public that FGT’s works<sup>16</sup> produce: rather than cohering into a “momentary grouping” or “micro-community,” as idealized by Bourriaud, for instance, the public of FGT’s work is an un-unifiable, anonymous, incoherent formlessness. And significantly, this formlessness persists as the very condition of the public as a social entity, beyond the exhibition in both space and time. The reason FGT considered his paper stacks to be “truly public sculptures,” then, is probably not merely because they call for audience participation, but because of what that participation yields, or refuses to yield. That is, it seems clear enough that the artist conceived the public as a performatively determined category, as coming into existence in the self-organizing act of individuals responding to the work’s address,<sup>17</sup> and not as a function of institutional rules of membership or belonging. It is perhaps less clear how important it was for the artist that the particularity of these responses not become colonized through abstraction for the purposes of affirming a coherent collective identity.

Those works not involving “giveaway” procedures, unavailable for literal, physical interaction, may illustrate this point better. With the series of works called “datelines,” in which selected events and dates are horizontally strung along, usually in two or three lines of white type at the bottom of a field of rectangular black ground, the viewer is confronted with idiosyncratic and discontinuous timelines. The best known of this series, and perhaps the most “coherent” and large-scale, is the one that FGT produced in 1989 for the Public Art Fund of New York City as a billboard at Seventh Avenue and Christopher Street. The work reads: People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969. Given the year of the piece (height of the culture war battles and AIDS activism), its location (a “gay neighborhood” near the site



Clockwise from front:

*"Untitled "*, 1989-1990

Offset print on paper, endless copies

26 in. at ideal height x 29 x 56 in. overall

Two parts:

26 in. at ideal height x 29 x 23 in. each

and

*"Untitled" (Blue Cross)*, 1990

Blue fabric and paper, endless copies

9 in. at ideal height x 59 x 59 in.

Fabric: 59 x 59 in.

Paper: four parts: 9 in. at ideal height x 23 x

23 in. each

and

*"Untitled "*, 1990

Offset print on paper, endless copies

17 in. at ideal height x 23 x 87 in. overall

Three parts:

One part: 17 in. at ideal height by 23 x 29 in.

One part: 12 in. at ideal height by 23 x 29 in.

One part: 8 in. at ideal height by 23 x 29 in.

Installation view of inaugural solo exhibition,

Felix Gonzalez-Torres at Andrea Rosen Gallery,

New York, 1990

of the Stonewall riots), and content, the immediate and continuing reception of the work emphasizes its status as a gay political statement, as a work of art that gives voice to the repressed history of the gay and lesbian community. Such an emphasis is not surprising or inappropriate given the artist's own statement regarding the conception of the work as a site-specific commemoration of the Stonewall Rebellion and a date-specific project to be on view during the Gay and Lesbian Pride march in June 1989 in New York City.<sup>18</sup> The most sophisticated interpreters of the work, however, have recognized that the work's most significant politics lie not in the assertion of gay content but in formal attributes that radicalize conventional structures of historical narrative. For David Deitcher, the work "testifies to the artist's mistrust of institutionalized, linear methods of historical inscription, such as those that commonly render lesbians and gays invisible while claiming to tell the whole truth." Similarly, Simon Watney has written of the work: "History is thus specifically not presented as a seamless progressive narrative, expressing some supposedly unified historical force or will." Instead, as Watney continues, "events and institutions co-exist, as in memory, in no particular order or sequence beyond that of our own active interpretative making. The 'private' defiantly invades 'public' space."<sup>20</sup>

What allows this invasion is, in fact, what is not said or shown. It is the unarticulated, silent relations between the events and dates on the billboard; it is the vacant expanse above the text, what FGT called a "space for imaginary

projection”<sup>21</sup> Considered as a form of public speech, FGT’s billboard addresses all passersby and subsequent viewers of the image of the work to occupy this space for imaginary projection. Each beholder, thus, is given the chance and responsibility to animate the blankness, to see herself in relation to the dates and events that frame it (not unlike the kind of viewer projection I described earlier in relation to the empty bed billboard). In the process, she becomes the “speaker” of the dateline or the central figure that it functions to caption. So that even if these dates and events of historical significance do not have an immediate bearing on her personal history, as they likely will for those self-identified as gay, she must still account for them. She must reckon with these dates and events as connected somehow to her own life, and reciprocally see her life in some coordination with them. “That’s the year I moved to New York . . . when I was seven years old . . . the year the Sex Pistols released ‘Pretty Vacant’ . . . while I was learning to speak English . . . first real boyfriend. . .” In short, the viewer is encouraged to acknowledge herself as a truly historical subject, implicated by and in worldly forces seemingly disconnected from her.

‘Untitled’, 1989  
C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag  
7 1/2 x9 1/2 in.  
Edition of 3, 1 A.P., 3 additional A.P.



I have purposefully presumed a heterosexual female viewer here to underscore the fact that the subject position that FGT's work inspires far exceeds any affirmation of a given, in this case gay, identity. Which is to say, even as this billboard brings into almost triumphant if somber visibility the markers of a history of a repressed and marginalized social group, it does not foreclose those markers for that history or for that group. In other words, FGT refuses more than the traditional linear structure of historical narrative. Most radically, he refuses what Michael Warner, the author of *Publics and Counterpublics*, calls the "humiliating positivity of the particular," a concept requiring some explanation.

In his important study, Warner reminds us that, "the bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal,"<sup>22</sup> to which we can add heterosexual. This privilege accords with "a principle of negativity [in which] the validity of what you say in public bears a negative relation to your person. What you say will carry force not because of who you are but despite who you are."<sup>23</sup> This is because:

Implicit in this principle is a utopian universality that would allow people to transcend the given realities of their bodies and their status. But the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction is both the utopian moment of the public sphere and a major source of domination, for the ability to abstract oneself in public discussion has always been an unequally available resource. . . . The subject who could master this rhetoric [of self-abstraction] in the bourgeois public sphere was implicitly, even explicitly, white, male, literate, and propertied.

Again, we can add "heterosexual" to this last remark. "These traits could go unmarked, even grammatically," Warner states, while bodies deviating from these traits, thus marked subjects, "could only be acknowledged in discourse as the humiliating positivity of the particular."<sup>24</sup>

Given these terms, FGT's work opposes, on the one hand, the Enlightenment model of the bourgeois public sphere as comprised of disinterested individuals who put aside their particular private concerns and desires to rationally deliberate with other individuals on behalf of presumed equals called "we" or "us."<sup>25</sup> FGT's work slyly rejects the demand put upon individuals to realize a utopian self-abstraction, to "transcend the given realities of their bodies and their [social] status," to borrow Warner's words. As the artist asserted in a 1991 interview: "Meaning is created once something can be related to personal experience."<sup>26</sup> Which is to say, public discourse is always based on the particular.

On the other hand, it is not enough, and is even politically wrong-headed, to appreciate FGT's billboard only as a proud claiming of public discourse by, or on behalf of, a group of particularly marked subjects. For FGT's work does not align with identitarian challenges posed by minority groups to destabilize the universalizing conceits of the public sphere discourse. To champion the particular as a marked positivity, a goal pursued by most identity-oriented artists and activists, does little to disturb the foundational principle of the public sphere that positions the particular as marked in the first place. For the positivity of the particular may be tolerated or condemned, or may even be celebrated in



"Untitled", 1989  
Billboard  
Dimensions vary with installation  
Installation at Sheridan Square,  
New York, 1989



"Untitled", 1989  
Paint on wall  
Dimensions vary with installation  
Installation view of "Untitled" at Brooklyn  
Museum of Art, New York, 1989

the art world (is this celebration a form of mere tolerance?), but either way it is a mark of being "less than public."<sup>27</sup> The radicality of FGT's work lies in the insinuation of the particular in the place of abstraction, while simultaneously destabilizing the particular as a fixed positivity. And with this complex move, the artist accomplishes a remarkable reversal: everyone becomes a particularly marked subject, making it impossible for there to be an unmarked, invisible, hierarchy-determining point of reference. Which means no one is less than public either. It is as if FGT wanted to achieve nothing short of reorganizing the foundational principles of the public sphere so that we can newly (re)embrace the utopian dream of a social and political arena in which we can each think and care for all of us without prejudice. An arena in which, truly, "What you say will carry force not because of who you are but despite who you are."

But we do not live in such a utopia. It is perhaps because FGT understood too well what Warner calls the "minoritizing logic of domination"<sup>28</sup> that in the 1990s he moved away from making another work like the Sheridan Square billboard, a work that could easily or exclusively be classified as "gay art" or "gay activist art," a designation that surely indicates the work's status as a "humiliating positivity of the particular." In fact, the Sheridan Square billboard was one of the last of the black-and-white dateline pieces. FGT self-consciously shifted to a more ambiguous, non-thematic, and individuated exploration of the relationship between public history and personal memory – beginning in 1989 with his

portraits, which maintained the format and concerns of the datelines but focused on private experience as a point of departure for the understanding of the public.<sup>29</sup>

Although many art critics and art historians still tend to categorize FGT's work in terms of his identity as a gay artist,<sup>30</sup> the horizon of the public that his work continues to produce is far more expansive and encompassing. This public is an imaginary public, which is not to say that it exists only in the realm of the artist's private fantasy. Following Michael Warner, it means rather "the public is always in excess of its known social basis. . . . It must include strangers."<sup>31</sup> Warner explains:

A public might almost be said to be stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers – nations, religions, races, guilds – have manifest positive content. They select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership. One can address strangers in such contexts because a common identity has been established through independent means or institutions (creeds, armies, parties, and the like). A public, however, unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory. Strangers come into relationship by its means, though the resulting social relationship might be peculiarly indirect and unspecifiable. . . .

[Strangers] are no longer merely people whom one does not yet know; rather, an environment of strangerhood is the necessary premise of some of our most prized ways of being. Where otherwise strangers need to be on a path to commonality, in modern forms strangerhood is the necessary medium of commonality.<sup>32</sup>

It is perhaps because FGT intuited this necessity of strangerhood as the medium of commonality, even relationality, as the very basis of a public, that his art maintained such an improbable balance of being personal and impersonal at the same time. Maybe this is also related to what the artist meant when he imagined that he needed the participation of an unknown and unknowable public (strangers to the artist) for there to be a work at all, while claiming simultaneously that his work was for a public of only one, the most intimate one: his boyfriend, Ross.<sup>33</sup> What FGT allows, in a sense, is for all the viewers paying attention to his work to experience something intimate yet remain a stranger to the work and to one another, to recognize a commonality based not on identification but on distance. This is what FGT asks us to share: our connection and beholden-ness to one another not only as indefinite strangers but because we are indefinite strangers, and to understand this connection based on distance as a binding form of intimacy.<sup>34</sup>

#### A POSSIBILITY OF RENEWAL

Numerous critics have commented aplenty on the ways in which FGT reworked the idioms of minimalism, post-minimalism, and conceptual art to infuse them with "content," be it personal or political or both. They have appreciatively commended the artist for bringing back the rigorous anti-aesthetic reductivism and abstraction of the 1960s neo-avant-garde, but doing so in a way that allows for richness of meaning, giving expression to experiences of emotions and feelings – particularly of pleasure, beauty, and melancholy. In FGT's paper

stacks, for instance, they have seen the ghost of Donald Judd's austere and mute boxes, but with their hard-edged "machismo" transformed into a gentle and graceful whisper that speaks of loss, love, desire, death, and mourning.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, within the context of the 1990s AIDS crisis on the one hand and multiculturalist identity politics on the other, these critics have recognized an intelligent political consciousness at work charged with an astute yet subtle aesthetic sensibility. For instance, they saw in FGT's identically twinned objects (such as clocks, mirrors, strings of light, and, at least on one occasion, stacks of paper) not so much the assertion of serial industrial production or a reprisal of the readymade but coded signs for same-sex love and the poignant complexities of self-other relations in general. The candy spills, too, often titled to reference actual bodies of real persons, called attention to the specificity of bodies in terms of social identity and corporeal matter that "specific objects" of the 1960s ignored, repressed, or remained blind to.<sup>36</sup> Again, given the context of the AIDS epidemic, FGT's surrogate bodies, set up to atrophy and disappear, to "die" (although to be resurrected through replenishment), have been interpreted as charging the apparent apolitical anti-formalist formalism of yesteryears with an urgent sense of politicized embodiment. Representative of many such critics' assessments, Robert Storr remarked in 1996 that FGT "revived minimalist and conceptualist strategies and rescued them from merely academic elaboration,"<sup>37</sup> as if indeed the artist had raised the dead.

While such appreciations are sufficiently borne out by FGT's works when publicly displayed, there remains another aspect of this "revival" that is less visible although not any less significant. This "private" aspect of FGT's work – by which I do not mean aspects of the artist's biography but the behind-the-commercial-scenes contracts of transaction that regulate the work's conditions of ownership, exchange, and public presentation – effects a more radical, structural reworking of how the art market and art institutions operate than the more visible reworking of form and content of the art object as noted already. At first glance, the certificates of authenticity and ownership accompanying FGT's works, devised by the artist and his dealer, Andrea Rosen, starting around 1990 in order to manage the life and, significantly, the potential death of his art, appear very similar to those written for minimalist, post-minimalist, and conceptualist works. But, just as the appearance of his objects initially remind us of a Judd or a Flavin or a Morris only to subvert the common understanding of their familiar forms and operations, FGT's certificates ambivalently complicate what has become the expected, conventional function of such documents also. In fact, if FGT is to be historicized as one of the most important "critical" artists of the 1990s, someone who inherits the neo-avant-garde legacy in order to intervene in the ideological conditions sustained by a range of orthodox assumptions and practices within and outside the art world, his certificates would have to be viewed as a primary medium of such an accomplishment. Most importantly, this political imperative is realized through his use of the certificates to fulfill an aesthetic function. For what the critics and fans appreciate as the affective emotional resonance of FGT's art – associated with loss, desire, mortality, love, hope, absence, and longing – is bound to his work's characteristic openness to the possibilities of its own disappearance and reappearance as phenomenal forms, indeed to the artwork's death and renewal. And this permanently impermanent condition of transformation is put into motion

through the business and legalistic language of his certificates. The evolution of FGT's certificates through the 1990s – changing from a rather casual one-page memo to a more specific, detailed, obsessive, formal, multi-page document, fortified by muscular legalese – attests to the artist's (and his gallery's) growing recognition of, on the one hand, the certificate's importance in maintaining the integrity of the works and in tracking their circulation – that is, as supplementary administrative literature for quality control – and, on the other hand, its role as a determinant part of the artwork itself. As we will see, FGT utilized modes of exchange in the marketplace as integral rather than extrinsic to his work's artistic meaning.

To appreciate the complex and, at times, contradictory operations (and aspirations) of FGT's certificates, we first need to sketch the emergence of certificates of authenticity in general and the prevalent terms of their use today. Since the mid-1960s, with the “dematerialization” of the art object (into idea, landscape, time, body, action, etc.) and the adoption of materials and production methods not prone to revealing any evidence of the “hand of the artist,” certificates of authenticity have gained in significance as a mechanism to guarantee the singularity, originality, authenticity, and more fundamentally the identity of a work of art. In fact, in most cases there is no work without the certificate to secure its status as such. (As we will see in detail shortly, this is certainly the case for FGT's works that get remade, replenished, or entail some kind of continuous physical transformation involving third parties.<sup>38</sup>) Despite this, the function of such certificates is hardly acknowledged in contemporary art discourse and, with very few exceptions, remains peripheral to the concerns of most art historians and critics as merely a market-oriented, extra-artistic element that has little relevance to the integrity or meaning of the artwork.<sup>39</sup> Yet, if there is no guarantee that something is a work of art without a certificate – for instance, a row of bricks, pencil lines on a wall, a set of plywood boxes, a tube of fluorescent light, or a stack of paper, a pile of candies – then it is the certificate rather than “the work” that matters more, or does more work, one could say, in determining both the aesthetic and market value of “the work” in question (and, by extension, the cultural capital of the artist).

An additional reason for such administrative and discursive intervention to affirm the identity of a work of art is due to the split in the conception of artistic labor during the 1960s: between manual work on the one hand (the artwork as requiring physical exertion and skill or craft of the artist) and intellectual or mental work on the other (the artwork as realized at the point of its ideational conception by the artist).<sup>40</sup> Certificates of authenticity emerge, then, precisely at the historical juncture when the art world, particularly the art market, is faced with a pervasive destabilization of not only the concept of the art object but also the nature of artistic labor on a broad scale.<sup>41</sup> As such, certificates of authenticity seek to do more than secure the authenticity of a work of art. They represent a struggle to establish new terms or systems of valuation that can respond adequately to these complex shifts.

Generally speaking, certificates of authenticity are of two types. First are those that function as proofs of purchase of an object that has been made and already exists. These certificates confirm the authenticity of the work as indeed the “product” of the artist even if he or she did not literally fashion it. Such certificates are especially relevant for artists employing readymade strategies or



"Untitled" (North), 1993

Detail

15-watt light bulbs, extension cords, porcelain light sockets

Overall dimensions vary with installation

Twelve parts: 22 1/2 ft. in length with 20 ft. of extra cord each

Beyond door:

"Untitled" (Passport), 1991

White paper, endless copies

4 in. at ideal height x 23 5/8 x 23 5/8 in.

Installation view of Currents 22: Felix GonzalezTorres at Milwaukee Art Museum, 1993



or adopting the idiom of industrialized serial production, which usually involves outsourcing the work's fabrication to specialized factories or studios.<sup>42</sup> The second type of certificate functions as a statement of intent, usually a proposal for a work that will be realized at some point in the future. These certificates are typically accompanied by some kind of plan of action or instructions for construction, serving best artists engaged in large-scale installations and environmental art, or post-studio, project-based, and potentially site-specific endeavors. Despite the distinction I have drawn, however, most certificates of authenticity are a combination of both types in order to legitimate various states of materiality and immateriality that much of the art since the mid-1960s can take at different times. Given the assertions of conceptual art that prioritized idea over object, and with ambitious project-based art that can involve the indefinite postponement of the physical realization of a work (awaiting the right alignment of contingent factors, including physical, temporal, monetary, etc.), what might be called the range or zone of legitimacy for a work of art is now rather expansive. And with this expansion, the certificates have become more and more important, becoming synonymous with the work of art in many situations, especially when it comes to market exchange.

For example, while no museum will likely put on display a Donald Judd certificate of authenticity as itself a work of art, a Judd piece may enter its permanent collection only if it has an accompanying certificate, and even if the acquisition consists only of a certificate. Conversely, while a museum may display aluminum or plywood boxes as works by Donald Judd, if this museum does not own the proper paperwork for said boxes in their archives, they are classified as mere reproductions or exhibition copies and would not count as genuine works of art. The objecthood, materiality, and presence of a realized "specific object," even if carrying the artist's signature, were inadequate for Judd, which is

“Untitled” (Leaves of Grass), 1993  
15-watt light bulbs, extension cord,  
porcelain light sockets  
Overall dimensions vary with installation  
One part: 42 ft. in length with 20 ft. of extra cord  
and  
“Untitled” (Ischia), 1993  
15-watt light bulbs, extension cord,  
porcelain light sockets  
Overall dimensions vary with installation  
One part: 42 ft. in length with 20 ft. of extra cord  
Installation view of Lux I Lumen at  
Fundaci6 Joan Miro, Barcelona, 1997



surprising given his discourse emphasizing these aspects. The artist stipulated in his certificates of authenticity that the possession of a signed certificate and accompanying plans and instructions for construction (together referred to as “Document”) and not the object itself constituted proof of ownership.<sup>43</sup> Thus, although the certificate usually cannot stand in for the work, there is no “real” work without the certificate, and a sale of realized work without the certificate is void. Put more generally, the cultural belief in the singular material existence of an artwork as the repository of meaning and value is now displaced by the certificate as the primary site of such determination.

The certificate accompanying FGT’s “Untitled” (Lover Boys), 1991, a mound of candy individually wrapped in silver cellophane, ideally positioned in a corner and weighing 355 lbs., shares of the same phenomenon. It states: “A part of the intention of the work is that third parties may take individual candies from the pile. These individual candies and all individual candies taken from a pile collectively do not constitute a unique work of art nor can they be considered the piece. . . . The nature of this work is that its uniqueness is defined by its ownership, verified by a certificate of authenticity / ownership.”<sup>44</sup> Which is to say, the uniqueness of “Untitled” (Lover Boys) as a work of art resides neither in the candies nor their accumulated form, no matter how exactly one follows the artist’s instructions on the type of candy, the quantity (i.e., ideal weight), and their installation and distribution. Instead, in a confusing circularity of language, we are told that the uniqueness of the work is defined by ownership, which requires verification by the certificate, which, in turn, confirms authenticity of the work, which, in yet another turn, coming back to the beginning, is determined by ownership.

Right away, the critical reader will argue that such circularity of logic and language are motivated purely by commercial interests and the terms of the marketplace, that they are promoted by those agents, mainly dealers and

collectors, most invested in producing conditions of rarity and constructing a systemic means to determine uniqueness and authenticity in order to favor their own gain. And such a charge would not be completely unfounded. For in reviewing the thirty-plus-year record of communication and transactions of the paradigmatic case of Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, the well-known Italian collector of multiple works by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Irwin, James Turrell, among others, it is clear that Panza, and not the dealers or the artists, insisted on the need for signed certificates of authenticity for all works in his collection, including, or especially, the many works yet to be fabricated or realized.

But the certificates do more than calm the nerves of collectors who fear the uncertainty of their investment. Artists have come to rely on them equally as the primary means to control their work, to assert its originality and uniqueness, and to secure their authorship. With and through the certificates, many artists, including FGT, set the terms of fabrication and production, installation, and conditions of reproduction as matters of artistic and legal concern. Moreover, they have tried to extend their control over the work far beyond the point of sale, the traditional point of exchange when the artwork normally passes into the buyer's hands to become now his or her private property to do with as he or she wishes. But as the controversies that have arisen since the late 1980s around the Panza collection attest, particularly with reference to works by Donald Judd and Carl Andre, the ownership and rights over an artwork seem far from clear even with the certificates.<sup>45</sup>

This is because the certificate of authenticity has developed into something much more than a legal document certifying the authenticity of an artwork. It is even more than a bill of sale, a receipt for an exchange of an artwork (even if not yet realized) for a monetary sum. Most consequentially, it is a promissory note that requires a serious level of trust and faith for all parties involved. In addition to authenticating a piece as his or her own work, the artist gives his or her word that the work is and will always be unique. In the case of the artists in the Panza collection, this promise is made explicit with a clause stipulating that the artist will not make another work that is the same or even similar to the one being purchased. In return, the buyer promises to abide by a set of rules and procedures established by the artist vis-à-vis the artwork's production, installation, reproduction, and, in many cases, future resale or other means of transfer of ownership.<sup>46</sup> As such, the certificate does not attest to a past coming into being of an artwork so much as it anticipates its future existence in the hands of someone other than the artist. This transaction results in an extraordinary transposition of roles: the artist who traditionally serviced buyers puts the buyers at his service now, granting them the right to not only claim the work as their property but also to absorb the ethical and financial responsibilities of making and / or maintaining the work exclusively on the artist's terms. This relation of obligation, in fact, is what is exchanged in the sale of the work. The certificate, then, can be viewed as a contract of either collaboration or a special agreement of outsourcing, depending on one's point of view.

Here, we are confronted with an altogether different type of interactivity than the kind of sociality of audience, viewers, or a public that occurs in front of or around the work when it is on display as discussed earlier. For all the talk of the viewer or reader as an interpretive author in a theoretical sense, we now confront

confront the owner of the artwork as a privileged interpreter of the artist's intentions, legally entitled to serve as the artist or author surrogate. FGT, unlike his predecessors, such as Judd, Andre, and Flavin, made a virtue of this surrogacy, foreseeing in his certificates the impossibility of his ongoing control and the likelihood of alterations that will inevitably come as the artwork moves into an indefinite future. The certificate for "Untitled" (A Corner of Baci), 1990, like so many of his certificates, initially gives detailed specifications on the material for the piece (regular size Perugina Baci chocolates), ideal quantity (42 lbs.), and even the address and phone number of its distributor as well as the name of a Perugina company sales representative. But immediately following this information, the certificate allows, "If these candies are not available, a similarly wrapped candy containing love messages may be used."<sup>47</sup> FGT's instructions for installation also tend to be exact in its ideal description but open-ended in its potential realization. For "Untitled" (31 Days of Bloodworks), 1991, a work consisting of thirty-one 16 x 20-inch canvases, the certificate's instruction reads: "The canvases are marked with an order. Ideally they may be installed in order, on one wall, in one line, with 1 1/2 inches (4 centimeters) between each canvas." But then other options: "Alternatively, the canvases may be configured to the owner's liking. All canvases may be installed together as one piece, or may be installed individually or in groups of any number of canvases."<sup>48</sup>

Such an attitude could not be further from the strictness of many of FGT's predecessors who used the certificates to prevent interpretative variations or practical adjustments, including alternative uses of similar materials or installation modifications to accommodate the specific conditions of a given exhibition context.<sup>49</sup> In other words, even if the owner was granted the legal right to fabricate a work, usually at his or her own expense, there was little or no leeway for the owner to make any decisions that did not require the approval of the artist first or in the end. No artist was more fixated than Donald Judd on achieving total control over the production and presentation of his art. Even years after the sale of numerous works to Panza (many in their unrealized state), the famed minimalist insisted on "correcting" those works, again at the owner's expense, that he deemed inconsistent with his vision or falling short of his standards. After a trip to Italy in the summer of 1980, for example, which included Judd's first visit to the Varese estate where Count Panza had installed some of his collection, the artist registered his discontent with several pieces fabricated by Panza and stressed the importance of his direct involvement in the fabrication and installation of other works being prepared for a handful of upcoming exhibitions in Europe. Although the relationship between the artist and collector at this point showed no signs of the rancor and bitterness that were to characterize it a few years later (the gloves come off around 1984), Judd's letters of 1980 build upon the stipulations of his certificates that reserve the final approval of a Panza fabrication as the prerogative of the artist. Soon after Judd's visit to Varese, Panza received notice from one of the artist's assistants that: "It remains very important . . . that Don see the final execution of his work or that his representatives see it and communicate with him. As you know, Don feels very strongly that no piece exist as his if it does not fully and precisely express his intentions. The meaning of the work is achieved only through the quality of its fabrication and the correctness of its installation."<sup>50</sup> Accompanying this notice was a list of what Judd would soon enough consider "infractions." In Judd's view, the installation of the

untitled galvanized iron wall piece at Varese was unsatisfactory because the floor of the room was not flat enough. To solve the problem, he suggested either trading the work for another that would be okay in the room or that Panza reinstall the piece in a different space with a floor that would be acceptable to the artist. Judd also found the chrome screws used on a number of plywood pieces too shiny and bright; he requested that they be changed to galvanized iron screws. And on a couple of rolled steel pieces, he thought the surface “looked a little rough,” implying that they required refinishing.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, such exacting attention to detail is perhaps what distinguishes a box by Donald Judd as a work of art and a similar box by Panza as a mere approximation. But the purpose of my elaboration of Judd’s case is not to argue for or against the artist’s right to maintain control over his work beyond a sale. Rather, I want to draw attention to the profound difference between Judd’s use of the certificates to protect the work of art as a singular, fixed, and static ideal, as a perfect object that exceeds the history, context, and social relations that make it possible, and whose perfection is determined only and ultimately by the artist, and FGT’s use of the certificates to leave open the possibility of the work’s physical transformation, and to relay the decision-making regarding that transformation to the current owner. In fact, to own a FGT work is not exactly to possess it but to confront varied aspects of making it and remaking it, over and over again (including the option not to make it at all), with each effort reaching for an ideal, by definition imaginary, that is always provisional, and that continuously slips away, like all objects of desire. Ownership thus involves more than simply delivering the “endless supply” of paper or candy to replenish the work when the public has taken away pieces from the cumulative stacks or piles. I believe the point of FGT’s certificates was to work against the security of his own versions of the stacks or piles, strings of light or beaded curtains, as unchanging, original, and finite ideals for eternity, which others coming after him must worship as immanently better than all other versions. Instead, he designed his certificates so that the work itself could be infinite, always particular in its phenomenal presence, always dying but never dead, always becoming new again.<sup>52</sup>

This reminds me of the following passage from Kaja Silverman’s essay “Twilight of Posterity,” an extraordinary meditation that rethinks the movements of history, preservation, mortality, and memory vis-à-vis a project by Irish artist James Coleman. Here she writes as if diagnosing Judd’s fetishistic aesthetic attachments:

In the vain hope of becoming an individual, the modern subject attempted to achieve the “permanence, identity, and substantiality” of a statue – to become, as Lacan puts it, like the face of an actor “when a film is suddenly stopped in mid-action.” He also sought to induce this state of “formal stagnation” in the exterior world.

Then, as if speaking for and through FGT’s art:

Far from being the enemy of form, death is what animates it, what allows things to be something other in the present than they were in the past. And this axiom pertains as much to the psyche as it does to the phenomenal world; all truly vital subjects are constantly emerging anew out of the ashes of their own extinction.<sup>53</sup>



“Untitled” (Portrait of the Cincinnati Art Museum)  
 1994  
 Paint on wall  
 Dimensions vary with installation  
 Installation view at Cincinnati Art Museum, 1995

Of course, the fact that FGT was confronting his own death (thought to be immanent in the early 1990s given his HIV-positive status), while producing artworks that will continuously and forever “die” in order that they emerge anew from their “extinction,” adds another powerful dimension to the poignancy that already charges his art. This is not to say, however, that he completely relinquished control over his work. For the artist, creating a work that does not resist its own “death,” but instead embraces it, was initially a controlling act of destruction to preemptively deal with the pains of loss in his personal life. He said about one of his large candy pieces:

This work originated from my fear of losing everything. This work is about controlling my own fear. My work cannot be destroyed. I have destroyed it already, from day one. The feeling is almost like when you are in a relationship with someone and you know it’s not going to work out. From the very beginning you know that you don’t really have to worry about it not working out because you simply know that it won’t. The person then cannot abandon you, because he has already abandoned you from day one –

CNN 1980 Black Monday 1987 Berlin Wall 1989 Penelope 1999 Great Society 1964 Venice 1985 Manhattan  
fourth Street 1993 Sloan-Kettering 1995 L.A. 1990 Sprengel Museum 1997 George Nelson Clocks 1993 A





Left:  
*"Untitled" (Water)*, 1995  
 Plastic beads and metal rod  
 Dimensions vary with installation  
 and  
*"Untitled"*, 1989  
 Paint on wall  
 Dimensions vary with installation  
 Installation view of *Carnegie International*  
 1999/2000 at Carnegie Museum of Art,  
 Pittsburgh, 1999

Above:  
*"Untitled" (Portrait of the Fabric Workshop,  
 A Gift to Kippy)*, 1994  
 Paint on wall  
 Dimensions vary with installation  
 Installation view in the studio of  
 The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia, for  
*Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 1994

cannot disappear. This work cannot be destroyed the same way other things in my life have disappeared and have left me. I destroyed it myself instead. I had control over it and this is what has empowered me. But it is a very masochistic kind of power. I destroy the work before I make it.<sup>54</sup>

It is striking that the artist viewed the ultimate act of taking control, of becoming empowered as an author, to be found in a masochistic negation, a paradoxical assertion of identity and power through the "death" of his artwork, and by extension self-negation as author. The radical implications of such an outlook are the starkest when we consider his "portrait" series originating in 1989, which is structured like his "datelines," that is, as a sequence of words and dates evenly spaced as a running line of text and numbers, but painted directly on ideally contiguous walls of a given room, just below where the ceiling meets the walls, as a frieze along the room's entire perimeter. As is well known, these unorthodox portraits do not offer visual likenesses of their subjects, nor do they narrate their life stories in any conventional sense. Like the discontinuous events and dates cited in the



Sheridan Square billboard, FGT's portraits offer a non-chronological, "incoherent," or open set of events and dates that frame a void, in this case the space of the room in which the work is installed, whether this be in someone's home or in a museum. The specific events and dates constituting the content of these portraits are a mix of personally significant moments chosen by the portrait's subjects and historically and culturally significant moments chosen by the artist. Their juxtapositions produce a tension in which the "sitter's" private moments become contrapuntally charged by the public ones and vice versa. Simultaneously, the spare inventory of past events, literally framing a given space, "captions" the activities taking place within it, underscoring the constancy of the past as the grounds or the ghost of the present.

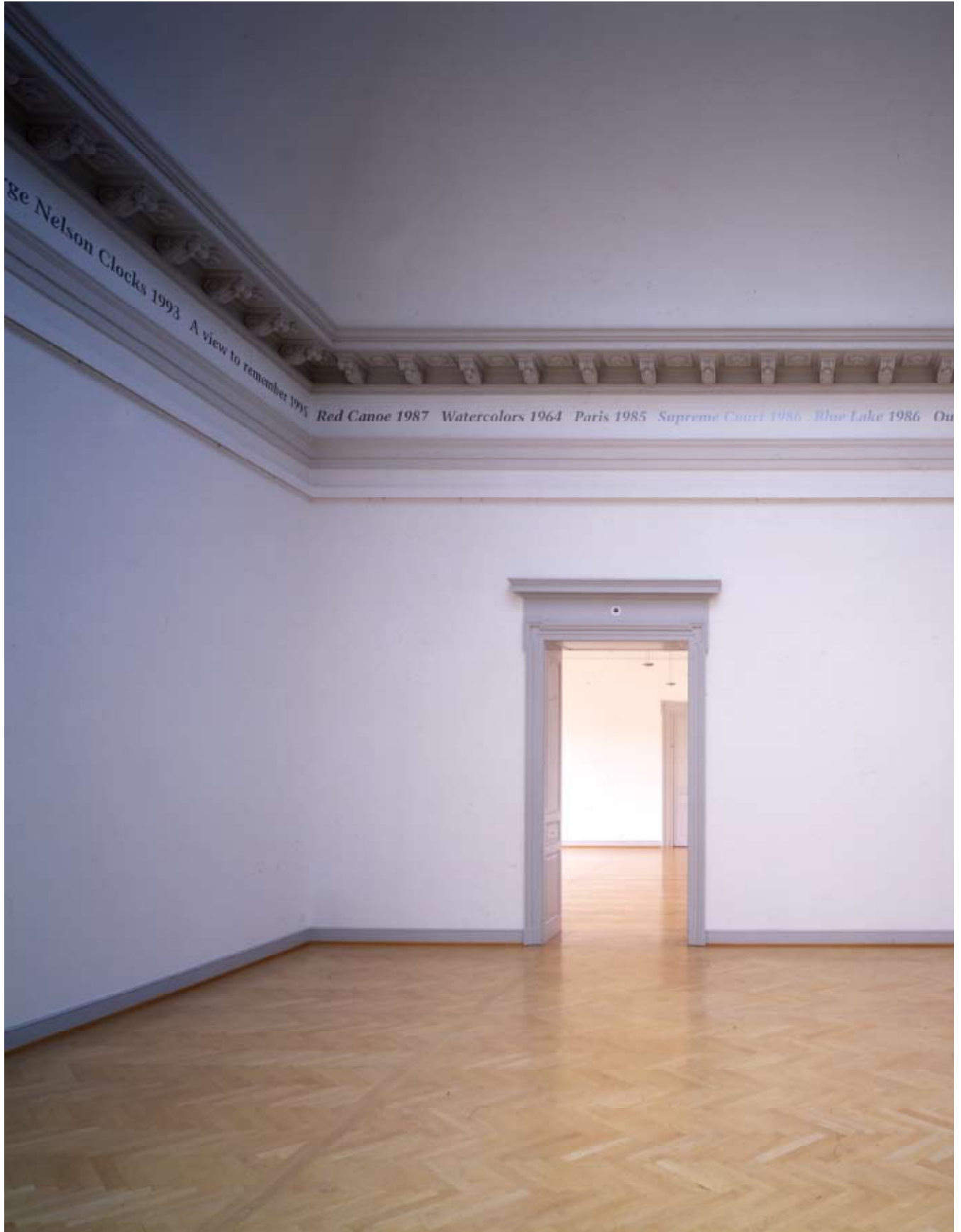
In addition to the unusual step of allowing the subjects of the portraits to help determine the portrait's content, FGT's certificate of authenticity for these works grants that, "The owner has the right to extend or contract the length of the portrait, by adding or subtracting events and their dates, and / or change the location of the portrait at any time."<sup>55</sup> Which is to say, the genre of the portrait is even further radicalized here. It is no longer a representation capturing the external likeness or the timeless "essence" or "soul" of a subject but a flexible and alterable one that can accommodate not only contingencies of a particular location but also the changing self-perceptions, priorities, memories, or desires of the portrait's owner / subject. Indeed, with the option to add or subtract events and dates within the portrait without the artist's approval or consent, FGT makes the work completely vulnerable to potentially limitless changes and unpredictable transformations as dictated by the owner of the portrait.

All of FGT's portraits are set up this way. In theory then, if not in practice, they can materialize anywhere, any time. Furthermore, they are open to continuous editing and rewriting to accommodate a "self" that is both ever changing and imagined or remembered in ever-changing ways. But who imagines and remembers this self? Who can say an addition or deletion is acceptable? Given the fact that most subjects of the portraits own their portraits, and given the rights defined by accompanying certificates, one may presume that the subjects themselves have the authority to change their portraits at their discretion. But the terms of the work's potential transformations raises numerous other questions that go beyond the legal right of the portrait's owner. For instance, what are, or should there be, some criteria - ethical, aesthetic, legal - regulating alterations to these portraits beyond the whim or wish of the individual portrait subjects? If so, how can such criteria be determined and by whom, given the fact that the artist relinquished his prerogative to do so? Are all revisions and updates equally legitimate? How much and what kind of changes can occur before a portrait becomes a representation of an utterly different subject than initially "pictured," until it is also no longer recognizable as a work by FGT? What values and presumptions are being promoted when we even raise such questions? While to question the lack of measures for control for the portraits may be going against the spirit of FGT's intentions for the work, the uncertain terrain that the artist leaves for us in terms of the status of a subject, a portrait, and the work of art seems precisely to be the point of the work. The significance of this series does not rest with the portraits' extreme openness to future change but what this openness demands of those who take ownership of them in the place of the artist

It is at once disturbing and wondrous to realize that FGT initiates a process in these works that allows for the complete erasure of his own contribution as the portraitist, and with it the history of the exchange between the artist and the owner that resulted in the particular formulation of the “original” portrait. With every decision to “manifest” a version of a portrait,<sup>56</sup> the particular owner, in contemplating possibilities of additions and deletions, bears the burden of recalling the artist’s presence in his or her life, the intimate time and thoughts that they shared as part of initially “composing” his or her own history and identity. In this way, FGT’s portraits function less as representations of discrete subjects and more as indexes of relations, or even memories of those relations. The lesson of the portraits is that relations define subjects as much as the reverse. (Indeed, many of the portraits are of couples, that is, of shared lives. Some are not even of persons but of institutions - there are portraits of museums, for instance, and one of an airline company.) This is an unprecedented model of a portrait that forces its subjects to “own” it in more ways than one. They become authors of it; all portraits convert into self-portraits. But the self-portrait in this case is a mutable series of (re)collections of past relations, traces of others’ presences, as constitutive of the self.

“*Untitled*”, 1989, a portrait piece that is unusually without a parenthetical subtitle, is in fact FGT’s self-portrait and provides the most extreme case of the artist’s “masochistic” logic. First exhibited in 1989 at the Brooklyn Museum, it initially consisted of seven entries and seven dates: *Red Canoe 1987 Paris 1985 Blue Flowers 1984 Harry the Dog 1983 Blue Lake 1986 Interferon 1989 Ross 1983*. By 2002, six years after the artist’s death, the eleventh version of “*Untitled*” was exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, now comprising sixty-six entries and sixty-six dates. The portrait of FGT would seem to be growing longer and the content keeps expanding and changing, as the certificate for the work allows. One could argue, however, that this “evolution” of the portrait means that the work can no longer be considered a self-portrait, as it has changed so much not only since its 1989 version but also because the changes to it since 1996, the year of the artist’s death, have been made by third parties no matter what legal authority they might have had to make such changes. Further complicating the situation is the fact that this portrait is now co-owned by two *museums*, not even persons, sharing the rights and responsibilities of rewriting FGT’s self-portrait each time it is exhibited or loaned to another institution. A plethora of new questions concerning procedure, rights and responsibilities, as well as parameters of authority arise again: Who makes the decisions on additions or deletions to FGT’s self-portrait within the context of the current state of its ownership? How can two museums, even if represented by single figureheads each (chief curators, for example), decide on the legitimacy or illegitimacy, of the specific value - historical, political, aesthetic, or sentimental- of an entry that ostensibly relates to an artist who is dead? Would they take turns or come to some agreement each time? More generally, what does this mean for the category of “self-portrait,” when its phenomenal form enfolds the selective history of not one, but two institutions that co-own it?

As we project into the future, say fifty or sixty years from now, and imagine a scene in which chief curators representing each museum, never having met the artist, convene to decide on what to add to or delete from FGT’s self-



ge Nelson Clocks 1993 A view to remember 1995 Red Canoe 1987 Watercolors 1964 Paris 1985 Supreme Court 1986 Blue Lake 1986 Ou



"Untitled", 1989

Paint on wall

Dimensions vary with installation

Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* at  
Kunstverein St. Gallen Kunstmuseum, 1997

portrait, one cannot help but wonder about the extraordinary ambiguity of the situation. As museum representatives, each curator will act in ways beholden to their respective institutional identities and histories. At the same time, they will have to determine the limits and implications of their decisions in relation to what they imagine to be not only the wish of the artist but also the artist himself. The difficulty of the situation will become only more exacerbated if the work is sold or otherwise transfers to a new owner in the future, because the new owner then will have to contend with the history of the work's transformation (that is, the prior owners' decisions on formulating the portrait) on top of the concern to "depict" the artist. Given such a set-up, it is not improbable and is indeed likely that the artist will disappear, with the portrait becoming a representation of something utterly foreign to FGT, or at least far from the view we have of the artist today. As such, "*Untitled*" will inevitably become, if it hasn't already, a portrait less of FGT and more a testament to the desire for the artist among the living, either in the form of recollection and memory or as fantasy and projection, or a combination of both. Since FGT put no real limits on such dreaming, there is a strong possibility that the artist's self-portrait will become distorted beyond recognition, or more severely, that the artist will be forgotten even within his own portrait. But the issue of fidelity to the subject seems beside the point here since nothing of FGT's practice is proposed as a reliable constant.

In the co-ownership agreement accompanying the most recent version of the certificate of authenticity / ownership for "*Untitled*", drafted on the occasion of the work's sale to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Art Institute of Chicago (2002), the following paragraph appears:

Not only did Felix know that he would not be alive to determine the work's future form, and so was indebted to the owner's involvement, but Felix: firmly believed that change was the only way to make the work remain permanent and relevant. He often said that if the work was not culturally relevant at any moment in time, it should not be manifested. The majority of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's works foretell of the necessity for future alterations - the original candies will no longer exist, the means of billboard advertisements will no doubt change.... He was inspired to imagine that the future would actually look different. It was the owner, the caretaker that he entrusted with this work's evolution. In direct relationship to his own portrait, the rules and guidelines and intentions of these portrait works create a forum for perpetual vitality I life. The perpetuation of his life without stagnation.<sup>57</sup>

But, in fact, the vitality and life that are perpetuated through FGT's "*Untitled*" self-portrait are not only those of the artist but also significantly the entire art world apparatus that must transform its rules - for purchasing, selling, gifting, loaning, exhibiting, reproducing, and preserving - in order to remain relevant itself. His certificates testify to this necessity. If FGT was motivated by thoughts of his own mortality to imagine a future that would be different, those who own or are engaged in exhibiting and taking care of his work must also imagine their mortality (individual or institutional) and embrace the openness to change that his certificates insist upon and seek to protect.<sup>58</sup> The eloquent

description of FGT's intentions cited above is, in fact, a retroactive attribution authored by Andrea Rosen as the executor of the artist's estate. As such, the certificate is becoming a form of recollection and remembrance, as well as a means to articulate longing and desire, as it seeks to paradoxically secure the vulnerable and open-ended future of FGT's legacy.

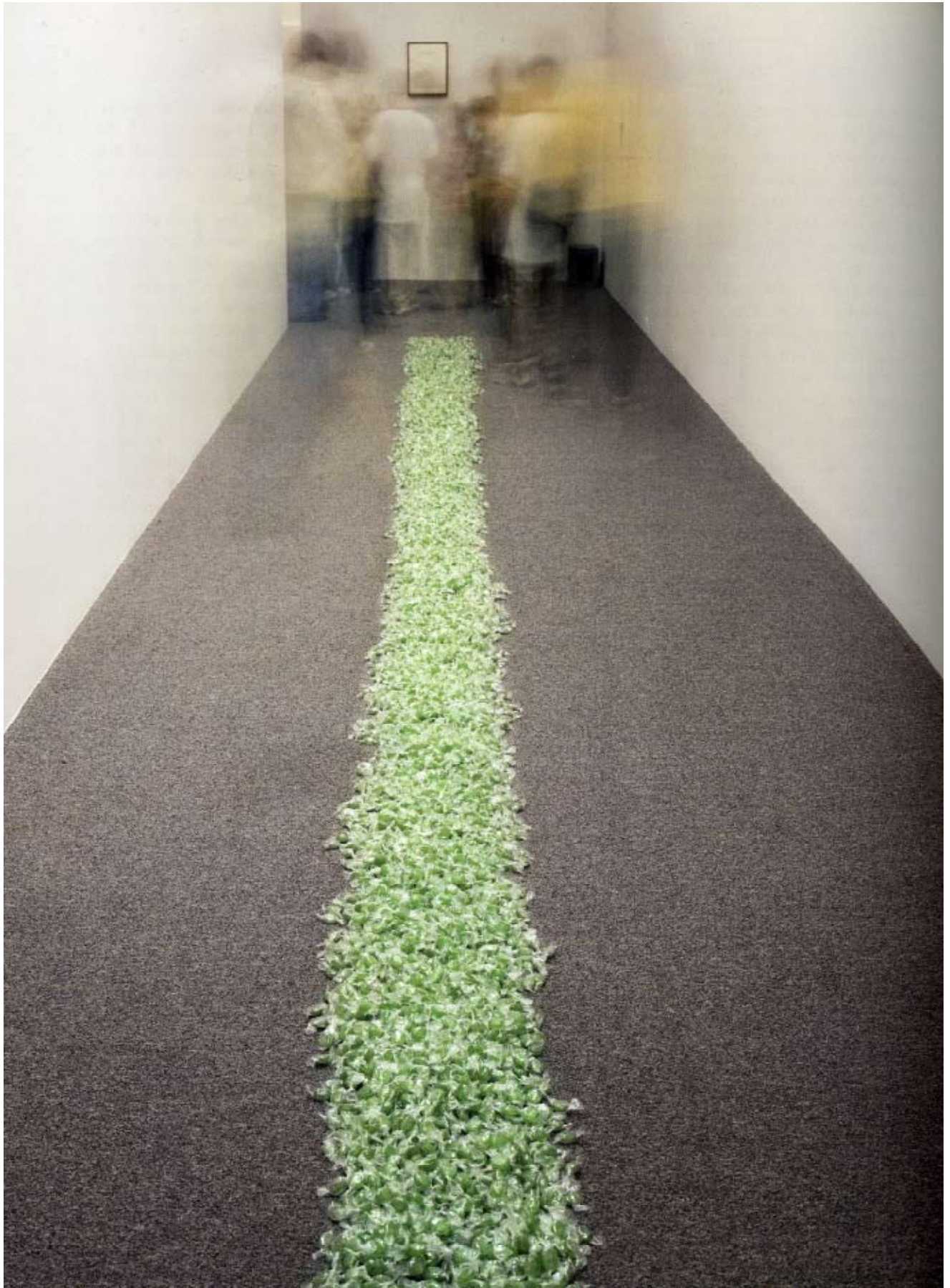
In relinquishing his authorship and risking loss of control of his work in a conventional sense, FGT secured the possibility of always emerging anew as incorporated into someone else's memories, absorbed into the life of another, including that of institutions. This is a move that is analogous to the piece of candy (from the artist) that gets ingested (disappears) to become one with the body and form of another. Thus, FGT's gamble is not only with his artwork but also with himself. Just as he "destroys" his artwork in order to make it, he initiates his own "disappearance" in order that he may always be. He figured out a way for his artworks to continue being, not as static, frozen objects but as an always becoming. And he insinuated himself into history in the same way. He did not try to declare: "I existed" or "I was here." He worked hard not to become a "statue" but to be absorbed into the world as itself a form of becoming, to become part of other's being limitlessly, forever. In this way, facing death, he fashioned his own dispersal, giving a whole new meaning to the concept of the "death of the author."

#### A FRAGILE TRUCE

A possibility of renewal, a chance to share, a fragile truce....I've come to the last and the most enigmatic of the remarks that were jotted by FGT on the back of his golden hour snapshot. Within the context of the full message, these words describe FGT's sense of what the city of Los Angeles had offered him, things he felt grateful for. To a large extent, I think I understand the first two attributes well enough, at least enough to take the liberties I have taken to think through their implications in relation to his art. But what did he mean by "fragile truce"? What did it mean *for* him? Truce between what, I wonder? Between his body and his disease? Between desire and fate? Isn't such a truce always fragile?

Truce is a temporary reprieve during an ongoing struggle or conflict between opposing forces, an agreement between adversaries to leave each other alone, to stop fighting for a while. It is a suspension, in other words, in an artificially constructed zone of unreality, an imaginary stopping of time, and a vulnerable state of peace. In the end, I have no conclusion about what Felix meant by fragile truce. But I would like to think that he was describing love. Since love is a fragile truce hovering between self-rescue and self-obliteration.

A friend once told me that Rossmore Avenue was FGT's favorite street in Los Angeles. This was not only because it is the street on which Ravenswood Apartments is located but also because the street bespoke the artist's desire. The street name literally declares: More Ross. I do not know for certain if this story is true, but when I drive past Rossmore Avenue now, I imagine FGT's longing for more Ross. I also notice the light. It reminds me of the photograph I saw in Chris and Ann's living room, of the golden hour upon the Hollywood Hills. I never saw Felix in this light, but I know that others did. I know that he was loved in this light.





Clockwise from left:

*“Untitled” (Rossmore II)*, 1991  
 Green candies individually wrapped  
 in cellophane, endless supply  
 Overall dimensions vary with installation  
 Ideal weight: 75 lb.  
 Installation view of *Work Ethic* at Baltimore  
 Museum of Art, Baltimore, 2003

*“Untitled” (Rossmore II)*, 1991  
 Green candies individually wrapped  
 in cellophane, endless supply  
 Overall dimensions vary with installation  
 Ideal weight: 75 lb.

*“Untitled” (Rossmore II)*, 1991  
 Green candies individually wrapped in cellophane,  
 endless supply  
 Overall dimensions vary with installation  
 Ideal weight: 75 lb  
 Installation view of *Work Ethic* at Wexner Center  
 for the Arts, Columbus, 2004





<sup>2</sup> Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 27. Although snapshots taken and distributed by FGT during his lifetime to friends and acquaintances have gained much art world interest in recent years as a significant aspect of the artist's oeuvre, the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation considers such materials "functioning non-art." For clarification on this designation, see Andrea Rosen, "'Untitled' (The Neverending Portrait)," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1 (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz, 1997), 45.

<sup>3</sup> See also David Deitcher's essay in the same volume and in this volume, pp. 317-28.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Robert Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," *Art Press* no. 198 (January 1995): 30. In this volume, pp. 229-39.

Since the early 1990s, the discourse on public art has benefited from a more rigorous engagement with critical theory and political philosophy. A major contribution in this regard is Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). See also Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 57. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 57. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

Bourriaud asserts this very point himself at the end of his book, couched in the glossary section under the heading "Co-existence criterion." *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

I am paraphrasing Michael Warner's thoughts here regarding the definition of the public. His book *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002) will be taken up in greater detail in the next section below.

<sup>16</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Statement," pamphlet produced in conjunction with Sheridan Square billboard project (New York: Public Art Fund, 1990), n.p. In this volume, p. 198.

<sup>17</sup> David Deitcher, "How Do You Memorialize a Movement that Isn't Dead?" *Village Voice*, June 27, 1989, 93. In this volume, pp. 201-03.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Watney, "In Purgatory: The Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Parkett* 39 (March 1994): 41. In this volume, pp. 333-47.

<sup>19</sup> Attributed to the artist in Deitcher, "How Do You Memorialize a Movement that Isn't Dead?" 93.

<sup>20</sup> Warner, 167.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-66.

For the "classic" theorization of the bourgeois public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November-December 1991): 87. In this volume, pp. 39-51. The artist often said that the public - the realm of Language, Father, Law - contains, regulates, or, in the artist's words, "intercepts" private experience, the subjective realm of dreaming, fantasy, and desire. He sought to reverse this relation or at least interrupt the colonizing force of the public as he understood it.

<sup>24</sup> Warner, 167.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

FGT's thoughts concerning this shift were communicated to curator Anne Umland as he prepared for his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. See Umland's personal archive, notes regarding their conversation of March 29, 1991.

<sup>26</sup> For example, in what will likely be a highly influential textbook survey of twentieth-century art by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, FGT's art appears as paradigmatic instances of "queering of art" and "gender trouble" in the late 1980s. The authors of the survey assert: "Gonzalez-Torres was influenced by poststructuralist critiques of the subject. Yet his art is concerned more with the making of a gay subjectivity than with its unmaking, for the simple reason that such a deconstruction would assume that gay identity is secure and central in a way that cannot be assumed in our heterosexist society. In his art, then, Gonzalez-Torres attempts to carve out of heterosexual space a lyrical-elegiac place for gay subjectivity and history."

See Foster, et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, vol. 2: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 610. My goal for this essay is to go beyond such implicit yet undeniable identification of artwork with artist and to work against the limitations that even favorable readings like this one imposes upon FGT's art. In doing so, I want to reveal the subtle ways in which such limitations, even when they appear otherwise, continue to position certain artists of color and / or sexual orientation as "marked," if not visible only as "humiliating positivity of the particular."

<sup>31</sup> Warner, 73.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 75. For Warner, "participation" in the public is constituted by mere attention to its address.

<sup>33</sup> The artist made such an assertion frequently. See, for instance, the interview with Tim Rollins in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 5-31, excerpted in this volume, pp. 68-76; the conversation between the artist and Joseph Kosuth in *A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), 76-81 and in this volume, pp. 348-58.

<sup>34</sup> In this sense, FGT's work reaches for what Gregg Bordowitz, following Emmanuel Levinas, has called an impossible ethical ideal: "Intimacy is an unresolvable dichotomy. One can not be an "I" without an Other, yet one can't fully become identical with an Other. Intimacy is a paradox. Being for the Other is an ethical ideal, absolutely necessary, fundamentally inescapable, and ultimately impossible." Gregg Bordowitz, *AIDS Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 278.

<sup>35</sup> Anna Chave's reading of minimal art as embodying a corporate and even militaristic "rhetoric of power" has been controversial for rendering its aesthetic program a hyper-masculinist project. See Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 (January 1990): 44-63. Interestingly, FGT at one point thought of his "simulation" of minimalist forms as a kind of drag performance. See his interview with Robert Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," 32.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Fried saw in minimalist objects a stand-in for humans, an anthropomorphism that the minimalists denied and Fried found a problematic aspect that linked minimal art to theater. See his "Art and Objecthood," first published in *Artforum* in 1967 and reprinted in numerous anthologies, including Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Robert Storr, "Setting Traps for the Mind and Heart," *Art in America* 84 (January 1996): 76. Characteristically, Storr means to assert an anti-theory position to say that FGT's work is free from theory's oppressive influence. Yet, as is well-known, FGT was highly influenced by and engaged with the writings of many theorists, including Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, and Sigmund Freud.

<sup>38</sup> In addition to works that are open to physical transformations, paired and multi-part photo pieces, drawings, paintings and puzzles are accompanied by certificates. Only single puzzles, photographs, photostats, bloodwork drawings, bloodwork and double fear paintings and bottles within FGT's oeuvre do not come with a certificate.

<sup>39</sup> The exceptions to this general neglect, as far as I am aware, are David Deitcher's essay in this volume, pp. 317-28, first published in FGT's catalogue raisonné in 1997, and Martha Buskirk's book *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Marcel Duchamp enacts this split earlier in the twentieth century, of course, with his readymades, but it is in the postwar period that it becomes more pervasive and defining of the conditions of artistic production. See Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (Baltimore and University Park, PA: The Baltimore Museum of Art and The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003) for a thorough consideration of this problematic as it emerges in the 1960s and continues into the present.

<sup>41</sup> There is a historical rhyming of this shift with the broader socioeconomic shift away from manufacturing to the service and information economy in the 1960s if not earlier. This has promoted a hierarchy of labor within contemporary art, with intellectual and mental labor, often of managerial variety, trumping manual labor as the labor that really counts. Indeed, this hierarchical outlook has become such a norm in advanced art practices today that it is hardly noticed, never mind questioned. For instance, who these days seriously asks about the actual labor involved in the making of a Jeff Koons sculpture or a Thomas Hirshhorn shrine?

<sup>42</sup> See Josiah McElheny, "Invisible Hand," *Artforum* (Summer 2004): 209-10.

<sup>43</sup> Count Giuseppe Panza, the collector for whom Judd produced his certificates of authenticity, wanted his works to bear the artist's signature as the mark of authentication. It is Judd who "teaches" Panza that a signature is not necessary once proof of ownership is supplied by the certificate of authenticity. Unless otherwise indicated, this and subsequent references in this essay to the Panza collection, including details concerning certificates of authenticity for specific works and-

- correspondences with specific artists, are based on materials found in the Giuseppe Panza Papers, 1956-90, in the Special Collections of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.
- <sup>44</sup> The one-page certificate for this work (ARG# GF 1991-9) is dated October 1995. Another work of the same title, “*Untitled*” (*Lover Boys*), also from 1991, made of white candies with blue spiral and individually wrapped in clear cellophane (ARG# GF 1991-15), also to be positioned ideally in a corner, is accompanied by a three-page certificate of authenticity / ownership dated July 2001. With the artist’s death, the certificates continue to evolve for each work, an aspect that is addressed toward the end of this essay.
- <sup>45</sup> For details regarding the specific controversy involving Andre, Judd, and Panza, see Susan Hapgood, “Remaking Art History,” *Art in America* (July 1990): 115-23, 181. See also Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, chapter 1, as well as Kwon, *One Place After Another*, chapter 2.
- <sup>46</sup> In FGT’s case, some certificates stipulate that a work cannot be put up for auction, nor can the owner sell the work without first offering the work to the Andrea Rosen Gallery for first right of refusal.
- <sup>47</sup> The certificate from which this quote is drawn is for work identified by the Andrea Rosen Gallery as ARG #GF 1990-20, signed in December 1993.
- <sup>48</sup> From certificate for ARG# GF 1991-28, signed in December 1994.
- <sup>49</sup> For example, Dan Flavin wrote to Panza: “You purchased *finite* installations of fluorescent light from me.... You have no right whatsoever to recreate, to interpret, to adapt, to extend, to reduce them.” Cited in Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Art*, 43.
- <sup>50</sup> James Dearing, letter to Giuseppe Panza, July 1980.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> In the majority of FGT’s certificates of authenticity, especially after 1991, the term “manifestation” is used to describe the physical realizations of the artist’s works, instead of, for instance, reproduction, copy, simulation, approximation, replication, etc. This seems a very self-conscious choice that coincides with the artist’s change in position regarding the possibility of more than one manifestation of a single work being exhibited at any one time. The adoption of the word manifestation moves the works away from the conceptual framework of original-copy and subtly insists on all the repetitions, or every manifestation, as a unique work. The word “manifestation” also implies the physical presence of a work as a material appearance, like an apparition, and not so much an object.
- <sup>53</sup> Kaja Silverman, “The ‘Twilight of Posterity,’” from her forthcoming book *Flesh of My Flesh*. The Coleman project that inspires the essay is from summer 2003 at the Louvre, for which there remains no documentation.
- <sup>54</sup> Quoted in Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1995), 122. It is highly likely that the specific work in question is “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), since the artist spoke of this work in almost identical terms in his conversation with Robert Storr, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être, un espion,” 32. Here, FGT says, “There was no other consideration involved except that I wanted to make an art work that could disappear, that never existed, and it was a metaphor for when Ross was dying. So it was a metaphor that I would abandon this work before this work abandoned me. I’m going to destroy it before it destroys me. That was my little amount of power when it came to this work. I didn’t want it to last, because then it couldn’t hurt me.”
- <sup>55</sup> The particular wording quoted here is from the certificate for “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of the Cincinnati Art Museum*), 1994 (ARG# GF 1994-9).
- <sup>56</sup> See note 52 on the use of the term “manifest” in FGT’s certificates.
- <sup>57</sup> Co-ownership agreement accompanying the certificate for “*Untitled*”, 1989 (ARG# GF 1989-20),4.
- <sup>58</sup> It is interesting to note that the more recent certificates begin to accommodate for the possible “death” of the Andrea Rosen Gallery in the future.



"Untitled", 1995  
Billboard  
Dimensions vary with installation  
Installation in Malmö for on the sublime at  
Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art,  
Malmö, 1999

# Art in America

January 1996

## Setting Traps for the Mind and Heart

*Building on Minimalist and Conceptualist precedents, Felix Gonzalez-Torres uses mundane materials to create works that combine emotional resonance and cerebral appeal. Two traveling retrospectives reveal this Cuban-born artist's effort to forge a "democratic" art that involves private as well as public experience.*



**BY ROBERT STORR**

**A** Shimmering silver carpet stretches along the institutionally white floor. It measures some 6 by 12 feet and is made of hundreds upon hundreds of foil-wrapped candies. Entering the room under the watchful eye of their mother, two young boys race toward the rectangular mirage and fill their pockets without restraint. From beside the door through which they have come, a uniformed guard steps forward and admonishes them to take only one. Just as they are about to surrender their next to last pieces of treasure she winks, letting them know that it's all right to hold on to an extra few.

At this point the guard turns to the mother, who tensely awaits a reproving look or comment, and delivers instead a detailed explanation of how the amount of candy spread out at their feet represents the combined weight of the artist—about whom she speaks with familiarity—and his dead lover. The piece, she informs the mother, is called *Untitled (Placebo)*, and it refers to the AIDS epidemic and the lack of a cure or even care that so many suffering from the disease must face. Thus, one morning at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., within walking distance of the House and Senate chambers where hysterical condemnations of “obscene” art are a routine spectacle, a black civil servant and a white mother of two preadolescent males entered comfortably into a conversation about art, and death, and public policy.

The floor sculpture they discussed was part of the first of two major museum exhibitions recently devoted to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the second of which closed last May at the Guggenheim Museum in New York preceding its current international tour. Together, these exhibitions focused considerable attention on an artist whose solo career, apart from his ongoing association with the collective Group Material, extends a scant nine years. The attention is well deserved, however—not least for the fact that Gonzalez-Torres's spare, elliptical art could have provoked the kind of exchange just described.

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*Untitled (Revenge), 1991, 2,000 pounds of individually wrapped ice-blue mind candies, dimensions variable; installed at the Renaissance Society, Chicago. Collection Barbara and Howard Morse. Photo Tom van Eynde. (All photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.)*

**A right-wing congressman, tipped off that there was “homosexual art” at the Hirshhorn, found only rooms full of lights, serial grid drawings, mirrors and two possibly “same sex” wall clocks.**

Gonzalez-Torres’s aim, in essence, is a classical one, to please and instruct; but it is barbed by the Brechtian notion that art, rather than dramatically resolving contradictions, should isolate and accentuate them, leaving the viewer with a set of conflicting choices phrased in the present tense. Thus each of Gonzalez-Torres’s works provides anomalous information for the consideration of the audience, while refraining from the kind of sloganeering found in so much recent



**Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1991,**  
*two white-framed clocks, each 13½ inches in diameter.*

**Untitled (Paris, Last Time), 1989,**  
*C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag, 7½ by 9½ inches.*



**Untitled (Klaus Barbie as a Family Man), 1988,**  
*C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag, 7½ by 9½ inches.*



art. This tactic reflects a close reading of the current scene and a sharp critique of the self-righteously “transgressive” art that is currently a staple of the culture wars. And so, when a right-wing congressman, tipped off that there was “homosexual art” at the Hirshhorn, headed down the Mall in search of the next Mapplethorpean outrage, he only found rooms full of lights, serial grid drawings, paired mirrors and two possibly but not certainly “same-sex” wall clocks labeled *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991), ticking away in unison. Bewildered, he left without uttering a word of protest.

The fact that neither the mirrors, nor the clocks, nor the two body-molded pillows that appeared on 24 billboards around New York in 1991 immediately declare their meaning is characteristic of Gonzalez-Torres’s refusal to play to type. In an art world too often obsessed with simplistic affirmations of origin or essence, Gonzalez-Torres eschews the role of Latin artist or queer artist or even activist artist, while using everything that his experience as a Cuban-born, politically committed gay man has taught him. What he has learned is that in America’s presently chauvinist climate, loudly declaiming who you are frequently preempts showing an audience what you see. Hence, “them” and “us” oppositions interest him only insofar as they are ambiguous and open to question.

For example, the twin full-length mirrors, *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* (1991), allude to Jean Cocteau’s cinematic rendition of the Orpheus myth, in which the poet passes through a mirror in a futile attempt to retrieve his lover

from the underworld. The second mirror complicates matters by implying that a modern Orpheus might fall victim to the same fate, doubling the suggested corporeal reflections and dissolves. The piece loses its purely symbolic quality, however, when members of the public literally enter the image. Standing to either side and studying their own reflections, perfect strangers of every description take their place in tandem. Every move made changes not just the viewer's physical orientation in front of a static work of art but also the nature of his or her psychological involvement with it and with the others that its shining surface gathers in. Taking E.M. Forster's admonition "only connect" to a point of maximum obliqueness—in the process mixing democratic tact with the nagging insistence of a well-planned riddle—Gonzalez-Torres prepares traps for the mind and heart.

**A** user-friendly Duchampian to this extent—his work encompasses both Duchamp's elegant semiotic play and the use of mundane readymades—Gonzalez-Torres nonetheless insists on introducing spectators to the hard facts of life. His works lead them step by self-effacing step through a maze of images that describe a society in crisis, at the same time that they evoke the bittersweet epiphanies of temporary communion and ultimate solitude.

The artist's recent retrospectives retraced his progress in distinct but complementary ways, though the Guggenheim show was the more comprehensive of the two. A photographer by training, Gonzalez-Torres is, by cultivated instinct, a master of placement regardless of the medium in question. The range of materials he has utilized—none of which involve the hand of the maker but all of which unmistakably convey his sensibility—include electric light fixtures, jigsaw puzzles, printed multiples of various kinds, live male go-go dancers and bead curtains. The candy works themselves employ a "palette" that encompasses cellophane-wrapped licorice, Bacci chocolates and Bazooka bubble gum. They may be heaped in corners, squared off on the floor or spilled in arcs, as they were in ironic harmony with the stylish scallops of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim interior.

Gonzalez-Torres's "dateline" works derive from the kind of mental and emotional channel-surfing that the artist engaged in, years ago, upon returning home early in the morning after working long hours as a waiter. Mingling references to intimate occurrences, cultural trivialities and historical events, he created photostat pieces in the late 1980s in which a few lines of white text on a black ground metonymically align the machinations of power with TV crazes and personal milestones. The



*Untitled (Portrait of the Wongs), 1991; installed in the home of Lorria and Deane Wong.*

*Untitled, 1989, hand-painted billboard displayed in Sheridan Square, New York City, 1989; commissioned by the Public Art Fund, Inc. Photograph Copyright 1989 Stanley Greenberg.*





*Clockwise from top left: Untitled (Death by Gun), 1990, offset print on paper, endless copies, sheets 33 by 45 inches, ideal height 9 inches. Museum of Modern Art. Untitled (Aparición), 1991, sheets 29 3/4 by 44 7/8 inches, ideal height 8 inches. Collection Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo de la Fundación Cultural Televisa, Mexico City. Untitled, 1991, offset print on paper, sheets 45 1/4 by 38 1/2 inches, ideal height 7 inches. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Untitled (Republican Years), 1992, offset print on paper, endless copies, sheets 34 by 48 inches, ideal height 8 inches. Sprengel Museum, Hannover.*

large billboard he mounted in New York's Sheridan Square in 1989 used the same technique to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and the beginning of the gay rights movement. By purposely confusing different orders of experience, these works undercut official history at the same time that they underscore the fitfulness and fragility of memory. Gonzalez-Torres has also crafted friezelike text "portraits" of various friends and collectors. Cross-referencing the public events of our epoch with Pop/Proustian "madeleines" that bring back not just the facts but the feel of times past, he has invented a graphic stanza form composed of raw but carefully selected data.

The jigsaw puzzles that Gonzalez-Torres has had printed and cut to order, using pictures

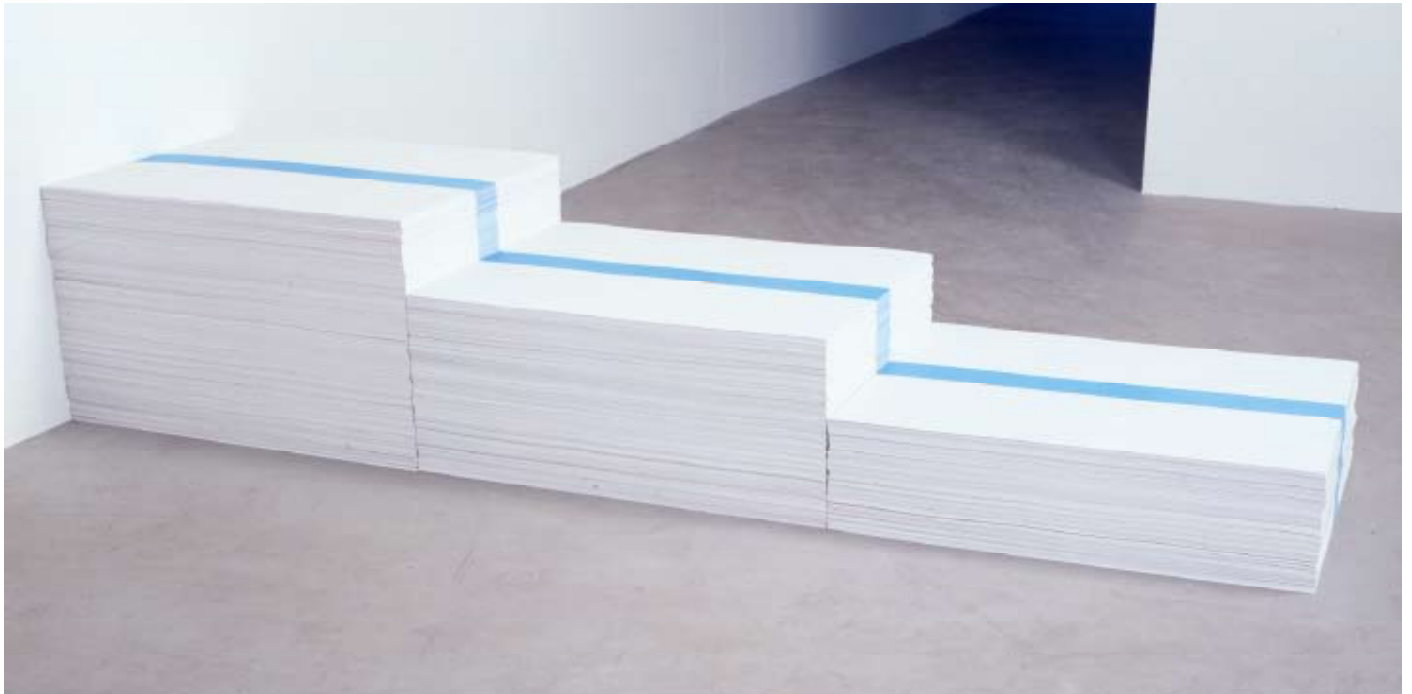
culled from the mass media and personal snapshots, run the same gamut of public and private experience. One depicts two white chairs turned slightly away from each other; another shows the shadows of two people standing side by side; a third reproduces a conventional family portrait that happens to represent Klaus Barbie, the Nazi "butcher of Lyon," with his wife and children; and a fourth shows Pope John Paul II giving the sacraments to Kurt Waldheim, the former UN secretary general and Austrian president who hid his involvement in World War II deportations and reprisals.

These works constitute a group of separate but linked enigmas. The two chairs that apparently stand in for a couple—what, we wonder, is their relationship? The shadows that indicate

two people who mayor may not actually be touching as they lean toward each other—how are they related? An ideal nuclear family whose head was a destroyer of families—knowing this, what is our feeling about the familial archetype that is personified? The head of the church "absolving" the leader of the state of historical transgressions—what bond can we have to the complicitous order they represent? Intricately cut, assembled and hermetically sealed in plastic bags, these puzzles present us with conundrums that beg to be dissected, even though the questions they symbolically pose can no more easily be answered than the prepackaged images can be taken apart.

**W**orks like these share common ground with the word games of first-generation





*Untitled, 1989, offset print on paper, endless copies, sheets 23 by 87 inches, ideal height 17 inches. Collection The Dannheisser Foundation, New York*

Conceptualists such as Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth and with the later agit-prop montages of Barbara Kruger. But Gonzalez-Torres's work is less linguistically formalist than that of the first two, while his rhetoric is politically subtler than Kruger's. The nuances on which he relies suggest not so much an effort to correct his predecessors as a sympathetic evolution from them. The minimalism of some of Gonzalez-Torres's installation objects takes past aspects of reductivist art in stride in the same way. His cascading light-strings loosen the rigid grids of Dan Flavin even as his choice of small, round incandescent bulbs instead of fluorescen tubes softens the intensity and change the affect of their glow, warm candle-power substitutin for Flavin's industrial light-blasts.

At the Guggenheim, for example, Gonzalez-Torres hung rows of light-strings from the ceiling of the two-story gallery off the Rotunda's second floor, further brightening the already brilliant room with a veil of bulbs. At the Hirshhorn, by contrast, a single cluster of such lights placed in one corner illuminated an otherwise penumbral space, whose far walls were papered with a gigantic mural photograph of two birds disappearing in opposite directions into stormy clouds. From the architectonics of Flavin's varichrome tubes in white rooms, Gonzalez-Torres moves us incrementally into a new kind of light-space, as matter-of-fact as its houseware wires and sockets but as atmospheric—and romantic—as the framed voids

of James Turrell and Robert Irwin.

Gonzalez-Torres's grid drawings likewise take Minimalism as a starting point but encode its neutral modularity with an altogether different kind of information. Logically laid out and exquisitely drafted, *Untitled (Bloodworks)* (1989) might be a Sol LeWitt or Robert Ryman drawing but for the fact that its coordinates and bisecting lines are determined not by purely forma templates and linear stresses but by a desire to chart the ineluctable decline of the immune system's resistance to infections. In sharp contrast to Ronald Jones's cruelly chic rendition of the AIDS virus as Brancusi-esque sculpture, Gonzalez-Torres conflates esthetic convention with grim scientific exactitude to mark the precise passage of time against the perceptible erosion of vital force. He respects Minimalism's systematic principles but replaces esthetic self-referentiality with allusions to the equally "impersonal" processes of disease.

Adding a Pop element to this unsentimental mixture of pure seriality and disturbing content, Gonzalez-Torres has hung curtains of beads in doorways in his recent installations; the beads are color-coded white and red to represent blood cells, or blue and green to represent the chemicals used in blood therapies. While it is delightful to walk through these rustling strands, it is also unsettling to imagine oneself enveloped by them as if by a sparkling shower of body fluids and medications.

The curtains are in fact vertical variations of

**Among his variations on Minimalist formats, the artist's "stacks" are the most commanding and most radical. While the work is on exhibit, paper sheets are available to anyone who wants them.**

Gonzalez-Torres's glittering carpets of sweets, which gradually wane at the pleasure of meandering gallery goers. According to his instructions, once they are totally depleted these atomized body surrogates must be fully reconstituted, only to undergo the same inexorable vanishing act. Far more than a mere commentary on commodity fetishism or a ritual gesture of defiance in the face of institutional possessiveness, works such as *Untitled (Placebo)* are examples of an explicitly existentialist art, one advantageously free of stylistic angst. Casually transforming the most banal accumulation into an arresting contemporary vanitas, the ever-fresh presence and always impending absence of these works quietly focuses attention on the slow metamorphosis of objects, architecture and other pieces of art in their vicinity. With their planned impermanence, the candy spills are like luminous shadows of all permanent things. Cyclically appearing and disappearing



*Untitled (Strange Bird), 1991/93, two billboards, dimensions variables; installed at the Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Private Collection, Cologne. Photo Peter Muscato.*

**Gonzalez-Torres eschews the role of Latin artist or queer artist or even activist artist, while making use of everything his experience as a politically committed gay man has taught him.**

ad infinitum, their essence is substituted for that of their maker and his late lover, even as the artist, by means of a wholly secular but patently esthetic transubstantiation reminds us of the evanescence of all that is human.

Among his several variations on Minimalist formats, Gonzalez-Torres's "stacks" are the most commanding and the most radical. Recalling the manufactured block sculptures of Judd, LeWitt, Tony Smith and others, these stacks consist of reams of paper variously printed with texts, pictures or abstract designs. Each work addresses one of Gonzalez-Torres's consistent themes. The two rings of *Untitled (Double Portrait)* (1991) reprise the paired clocks of *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* and the paired round mirrors of *Untitled (March 5th) #1* (1991). Two other stack works make use of black-and-white photographs of the sky and the sea, respectively. A work featuring a double black border like an old-style Catholic funeral

announcement is called, with untypically polemical forthrightness, *Untitled (Republican Years)* (1992). Another, blunter still, bears the names and faces of all 464 Americans shot dead during a one-week span.

While the work is on exhibit, the paper sheets which compose the stacks are available to anyone who wants them. As with the candy spills, this availability changes the usual museum rule of "look but don't touch" and shifts the criterion for judging the work away from coveted uniqueness to intellectual or imaginative value. Moving ahead on the course set by LeWitt's "democratic drawings"—works whose price was forever fixed at \$100—and the affordable artists' books LeWitt and others pioneered decades ago, Gonzalez-Torres has effectively created unlimited-edition multiples, obliging any institution that buys the "original" stack to reproduce and give away its paper sheets as long as there is a demand. Whether and how the offer is accepted by museum and gallerygoers depends on the particular stack in question. Judging from observation, the moody sea and sky pictures are most popular, constituting a kind of take-home sublime, with the cryptic textworks and "abstractions" coming next. People seem more reluctant, however, to pick up a copy of *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, as if it carries a curse. But at the level on which artistic gambits reveal social and psychological truths, this hesitancy exposes the fear such carnage has instilled in

us and epitomizes our vain efforts to keep violence at arm's length.

In these and other ways, Gonzalez-Torres has revived Minimalist and Conceptualist strategies and rescued them from merely academic elaboration. The artist's relation to the intellectual discourse of his own generation is comparable. Like most of his contemporaries, Gonzalez-Torres has steeped himself in Marxist, structuralist and postmodernist thought. Unlike many of them, however, he is not content to illustrate these ideas for a readymade audience of initiates. While his peers have intoxicated themselves with theory, he has suggested that it is best, perhaps, to read theory with a bottle at your elbow.

Something I tell my students is to read [a text] once; then, if you have problems with it, read it a second time. If you still have problems, get drunk and read it a third time ... and you might get something out of it. But always think about practice.... Theory is not the endpoint of work, it is the work along the way to the work.

To those hamstrung by intellectual or esthetic doctrines that compel artists to justify what they do according to formally or historically programmatic principles, these words should sound the "all clear." Conceptualism, for Gonzalez-Torres, posits ideas and follows intuited

*continued on page 125*



*Above, Untitled (Summer), 1993, 42 light bulbs with porcelain light sockets on an extension cord, dimensions variable.*

*Below, Untitled (For Stockholm), 1992, 12 light-strings, each with 42 light bulbs, extension cords, and porcelain light sockets; at the Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, Stockholm.*



# Gonzalez-Torres

*continued from page 76*

mental progressions; it owes nothing to ideological purists or to the received opinions of scholarly guilds.

While the freshness of Gonzalez-Torres's approach was immediately apparent at the Hirshhorn, circumstances at the Guggenheim skewed perceptions of his work there. In each venue he and the curators had to work against the architectural constraints of the circular spaces involved. At the Hirshhorn, the inward-turning orientation of the building was used to good purpose, emphasizing the meditative quietude of much of his art. At the Guggenheim, Gonzalez-Torres and curator Nancy Spector positioned the works so that they hugged the walls and floor and discreetly filled the niches and bays of the museum's spiraling walkway. By conceiving the concavities of the coiling building as an armature and its pristine surfaces as a ground, this installation showed the masses, colors and patterns of Gonzalez Torres's stacks, mounds, light-strings and other works with surprisingly graphic intensity.

Regrettably, the artist had to share the museum's ramp with the concurrent retrospective of Ross Bleckner [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '95], whose murky paintings and drawings pined for 19th-century Symbolism as obviously as Gonzalez-Torres's work asserted its complete contemporaneity. That the two artists also dealt with AIDS further invited esthetically irrelevant comparison. Judging from the short shrift Gonzalez-Torres's show received in the press and the avalanche of generally indulgent notices that greeted Bleckner's, this ill-conceived double bill seems to have reinforced the popular tendency to oppose painting's sensual amplitude to conceptualism's supposed cerebral austerity.

In this instance the salient differences lay elsewhere. Bleckner's memorial pictures present his themes by means of one-to-one metaphoric correspondences. Black betokens mourning; evanescent whites and yellows represent spiritual transcendence; urns, flowers and ribbons signify remembrance; and so on, in images limned with heavy-handed if at times satisfyingly quirky painterliness. Yet Gonzalez Torres's work appeals every bit as insistently to the senses as Bleckner's, and with greater visual discipline, variety and nuance. Moreover, he draws attention to the pain and gravity of his subject through counterimages created from provocatively ephemeral or dissonantly enjoyable means. Even the overt romanticism of his panoramic landscapes and wheeling birds avoid nostalgia. Instead, like the closing freeze-frame shot in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, Gonzalez Torres's images suspend life in the



**Untitled (Public Opinion), 1991, cellophane-wrapped black licorice candies, 700 pounds (ideal weight), endless supply, dimensions variable; installed at the Guggenheim Museum. Photo David Heald.**

perpetual actuality of photographic grain.

Inclined toward neutral materials and leery of being entrapped by a signature method or style—he ceased making his stacks when they became the average collector's idea of a "Gonzalez-Torres"—the artist nonetheless leaves his impress on whatever he touches. Like the sandy footprints in a recent series of photogravures, his presence is low-keyed, nearly anonymous, but residually felt just the same. His return to photography in these works seems to have been prompted by the way in which that medium captures interrupted time. While his "dateline" pieces stretch and warp the passage of years, these elegiac photogravures contract in an instantaneous click all the chance meetings, partings and missed convergences recorded in the human treadmarks they preserve. The deathly and irrevocably "that has been" which Roland Barthes identified as photography's essential aspect is, in Gonzalez-Torres's latest images, commonplace and immanent. Embedded in the cool esthetic surface of these pictures lies a harsh reality. His is the first generation of Americans since the world wars for whom life's duration is often measured in days and months instead of decades. Too frequently in this context, an artist's first mature statements must also count as his or her summation.

Nevertheless, the impression one takes away from these two shows is not morbid. For all its references to loss and sorrow, Gonzalez Torres's art quickens the imagination. Unencumbered by polemical baggage, it is likewise free of self-pity or special pleading; these, the artist plainly understands, are mistakes a serious artist cannot afford. Daily awareness of mortality is a crucible, and at the limit where such consciousness predominates, each thing

yet to be made must be able to stand alone, not just as a testament of that moment but as a completely self-sufficient entity within the larger esthetic discourse of its time.

That is the standard that all important art must meet, and Gonzalez-Torres's work does. How the poignancy that suffuses his art could be manifest in such economical terms is the story vividly told by his two recent retrospectives. To the extent that critics and the public have so far failed to take their full measure, the record of these exhibitions deserves reconsideration, just as the artist's ongoing work demands the most serious scrutiny. In any case, what he has already accomplished signals an important and influential shift away from mechanical or largely reactive types of post-modernist thinking. Replacing the "discourse" of artistic intervention with its poetics, he has created one of the pivotal bodies of work to emerge from the often dispiriting confusion of the last decade.

*"Felix Gonzalez-Torres" was organized by Amanda Cruz, Suzanne Ghez and Ann Goldstein. It opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles [Apr. 24-June 19, 1994], and traveled to the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C. [June 16-Sept. 11, 1994], and the Renaissance Society, Chicago [Oct. 2-Nov. 6, 1994]. The Guggenheim Museum's exhibition, also titled "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," was organized by Nancy Spector and was on view Mar. 3-May 10, 1995. It travels to the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain [Dec. 13, 1995-Mar. 3, 1996]; Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris [Apr. 18-June 16]; Kunst-Werke, Berlin [fall 1996, dates to be announced]. Each exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue.*

Author: Robert Storr is an artist and critic who is also a curator in the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art.

interview by  
ROBERT STORR

## FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

### *Being a Spy*

The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres has quickly risen to a preeminent place on the international scene as one of the most personal *œuvres* in contemporary art. The great number of shows currently devoted to his output, including the major exhibition planned for the Guggenheim (17 February-7 May 1995) are ample proof of this attention. Criticized as being a politically correct artist, Gonzalez-Torres strikes back in the following interview, calling for a veritable guerilla war - intelligent and undercover - against the plethora of straightforward, moralizing works of art with their angry-young-man messages.



Untitled (Strange Bird), 1991/93, two billboards, dimensions variables; installed at the Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Private Collection, Cologne. Photo Peter Muscato.

■ You recently took part in an exhibition in London that placed you in context with Joseph Kosuth, and the pair of you in context with Ad Reinhardt. And I was struck by the fact that instead of trying to separate yourself from previous generations, you joined with Kosuth in establishing an unexpected aesthetic lineage. Could you talk about that a little bit because on the whole, younger artists generally avoid putting themselves in such close proximity to their predecessors, especially conceptualists in relation to painters.

I don't really see it that way. I think more than anything else I'm just an extension of certain practices, minimalism or conceptualism, that I am developing areas I think were not totally dealt with. I don't like this idea of having to undermine your ancestors, of ridiculing them, undermining them, and making less out of them. I think we're here because we're part of a historical process and I think that this attitude that you have to murder your father in order to start something new is bullshit. We are part of this culture, we don't come from outer space, so whatever I do is already something that

has entered my brain from some other sources and is then synthesized into something new. I respect my elders and I learn from them. There's nothing wrong with accepting that. I'm secure enough to accept those influences. I do not have anxiety about originality, I really don't.

### Reading Althusser Drunk

*How did that show come about?*

Joseph and I met one day somewhere downtown, and he was talking about how much he admired Reinhardt, although he was a totally different kind of artist - a painter - belonging to a different generation. It was the same thing for me with Joseph. I will never do the kind of work that Joseph has done. I'm not into Heidegger and I don't go to the dictionary and blow up the information into black-and-white photostats. But I respect Joseph's work a lot. I think that we in the new generation, the one that has used some of the same ideas for the advancement of social issues, owe a lot to

artists of the past like Lawrence Weiner and Kosuth. In the essay in the show's catalogue Joseph said it very well, "The failure of conceptual art is actually its success." Because we, in the next generation, took those strategies and didn't worry if it looked like art or not, that was their business. We just took it and said that it didn't look like art, there's no question about it but this is what we're doing. So I do believe in looking back and going through school and reading books. You learn from these people. Then, hopefully, you try to make it, not better (because you cannot make it better), but you make it in a way that makes sense. Like the Don Quixote of Pierre Menard by Borges; it's exactly the same thing but it's better because it's right now. It was written with a history of now, although it's the same, word by word.

*What other theoretical models do you have in mind?*

Althusser, because what I think he started pointing out were the contradic-

## interview

tions within our critique of capitalism. For people who have been reading too much hard-core Marxist theory, it is hard to deal with those contradictions; they cannot deal with the fact that they're not saints. And I say no, they're not. Everything is full of contradictions, there are only different degrees of contradiction. We try to get close to them, but that's it, they are always going to be there. The only other thing to do is give up and pull the plug, but we can't.

That's the great thing about Althusser, when you read his philosophy. Something that I tell my students is to read it once, then if you have problems with it read it a second time. Then if you still have problems, get drunk and read it a third time with a glass of wine next to you and you might get something out of it, but always think about practice. The theory in the book is to make you live better and that's what, I think, all theory should do. It's about trying to show you certain ways of constructing reality. I'm not even saying finding (I'm using my words very carefully), but there are certain ways of constructing reality that helps you live better, there's no doubt about it. When I teach, that's what I show my students - to read all this stuff without a critical attitude. Theory is not the endpoint of work, it is work along the way to the work. To read it actively is just a process that will hopefully bring us to a less shadowed place.

### For Which Audience?

*When you say what you and some of the people of your generation have done is to deal with the elements of conceptualism that can be used for a political or social end, how do you define the political or social dimension of art? What do you think the parameters are?*

I'm glad that this question came up. I realize again how successful ideology is and how easy it was for me to fall into that trap, calling this socio-political art. All art and all cultural production is political. I'll just give you an example. When you raise the question of political art, people immediately jump and say, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, those are political artists. Then who are the nonpolitical artists, as if

that was possible at this point in history? Let's look at abstraction, and let's consider the most successful of those political artists, Helen Frankenthaler. Why are they the most successful political artists, even more than Kosuth, much more than Hans Haacke, much more than Nancy and Leon or Barbara Kruger? Because

they don't look political! And as we know it's all about looking natural, it's all about being the normative aspect of whatever segment of culture we're dealing with, of life. That's where someone like Frankenthaler is the most politically successful artist when it comes to the political agenda that those works entail, because she



Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1991, two white-framed clocks, each 13½ inches in diameter.



Untitled (Strange Bird), 1991-1993. Two billboards. Dimensions variable. (Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Photo P. Muscato)

serves a very clear agenda of the Right. For example, here is something the State Department sent to me in 1989, asking me to submit work to the Art and Embassy Program. It has this wonderful quote from George Bernard Shaw, which says, "Besides torture, art is the most persuasive weapon." And I said I didn't know that the State Department had given up on torture - they're probably not giving up on torture - but they're using both. Anyway, look at this letter, because in case you missed the point they reproduce a Franz Kline which explains very well what they want in this program. It's a very interesting letter, because it's so transparent. Another example: when you have a show with white male straight painters, you don't call it that, that would be absurd, right? That's just not "natural" But if you have four black lesbian sculptors from Brooklyn, that's exactly what you call it, "Four African-American Lesbians from Brooklyn."

*What's your agenda? Who are you trying to reach?*

When people ask me, "Who is your public?" I say honestly, without skipping a beat, "Ross."<sup>1</sup> The public was Ross. The rest of the people just come to the work. In my recent show at the Hirshhorn, which is one of the best experiences I've had in a long time, the guards were really in it. Because I talked to them, I dealt with them. They're going to be here for eight hours with this stuff. And I never see guards as guards, I see guards as the public. Since the other answer to the question "Who's the public?" is, well, the people who are around you, which includes the guards. In Washington people asked me, "Did I train the guards, did I give them a lecture?" I said, "No, I just talk to them when I'm doing the work." They said, "You know we have never been to an exhibit where the guards go up to the viewers and tell them what to do and where to go, what to look at, what it means." But again, that division of labor, that division of meaning, that division of function is always there in place to serve someone's agenda.

### The Political Arena



Untitled (Klaus Barbie), 1989. C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag. 20 X 25 cm. (Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Photo P. Muscato)

When I was at the Hirshhorn and saw the show, there was one particular guard who was standing with the big candy floor piece Untitled (Placebo), and she was amazing. There was this suburban white, middle-class mother with two young sons who came in the room and in thirty seconds, this woman who was a black, maybe church-going civil servant in Washington, in the middle of all this reactionary pressure about the arts - there she was explaining to this mother and kids about AIDS and what this piece represented, what a placebo was, and how there was no cure and so on. Then the boys started to fill their pockets with candies and she sort of looked at them like a school mistress and said, "You're only supposed to take one." Just as their faces fell and they tossed back all but a few she suddenly smiled again and said, "Well maybe two." And she won them over completely! The whole thing worked because then they got the piece, they got the interaction, they got the generosity and they got her. It was great.

*Do you think there's a way to break the intellectual habits that result from genera-*

*tions of moralizing protest art. Such work is based on the idea that the artist is there to enlighten a socially benighted world, and along with that comes the expectation that the artist personally be a beacon of virtue so that if, at any point, they are shown to be less than pure, then everything they say is subsequently dismissed as bogus. This has happened over and over, as if the social content of art were limited to individual ethical exercises rather than thinking of art as a political and cultural probe.*

Let's go to the political arena, I'll say, the real political arena, and say that some politicians that have not been "good," yet they have done some very wonderful things for everyone, improving the quality of life for a lot of us in a very tangible way and at the most intimate personal levels. Like some of the programs that John F. Kennedy started. I'm a product of that. I went to school because of what that man started. Womanizers and drunks and all that stuff, guys with mob connections made all these changes possible so that someone like me could then get loans and go to school. That's just one simple

## interview



Untitled (Death by gun). 1990. Offset print on paper. Ideal dimensions: 22.5 X 112 X 82 cm. (Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York)

example from life. Let's move forward to a certain degree, in terms of the kind of protest art that says that Capital is bad, Benneton is bad. We know that! We really do know that. We don't need a gallery space to find out something that we read in the news.

### Puritan Anti-aesthetic

*What about ideas of a puritan anti-aesthetic?*

I don't want that. No, between the Monet and Victor Burgin, give me the Monet. But as we know aesthetics are politics. They're not even about politics, they are politics. Because when you ask who is defining aesthetics, at what particular point - what social class, what kind of background these people have you realize quickly again that the most effective ideological construction are the ones that don't look like it. If you say, I'm political, I'm ideological, that's not going to work, because people know where you are coming from. But if you say, "Hi! My name is Bob and this is it," then they say, that's not political. It's invisible and it really works.

I think certain elements of beauty used to attract the viewer are indispensable. I don't want to make art just for the people who can read Fredrick Jameson sitting upright on a Mackintosh chair. I want to make art for people who watch The Golden Girls and sit in a big brown, Lazy-boy chair. They're part of my public too, I hope. In the same way that that woman and the guard are part of my public.

*How do you think about the issue of engaging in explicitly social forms of art making with respect to your involvement with an activist collaborative project like Group Material? What's the relation 'between the work you did with them what you do as an individual artist?'*

I always worked as an individual artist even when Group Material asked me to join the group. There are certain things that I can do by myself that I would never be able to do with Group Material. First of all, they are a totally democratic entity and although you learn a lot from it, and it's very moving, it's very exacting, everything has to be by consensus. So you figure that one out. It takes a long

time to get to any consensus, which is the beauty of it, but it is much more work. It's worth it 100%. But as an individual artist there are certain things that I want to bring out and express, and the collaborative practice is not conducive to that.

*Group Material's installations were generally a form of public address. How does that differ from what you've done on your own in other circumstances?*

Well, if you think of the stacks, especially the early stacks, that was all about making these huge, public sculptures. When I started doing this work in 1988-89 the buzzword was public art. One thing that amazed me at that time was that the difference between being outdoors' and being public was not spoken about. It's a big difference. Public art is something which is really public, but outdoor public art is something that is usually made of a good, long-lasting material and is placed in the middle of somewhere, because it's too big to be inside. I was trying to deal with a solution to that that would satisfy what I thought was a true public sculpture, and that is when I came up with the idea of the stack. I think that is what got people so intrigued. It was before people started making scatter art and stuff like that. So when people walked into the gallery at Andrea Rosen's and they saw all these stacks, they were really confused because it looked like a printing house, and I enjoyed that very much. And that's why I made the early stacks with the text. I was trying to give back information. For example, there are the ones I made with little snippets from the newspaper, which is one of the biggest sources of inspiration because you read it twice and you see these ideological constructions unravel right in front of your eyes. It wasn't just about trying to problematize the aura of the work or its originality, because it could be reproduced three times in three different places and in the end, the only original thing about the work is the certificate of authenticity. I always said that these were public sculptures; the fact that they are being shown in this so-called private space doesn't mean anything - all the spaces are private, you have to pay for everything. You can't get a sculpture into a public space without going through



the proper channels and paying money to do that. So again I was trying to show how 'this division between public and private was really just words.

## State of Cultural Wars

*What is your guess about what the next phase of the cultural war's going to be? How will the whole battle over the NEA and censorship and multiculturalism proceed from here? I think we've gone through a cycle and I sense that it will change. directions somewhat, but I'm not at all sure which way.*

It's going to go on for a while but first of all, we should not call it a debate. We should call it what it is, which is, a smoke screen. It is no accident. As we know, everything that happens in culture is because it is needed. There are certain things that happen to be there for a long time but they're not needed, culture is not ready for that. That's not the right social condition to make them be, to make them physical, to bring them to the forefront. Everything in culture works like that. So this is all a smoke screen. I just gave this lecture in Chicago and I read all this data and tried to make sense of what happened during the eighties, during the last Republican regime, how the agenda of the Right was implemented, and that was an agenda of homophobia, division, destruction and the enrichment of 1% of the population. Clearly and simply. But it is something that we love. We love to be poor and we love to have the royal class. I know that deep inside we miss Dynasty, because that gave us the hope of some royalty, a royal family in America, which we almost had. But why worry about the fact that we have the lowest child immunization rate of all industrialized nations, right behind Mexico. Why worry about that when we can worry about \$150 given to an artist in Seattle to do a silly performance with his HIV-positive blood? Why worry about \$500 billion losses in the Savings and Loans industry when \$10,000 was given to Mapplethorpe? Because the threat to the American family, the real threat to the American family, is not dioxin and it's not the lack of adequate housing, it's not the fact that there has been a 21% increase in deaths

by guns since 1989.

## A Smoke Screen

That is not a threat. The real threat is a photograph of two men sucking each others dicks. That is really what could destroy us. It makes me wonder what is the family. How come that institution is so weak that a piece of paper could destroy it? Of course, you ask yourself, why now and why this issue, and you realize that something else is happening. This is a smoke screen to hide what they have already accomplished.

## Guerilla Warfare

The Right is very smart. Before they had Martians; well we proved that there's no life in Mars. Then they said the Russians were ready to invade this country, but they're not there any longer. Fidel is sinking, so what is there left that we can have that is as visual and symbolic as that - the arts. Especially the arts that have, well, homosexual imagery. And that is one thing that bugs me about artists who are doing so-called gay art and their

limitation of what they can consider as an object of desire for gay men. When I had a show at the Hirshhorn, Senator Stevens, who is one of the most homophobic anti-art senators, said he was going to come to the opening and I thought he's going to have a really hard time trying to explain to his constituency how pornographic and how homoerotic two clocks side by side are. He came there looking for dicks and asses.

There was nothing like that. Now you try to see the homoeroticism in that piece. There's a great quote by director of the Christian Coalition, who said that he wanted to be a spy. "I want to be invisible," he said, "I do guerilla warfare, I paint my face and travel at night. You don't know it's over until you are in the body bag. You don't know until election night." This is good! This is brilliant! Here in the Left we should stop wearing the fucked-up T-shirts that say "Vegetarian Now." No, go to a meeting and infiltrate and then once you are inside, try to have effect. I want to be a spy, too. I do want to be the one who resembles something else. We should have been thinking about



Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for Roni). 1993. Gold candies. Ideal weight: 1000lbs. (Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Photo S. Tallon)

## interview

that long ago. We have to restructure our strategies and realize that the red banner with the red raised fist didn't work in the sixties and it's not going to work now. I don't want to be the enemy anymore. The enemy is too easy to dismiss and to attack. The thing that I want to do sometimes with some of these pieces about homosexual desire is to be more inclusive. Every time they see a clock or a stack of paper or a curtain, I want them to think twice. I want them to be like the protagonist in *Repulsion* by Polanski where everything to her becomes a threat to her virginity. Everything has a sexual mission, the walls, the pavement, everything.

*We've touched on this already but you came up in a generation where young artists read a lot of theory and out of that has come a great deal of work which refers back to theory in an often daunting or detached way, and that has put off many people. In effect, they've reacted against the basic ideas because they've gotten sick of the often pretentious manner in which those ideas were rephrased artistically.*

It's a liberating aspect of the way that most of my generation does art, but it also makes it more difficult because you have to justify so much of what you do. If we were making, let's say, more formalist work, work that includes less of a social and cultural critique of whatever type, it would be really wonderful. Either you make a good painting or you make a bad one, but that's it. When you read Greenberg you can get lost in page after page on how a line ends at the edge of the canvas, which is very fascinating - I love that, I can get into that, too. But when some of us, especially in the younger generation, get involved with social issues we are put under a microscope. We really are and we have to perform that role, which includes everything. It includes the way we dress to where we are seen eating.

Those things don't come up in the same way if you are interested in beautiful abstractions that have nothing to do with social or cultural questions. It's part of the social construction, but it has less involvement in trying to tell you what's wrong or what's right. These are just two

plates on a canvas, take it or leave it. What you see is what you get. Which is very beautiful too - I like that.

### To Control the Pain

After doing all these shows, I've become burnt out with trying to have some kind of personal presence in the work. Because I'm not my art. It's not the form and not the shape, not the way these things function that's being put into question. What is being put into question is me. I made *Untitled (Placebo)* because I needed to make it. There was no other consideration involved except that I wanted to make an art work that could disappear, that never existed, and it was a metaphor for when Ross was dying. So it was a metaphor that I would abandon this work before this work abandoned me. I'm going to destroy it before it destroys me. That was my little amount of power when it came to this work. I didn't want it to last, because then it couldn't hurt me.

From the very beginning it was not even there - I made something that doesn't exist. I control that pain. That's really what it is. That's one of the parts of this work. Of course, it has to do with all the bullshit of seduction and the art of authenticity: I know that stuff, but on the other side, it has that personal level that is very real. It's not about being a con artist. It's also about excess, about the excess of pleasure. It's like a child who wants a landscape of candies. First and foremost it's about Ross. Then I wanted to please myself and then everybody.

(1) Felix Gonzalez-Torres's lover Ross died several years ago.

*Robert Storr is the curator of contemporary art at the MoMA.*

THE PARKETT SERIES WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS / DIE PARKETT-REIHE MIT GEGENWARTSKÜNSTLERN

# PARKETT

No. 39/1994



## FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

*Texts on Felix Gonzalez-Torres and*

*Wolfgang Laib: Nancy Spector / Simon*

*Watney / Susan Tallman / Didier Semin /*

*Clare Farrow / Jean-Marc Avrilla / Tho-*

*mas McEvilly* **INSERT: RONI HORN**

**EDITIONS FOR PARKETT**

*Claude Gintz: Gabriel Orozco / Walter*

*Grasskamp: Axel Kasseböhmer / Neville*

*Wakefield: Matthew Barney / Les Infos*

*du Paradis: Burt Barr's The Pool /*

*Cumulus aus Europa: Eric Troncy / Cu-*

*mulus from America: Meyer Vaisman / Bal-*

*kon: Laura Arici*

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NANCY SPECTOR

# FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES: TRAVELOGUE

*[This work] constitutes a comment on the passing of time and the possibility of erasure or disappearance, which involves a poetics of space... [it] also touches upon life in its most radical definition, its limit: death. As with all artistic practices, it is related to the act of leaving one place for another; one which proves perhaps better than the first.*

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 1990

In 1990, Gonzalez-Torres made seemingly twin stacks of white paper in close configuration. Identical in size and shape, these pieces immediately called to mind other intimate pairings in the artist's work—in particular, the synchronized, matching clocks of "UNTITLED" (PERFECTLOVERS) (1987-90). On closer inspection, however, the two stacks failed to embody the notion of harmonious coupling. Rather, their contradictory inscriptions—"Somewhere Better Than This Place" and "Nowhere Better Than This Place"—created a feeling of ambiguity: one intimating a more desirable reality than the present situation, the other affirming that the present is the best place to be, each stack annulled the message of the other. Their concurrent yet contrary epigraphs induced a peculiar sensation of paralysis, a feeling of immobility generated by circumlocution and indecision. If thought through, however, the fusion of elsewhere and nowhere enacted by the two works also creates a psychic space, a metaphorical topography, which maps the state of "in-betweenness" at the heart of Gonzalez-Torres's art.

His work has always trodden a fine line between social commentary and deeply personal disclosure,

equivocating between the two realms and obscuring the culturally determined distinctions that separate them. In Gonzalez-Torres's most recent objects and installations, it is this subtle shifting from cultural activism to intimate, autobiographical depiction—and the subsequent erosion of the boundaries between—that forms the very essence of the work. The stack piece "UNTITLED" (PASSPORT) (1991) alludes to such states of transition, passage between two sites, unfettered movement from one demarcated cultural sphere to another. A document that authorizes international travel, the passport is an empty tablet on which the evidence of one's journeys is inscribed. When filled, it becomes a diary of motion, a chronicle of geographic wanderings, a palimpsest of other spaces and other times. This key piece in Gonzalez-Torres's recent body of work also refers to the passport as a legal form of identification, one that forms cultural identities in its restrictive coding of nationality, gender, and age. The unadorned, empty white sheets of paper that comprise "UNTITLED" (PASSPORT) leave the question of identity open-ended; the blank pages, available for the taking, announce journeys not yet traveled and borders not yet crossed. Such future destinations, however, are not only geographic locations, but also represent interior, ontological spaces-territories of negotiation between the psychic, the sexual, and the social.

The metaphor of the voyage informs Gonzalez-Torres's most recent exhibitions. At the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, in 1993, the presentation was conceived as two discrete zones dictated by the architectural division of the space. The installation in the first room, "TRAVEL #1," consisted of two wall-

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size, black-and-white billboard photographs of an ominous sky punctuated by a lone gliding bird. The melancholic tenor of this enormous picture, which covered two abutting walls, was tempered by a tenderly entwined pair of strung light bulbs—subtitled *A COUPLE*—that served as the only source of illumination in the room. In the second room, entitled “*TRAVEL #2*,” Gonzalez-Torres arranged thirteen identical gridded charts, each one mapping the plunge of a diagonal red line from upper left corner to bottom right. The subtitle of this morbid piece—“*UNTITLED*” (*BLOODWORK, STEADY DECLINE*)—unequivocally refers to a waning T-cell count, marking the reality of AIDS’s destructive force in the most graphic of terms. The repetitive nature of the work, whether it manifests the fate of one person or of thirteen, underscores the terminal character of this illness, another journey through time.

Thus Gonzalez-Torres created a *mise-en-scene* permeating both rooms of the gallery that evoked an encounter with spatial and temporal boundaries. In “*TRAVEL #1*,” the expansive image of an open sky contrasted with the intimate scale of bare domestic light bulbs, causing interior and exterior environments to collide. The sky photograph itself, like Gonzalez-Torres’s other billboard projects, such as the charged image of an empty, but recently shared bed, marks a site where the “private” and the “public” spheres intersect.<sup>1</sup>) Using the most public mode of urban outdoor advertising, Gonzalez-Torres has infiltrated the communal realm to speak of the intimate and erotic by creating “places of passage” that assert their in-betweenness.

The separate but contiguous zones of Gonzalez-Torres’s New York exhibition were later reiterated in Paris, where he staged simultaneous presentations at Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot and Galerie Jennifer Flay. Entitled “*TRAVEL*”; “*TRAVEL #1*” and “*TRAVEL #2*,” these discrete installations literalized the notion of passage, for viewers were required to proceed from one venue to the other in order to experience the exhibition in its totality. At Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot (“*TRAVEL #1*”) an immense, sky billboard subtitled *STRANGE BIRD*, depicting two birds soaring in tandem, loomed on the wall; two identical strings

of lightbulbs—subtitled *LOVERS-PARIS*—originating from adjacent electrical sockets, trailed across the floor into two softly glowing heaps; on the mezzanine of the gallery, “*UNTITLED*” (*PLACEBO*), a vast radiant carpet of gold-wrapped candies, provided the only other intimation of light. On entering Galerie Jennifer Flay (“*TRAVEL #2*,”) the viewer was first confronted by a group of seven bloodwork graphs, all with sharply declining lines that collectively measured the passage of one week. After this sobering introduction, however, promises of emotional and physical transport were invoked by a second version of “*UNTITLED*” (*PASSPORT*), a stack of individual photographic booklets—giveaway passports, as it were—containing images of birds sailing freely through space. Then, continuing his practice of inverting public attention and personal reflection, Gonzalez-Torres constructed an interactive dance floor, subtitled *ARENA*. Reminiscent of the illuminated *GO-GO* platform he exhibited in 1991—complete with a bikinied male performer sporting a Sony Walkman—the dance floor was demarcated by a square of strung lightbulbs dangling overhead, with a dual-headphone walkman that once again provided a sound track perceptible only to the performer(s). This time the invitation was to the gallery visitors themselves to take to the dance floor in pairs and move to an otherwise inaudible beat. What in 1991 had functioned to elicit voyeuristic reactions to a (homo)erotic display, here enticed viewers to perform publicly, united by their private yet shared experience of the music. In this way, Gonzalez-Torres’s dance ‘floor operated as another site of transition, a site for erotic circulation, for traversals between the intimate and the communal.

Our understanding of space may still be predicated on age-old sets of oppositions that remain inviolable today; divisions between the domestic and business environments, the sacred and the secular, the rural and the urban all contribute to the social/spatial construction of subjectivity, (sexual) difference, and class identity.<sup>2</sup>) However, the spaces that Gonzalez-Torres navigates in his work are ones in which irreconcilable domains coexist and interpenetrate. Described by Michel Foucault as “heterotopias,” these zones accommodate shifting senses of time and

space; they are “counter-sites” in which “all the other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”<sup>3</sup>) According to Foucault, the heterotopia is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”<sup>4</sup>) A conceptual mapping of such a multivalent space can be glimpsed in Gonzalez-Torres’s early series of “date” pieces, conceived as empty sheets of black paper captioned with disjunctive historical incidents and private moments, followed by the year of their occurrence. Presented in arbitrary order, these events refuse narrative resolution; they disrupt linear syntax, undermining language itself.<sup>5</sup>) Disconnected memories, disparate places, and diverse social phenomena are evoked with the rapidity of shifting television channels:

*Alabama 1964 Safer Sex 1985 Disco Donuts 1979 Cardinal O’Connor 1987 Klaus Barbie 1944 Napalm 1972 C.O.D. or Bitberg Cemetery 1985 Walkman 1979 Capetown 1985 Waterproof Mascara 1971 Personal Computer 1981 TLC.*

And the television itself, as technological window onto the world, is a heterotopic “environment” fusing the private arena with a wide-ranging social speculation, a vehicle for immobile travel through space and time. The vast selection of available viewing channels can be surveyed in a matter of seconds. The television viewer is thus subjected to a phantasmic mosaic of shifting images. In the relentless oscillations between private/public, interior/exterior, and present/future that result from such acute visual stimulation, the “very narrative of space ... is reinvented as it is constantly traversed.”<sup>6</sup>)

The concept of heterotopography adds another dimension to “TRAVEL #2”—the series of bloodwork graphs which trace the temporal journey of illness. According to Foucault, heterotopias “are most often linked to slices in time,” and they begin to operate at full capacity when culture experiences a rupture in its traditional sense of chronological order, when different concepts of the temporal become operative simultaneously.<sup>7</sup>) The loss of life—a sense of the utterly transitory coupled with an awareness of the permanence of death—represents such a collision of disparate tempo-realities. The extraordinary scale of

loss created by the AIDS crisis has induced a new cultural understanding of time, a “heterochrony,” in which the future aspirations of modern-day youth coexist with a projected life span that contradicts their hopes and dreams. The descending red lines of Gonzalez-Torres’s graphs map the all-too-many journeys already taken through this new topos of life on the verge of death. They map a territory in which the private sufferings of those who mourn can no longer be segregated from the realm of public action.

1) This billboard was displayed in 24 locations throughout New York City in 1992.

2) Such forms of spatial bipolarization are embodied, for instance, in the epistemological construct of the homosexual “closet,” in that this socialized “place” demands a position that is either “inside” or “out,” regardless of the consequences. For more on the spatialization of the closet, see Judith Butler’s essay, “Decking Out: Performing Identities,” in which she points out the following polemic:

Conventionally, one comes out of the closet. ...but into what? what new unbounded spatiality...? Curiously, it is the figure of the closet that produces this expectation, and which guarantees its dissatisfaction. For being “out” always depends on being “in” it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence the closet must produce itself over and over again in order to maintain itself as “out.”

Included in Diana Fuss, ed. *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 16.

3) Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986), p. 4. In a recent article, film scholar Giuliana Bruno equated heterotopic space with cinematic vision; a portion of her text is relevant to this discussion of Gonzalez-Torres’s project.

Embodying nomadic dynamics, cinema maps a heterotopic topography. The heterotopic fascination of cinema is to be understood as the attraction to and habitation of a site without a geography, a space capable of juxtaposing in a single space several possibly incompatible sites and times: a site whose system of opening and closing both isolates it and makes it penetrable, as it forms a type of elsewhere/nowhere. “Bodily Architectures,” in *Assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, no. 19 (December 1992), p. 110.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

5) Foucault has written that within the “heterotopia:

Fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry... in such a state, things are “laid,” “placed,” “arranged” in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a common locus beneath them all ... Heterotopias are disturbing probably because they secretly undermine language ...

Quoted in Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988).

6) Bruno, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

7) Foucault, *Op. cit.*, p. 26.



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 'UNTITLED' (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990,

Commercial clocks, ed. 3, 13 ½ x 27 x 1" /

"OHNE TITEL" (Ideale Liebhaber), Handelsuhren, ed. 3, 34,3 x 68,6 x 2,5 cm.

(PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 'UNTITLED' (Placebo), 1991, 1'000-1'200 lbs. silver wrapped candies, dimensions vary with installation /

"OHNE TITEL" (Placebo), 453-550 kg silbern eingewickelte Bonbons, Grosse von der Installation abhängig. (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)





FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Placebo - Landscape - For Roni), 1993, 1'000 lbs of candies in gold of cellophane, overall size varies with installation / "OHNE TITEL" (Placebo - Landschaft - Fur Roni), 453 kg Bonbons in goldenem Zellophan, Gesamigrosse von der Installation abhängig. ("Travel"; Travel No. 1"), (PHOTO: ANDRE MORAIN)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED", 1993, two billboards installed for "Travel No. 1", dimensions vary / "OHNE TITEL", zwei Plakatreande fur Travel No. 1, installiert, variable Grossen.



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 'UNTITLED' ( Couple), 1993, 24 lightbulbs, extension cords, porcelain light sockets, dimensions vary /  
"OHNE TITEL" ( Paar), 24 Glühbirnen, Verlängerungskabel, Porzellanfassungen, variable Grossen. (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)





*FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 'UNTITLED' (Passport No. II), offset print on paper, endless copies, ideal height: 8 x 31 1/2" / "OHNE TITEL" (Pass No. II), Offsetdruck auf Papier, unbeschränkte Auflage, ideale Höhe: 20,3 x 80 cm.*

*FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 'UNTITLED', 1991, Location 4: 30 DeKalb Ave. at Flatbush Ave., Brooklyn, Billboard, dimensions vary. (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)*



*FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Passport), 1991, stack of paper, endless copies, 4 x 23 5/8 x 23 5/8" / "OHNE TITEL" (Pass), Papierstapel, unbeschränkte Auflage, 10,15 x 60 x 60 cm.*



## **EDITORIAL**

*Like two purists who have put the heat on a traditionally cool domain, our collaboration artists in this issue—Felix Gonzalez- Torres (\*1957) and Wolfgang Laib (\*1950)—produce art that glows with precisely balanced gestures, subtly infiltrated signs, and cogent mental fields of force.*

*Wolfgang Laib has chosen a spot in the Pyrenees, to form there a public place as a sanctuary of solitude, a place covered with “that energetic gold that is wax.” (Jean-Marc Avrilla)*

*Felix Gonzalez- Torres spreads out, his gigantic pictures on city billboards, symbolizing both the stillness of “being-with-oneself” and the publicness of outward thrust.*

*The wandering spirits of these artists take soundings of room and open space searching for the potentials of meaning. Laib and Gonzalez-Torres move the exterior world in and the interior world out; they fray the edges between outside and inside, between private and collective, treating them as pollen or curtains fluttering in the wind.*

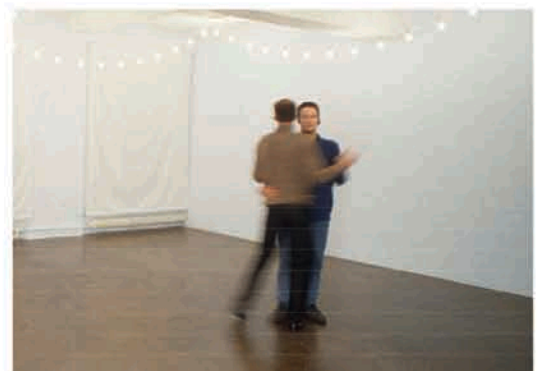
*In the one case, the site of artistic practice is abstract and terrestrial; in the other, it is radically urban.*

*Gabriel Orozco’s magical transformation of an old car, a Citroën DS, into a shape informed with a sense of privacy and self-confidence makes us wonder whether the thing has found its way into a gallery from the street or out of collective imagination and memory. Roni Horn’s Insert invites us to take a mentally and physically stimulating journey to “the center of the earth.”*



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Fear), 1991, blue mirror, 30 5/8 x 25 7/8 / "OHNE TITEL" (Angst), blauer Spiegel, 77,8 x 65,7 cm.

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Arena), 1993, strings of light bulbs, walkman with two headphones / "OHNE TITEL" (Arena), Glühbirnenstrang, Walkman mit zwei Kopfhörern.



SIMON WATNEY

# In Purgatory: The Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

*A testimony is something other than demographics. Neither does testimony attempt to substitute words for persons; that would be mere fetishism. Testimony is witness in front of an indifferent world about the worth and merit of persons.*

Timothy F. Murphy<sup>1)</sup>

*Death is insidiously present behind the most diverse masks, often silent, sometimes noisy, but always active along the paths of existence.*

J.-B. Pontalis<sup>2)</sup>

## Introduction:

### Death, Age, Memory

A recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* by the admirable Roz Chast epitomises a certain distinct sensibility of the '90s.<sup>3)</sup> We are shown a balding man from behind, seated at a table, looking at the obituary page of a newspaper which we also read (as it were) over his shoulder, just as one sneakily regards someone else's newspaper on a subway train or in a crowded cafe. The dead are provided with summary features, but no names are given. Instead we read only: "Two Years Younger Than You"; "Exactly Your Age"; "Three Years Your Junior"; "Twelve Years Older Than You"; "Five Years Your Senior"; and "Your Age On The Dot."

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European readers of American newspapers are frequently struck by two aspects of their obituaries. First, by the great age to which so many Americans evidently live. Second, by the sheer numbers of AIDS deaths, especially among young men in their thirties and forties. Chast's drawing does not require identifiable faces, since its subject matter is not so much the dead as individuals, but rather death as it is perceived by the living. Indeed, this is precisely how many hundreds of thousands of American gay men start their every day, reminded of their survivor status—so far. The endless routine of sickness, dying and death also ages the survivors prematurely, as entire networks of friends vanish, and with them "the wealth of accumulated memory, taste, and hard-won practical wisdom they shared."<sup>4)</sup> This is the immediate context that gives specific significance to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's characteristically laconic observation that "There is a lot of memory involved in my work."<sup>5)</sup>

Memory also has its history, both in the lives of individuals, remembering, and in whole collectivities of memory. Such collective memories will often be in sharp conflict with one another. Indeed, social collectivities are largely constituted by such bodies of accumulating memory. This is how history is lived in social relations. However, memory is never simply transparent. As I have argued elsewhere:

“Psychoanalysis refuses any notion of direct, unmediated vision, since it understands seeing as a constant site of unconscious activity ( ... ) We cannot theorise the workings or nature of remembering without at the same time considering the systematic mechanisms of forgetting. Once we begin to think of both seeing and memory as primarily defensive and self-protective operations, saturated with fantasy, then the status of ( ... ) imagery is affected rather radically.”<sup>6)</sup>

Collective memory is also limited by concrete institutions, and the criteria they employ which privilege certain “angles” of memory, some elements to the exclusion of others, and so on. Moreover, memory is clearly culturally organised in the preferred likeness of those who possess the power to define the past. For the individual, memory thus always involves a degree of intersection between the seemingly irreducible immediacy of recollected experience, and the tug of institutionally sanctioned “official” memories. Thus each individual death takes place to a greater or lesser extent in the context of a wider culture of dying, in which memory and memorialising play an important function.

## Exemplary Bodies

British art historian Nigel Llewellyn has described how prior to the Reformation: “The traditional belief about Purgatory had created a popular image of the afterlife as a place where the souls of the dead might be imagined residing after the decease of their natural bodies, but before the Last Judgment. Purgatory also allowed the living a sense of contact with the dead through prayer ( ... ) One of the Reformers’ main grievances was against the whole corrupt practice of indulgences ( ... ) Inscriptions on countless monuments which beseeched passers-by to pray for the dead—’orate pro nobis...’—encouraged this sense of contact, but such wordings were expressly

forbidden by reformist statute. The ending of Purgatory thus caused grievous psychological damage: from that point forward the living were, in effect, distanced from the dead ( ... ) to balance the traumatic effect of the loss of Purgatory the Protestant churches gradually developed the theory of memoria, which stressed the didactic potential of the lives and deaths of the virtuous.”<sup>7)</sup>

As Llewellyn notes: “Protestant monuments were designed to be read as examples of virtue. In skillful enough hands and given sufficient ambition on the part of the patron, the monumental body could invent for posterity a completely new persona.”<sup>8)</sup>

In spite of regional and other variations, the Lutheran theory of memoria underpins the entire subsequent Anglo-American culture of death and memorial art.

There is no social constituency in contemporary Anglo-American society which is more likely to be considered to be without virtue than gay men, a situation which has been greatly aggravated by the advent of AIDS. In this context we may identify a deep, ongoing cultural crisis which co-exists with the AIDS epidemic and its many conflicting narrations. Ever since the medical classification of AIDS in 1981, the bodies of people with AIDS have been used as signifiers in an immensely complex contest concerning the supposed “meaning” of the epidemic. We may thus detect a significant slippage at work between the field of “scientific” medical photography, which identifies symptoms, and a wider form of what might be described as moralised seeing, according to which AIDS is a signifier of powerful non-medical meanings. AIDS thus becomes also a crisis of memory. For when the deaths of our loved ones are casually dismissed as “self-inflicted,” it is the most fundamental level of our most intense experience of life and of love that is effectively denied.

Such issues of systematic remembering and forgetting, of memorialising and calumniating gay men who have died from AIDS, are absolutely central to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, now in his mid-thirties, and living at the epicenter of the AIDS crisis. His work is initially distinguished by his refusal to engage in a dualistic cultural politics which strives to

counter the widespread demonising of people with AIDS with an equally over-simplified (if understandable) tendency to heroise them. Rather, he has stepped away from contestation which is directly grounded on the bodies of people with AIDS and their representations. Instead, he has consistently drawn attention to the discursive formations which frame policy and practice in relation to the everyday lives of gay men in the AIDS epidemic. He sets out and reenacts discursive contradictions and conflicts, and all his work to a greater or lesser extent involves situations of tension between rival and conflicting potential meanings. In this respect his work does not offer the closure of meaning that has been widely understood as one marker of “political art” in the twentieth century. While his work is focused with extraordinary conceptual precision, he is never simply didactic.

Rejecting the whole idea of any single “truth” that might encompass the social and psychic reality of all gay men within single representations, artists such as Gonzalez-Torres, Robert Gober, Jack Pierson, Tom Kalin, John-Paul Philippe, Michael Jenkins, and others have tended to draw attention to the workings of the various social and psychic mechanisms of displacement, disavowal, and projection which are actively at work in homophobic discourses, and thus also in the larger cultural process which constitutes and maintains individual and collective subjectivities. Such work is thus intended to intervene at a level prior to the self-consciously “political.” In effect, Gonzalez-Torres returns us to a sense of demarcation between “politics” and a politics of representation and, in doing so, exposes the workings of homophobic discourse—in symptomatic repetitions, omissions, slippages, metaphors, substitutions, emphases, and so on—rather than opposing a supposedly universally gay “truth” to what may misleadingly be regarded as homophobic “lies.”

This is evidently difficult to understand for critics coming from an old Leftist political culture, which is determined to cling to the notion of economic determinism, and which denounces “consumerism” as stupid and greedy with all the vigour it had previously reserved for those it accused of “false-consciousness”—the ignorant masses who so routinely

fail to line up to justify the messianic pretensions of the Revolutionary Party leadership. In a recent article, British artist and critic Terry Atkinson describes “those who consume” as “transfixed by their addiction to keep doing it.”<sup>9</sup> It is almost as if “producers” and “consumers” are imagined as distinct tribes, the former “good” class subjects, the latter wanton hedonists. From such a perspective, all objects (including art objects) are considered primarily as commodities, functioning in a distinct economy and epoch to be known as “Late-Capital.” Again, from this perspective both “the audience” and “the market” are regarded as invariant and monolithic. What is “good” about “good” art from this perspective would be precisely its capacity to somehow transform the viewer into a good, productive, socialist subject, rejecting the culture and values of Late-Capital. It would be closely akin to a religious conversion.

For Atkinson, Gonzalez-Torres’s candy pieces can only make sense as: “an area where gluttony, a kind of subspecies of Late-Capital, might be the order of the day. Shades of Hieronymous Bosch.”<sup>10</sup> Yet it is hard to imagine how Gonzalez-Torres (or any other artist) is supposed to be “effective,” since according to Atkinson and his ilk: “The problem with all our critiques of Late-Capital is that in allowing the critique, Late-Capital can feel good about itself.”<sup>11</sup> Late-Capital is thus depicted as an entity that can think for itself, and also feel “better” (and presumably “worse”?) about itself. Such a monolithic, totalising politics can hardly be expected to recognise the bizarre comic absurdity of its own reflections on “where Late-Capitalism sees itself.” If Atkinson truly believes that the entire developed world is currently “suffused with self-congratulation” one can only speculate on which nearby planet he might be living.

Such doubts equally involve his inability to begin to comprehend the historical and cultural circumstances that shape Gonzalez-Torres’s project. Thus his spectacularly odd reading of Gonzalez-Torres’s 1989 *Sheridan Square* installation, just round the corner from the site of the 1969 Stonewall riots which marked the emergence of the modern gay political movement. Placed on a billboard at the entrance to New York’s most celebrated gay strip, Christopher

Street, the piece substituted for the more familiar image of the Marlborough Man, which had famously occupied the same public space for many years. The piece reads as a low double horizon against an austere black ground: “*People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harrassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme / Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March On Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969.*” Atkinson contrasts what he insultingly describes as the “pathos” of this piece, which allegedly “comes from remembering the gains acquired through a tradition of political culture,” to another billboard project which simply shows a recently vacated double-bed with two pillows and a duvet. For Atkinson this is also an image of “pathos”—“personally rich and formally bleak.”<sup>12)</sup>

It is important to correct such fanciful interpretations, since the Stonewall riots were most decidedly not produced by any known “traditions of political culture,” at least not in the tradition of ultra-Leftist party politics espoused by Atkinson et al. (On the contrary, Stonewall was a community-based response to immediate police brutality at a community level, and it was led not by Marxists, but by black and Latino drag queens.) Nor is the bed piece an image which can adequately be described (and thus dismissed) as merely “personal” or “private.” On the contrary, as Gonzalez-Torres has pointed out:

“Someone’s agenda has been enacted to define ‘public’ and ‘private.’ We’re really talking about private property because there is no private space anymore. Our intimate desires, fantasies, dreams are ruled and intercepted by the public sphere.”<sup>13)</sup>

Thus the Sheridan Square piece rejects a conventional “political” roll-call of heroic achievements, and presents history in a far more complex way, out of chronological order, melding different types of events from the murder of gay San Francisco politician Harvey Milk to the formation of community-based organisations in response to HIV/AIDS. History is thus specifically not presented as a seamless progressive narrative, expressing some supposedly unified historical force or will. Rather, events and institutions coexist, as in memory, in no particular order or sequence beyond that of our own active interpretive making. The “private” defiantly invades “public” space.

When the *Bed* billboard was exhibited in Glasgow in 1992, similar criticisms were levelled against it, on the grounds that it was not sufficiently “informational,” that it was not sufficiently didactic. Yet what could be more powerful than the sight of a clean beautiful double bed on hoardings in a grimy, wintry industrial city? For beds are where most of us are born, where we most frequently have sex, and where, if we are lucky, we will eventually die. The image of a double bed, whose pillows clearly bear the imprint of the two people who had recently occupied it, carried over the widespread publicity surrounding the exhibition and its subject matter into the public spaces of a typical city. Gonzalez-Torres draws our attention to the sheer comfort of being in bed, and the intense pleasures we associate with bedrooms. Yet, as the *Sheridan Square* poster reminds one, the privacy of the bedroom is also intimately connected to the gender of those who sleep there. Hence the significance of the reference to the notorious (or forgotten) 1986 Supreme Court decision that American gay men have no constitutional right to privacy from direct police interference in their own homes. Moreover, the reference to Harvey Milk will also remind older gay men, and others, that Milk’s assassin, Dan White, received only a three-year jail sentence on the grounds that his judgment had been impaired by an excessive intake of Twinkies, a brand of sweetmeat popular with American children. (At the time, “twinkies” was also a derogatory term for gay men in the United States.)

In Britain we refer to candy as “sweets,” and children are sensibly exhorted never to take sweets from strangers. This is just one of the many levels of meaning which operate in relation to Gonzalez-Torres’s celebrated candy spills, such as his “Untitled” (Welcome Back Heroes) of 1991, a 400-pound stack of red, white and blue wrapped Bazooka gum, “memorialising” the Gulf War. Other candy pieces include portraits of his boyfriend and himself, and others, in which the candy has the same weight as his subjects. Who call resist candy? Thus the metaphoric associations of his materials permit Gonzalez-Torres to construct works which share what amounts to a formal invitation to the audience to participate by slowly ingesting them, sweet by sweet. Nor should we forget





FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED", 1991,  
Location No. 11: 31-33 Second Avenue, East 2nd Street,  
Manhattan, billboard, dimensions vary.

in this context the gradual wasting, and loss of appetite, which is so often and so painfully experienced by people with AIDS.

Such latent implications were most powerfully mobilised in his 1991 "Untitled" (Placebo), which consisted of 1000-1200 pounds of silver-foil wrapped candies, laid out like a huge carpet across the floor of the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. Like several other pieces, including "Untitled" (Bloodworks), Placebo immediately involves us in the cultural field of the medical clinical trials of potential treatment drugs. A placebo is an inert substance, indistinguishable from a pharmaceutical compound in comparison to which the effects of a drug may be measured, after a sample of individuals have agreed to enter a clinical trial in which they do not know whether they are receiving the potentially therapeutic drug, or the placebo. And yet a placebo is never just an inert substance, for it inevitably carries with it a profound supplement of hope. Moreover, as a participant in a clinical trial, one does not know whether or not one is taking a placebo every four or eight hours, sometimes for years on end. Furthermore, the pharmaceutical compound may eventually turn out to be an effective treatment which, by receiving a placebo, one has in effect lost the opportunity to take. On the other hand, the compound may have unintended side-effects, and even do one harm. There is also the more straightforward question of the sheer quantity of such pills one ingests in the course of a clinical

trial, or any long-term therapy. There is thus a complex, shifting relationship among Gonzalez-Torres's various candy pieces, which has not been apparent to critics who regard his use of sweets as if they were traditional, fixed iconographic symbols.<sup>14)</sup> These are works of art which enact and embody the instability of life, and its extreme unpredictability and transience. There is no false optimism here, no self-deception. Rather, Gonzalez-Torres finds and mobilises materials which may function as analogues for experience and emotions which are not "explained" in any extended biographical supplementary exegesis. They are works about love, desire, loss, death, and mourning, and much of their extraordinary power derives from the artist's refusal to retreat into didacticism. They are works which try to take us seriously as spectators, and which encourage us to make as many associative connections as we like in relation to the materials assembled before us, as well as in relation to previous works.<sup>15)</sup>

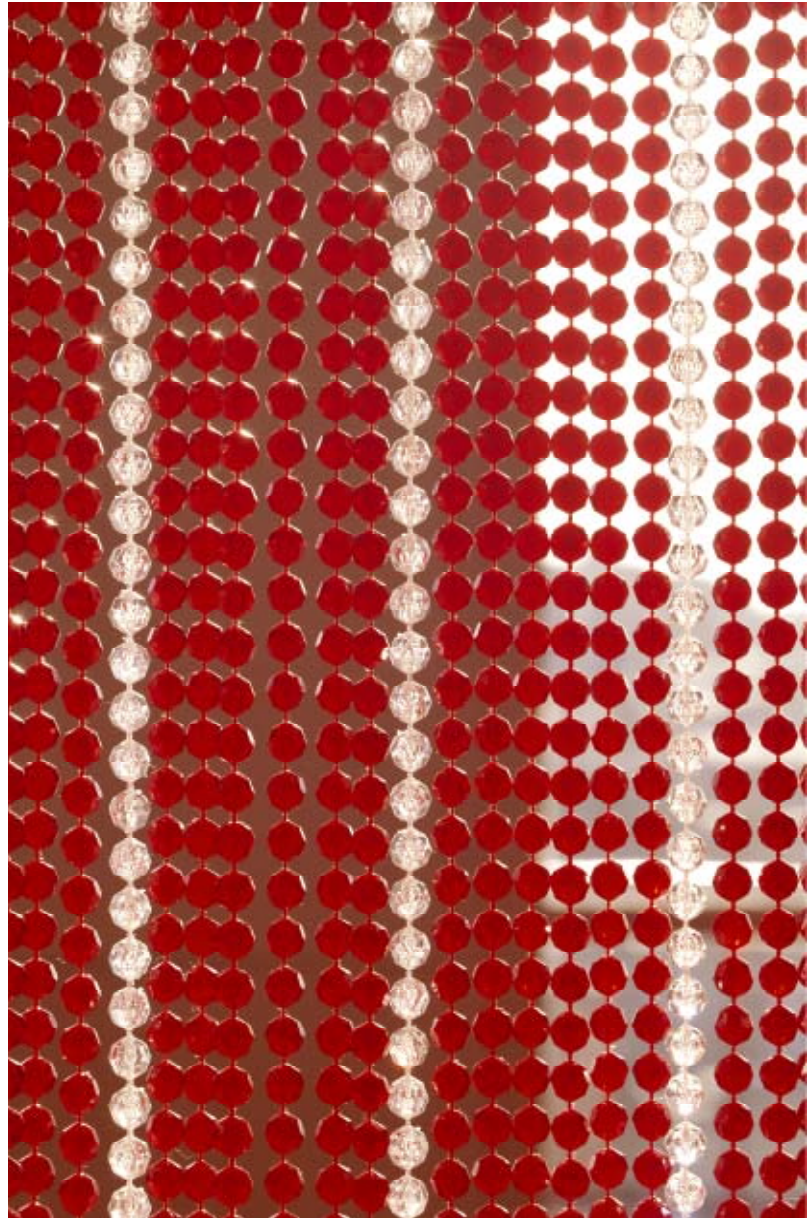
Thus "Untitled" (Placebo) also needs to be considered in the context of its exhibition in 1991, when it was installed for five days at the end of a one-month constantly changing show entitled "Every Week There Is Something Different," which had begun with a display of conventionally framed and displayed photographs of the carved inscriptions that form the backdrop to the Teddy Roosevelt monument outside New York's Museum of Natural History. These elicit Roosevelt's various attributes of public virtue in his roles as "Statesman," "Scholar," "Humanitarian," "Historian," "Patriot," "Ranchman," "Naturalist," "Soldier," and so on. In the second stage of the exhibition a powder-blue wooden platform was installed, unlit, in the middle of the room, whilst in the third week the gallery walls had been repainted white, and a line of light bulbs around the top edge of the platform was switched on. Every day a professional male Go-Go dancer arrived and danced for a short period of time to the almost inaudible accompaniment of his Walkman. Three of the origi-

nal photos were retained on the walls—"Soldier," "Humanitarian," and "Explorer."

For the Go-Go boy in his shiny silver briefs is indeed all of these things, and more, as the piece implies. Like so many others, he is soldier, on active service, manning his post, in a war-zone of homophobia, censorship, anxiety, hatred, fear and loss. He is a humanitarian in his ordinary, unremarked, everyday relation to the epidemic as it affects himself, his friends, and complete strangers, and in his insistence that he is perfectly entitled to his own sexuality, just as anyone else is entitled to theirs: an explorer who has dared to leave home, to set out against all the dreadful pressures of homophobic education and popular culture. He has come out as a gay man, explored his sexuality, and has now stepped courageously into the spotlight of exhibitionism, knowing himself confidently as an object of desire for other men, daring to be shockingly sexy in a world that must go on. And his HIV status? We don't know. Nor is this the issue. Which is precisely the point. Gonzalez-Torres is not providing us with ordinary, political analysis dressed up, as it were, in artworld terms. This appears to be his major crime, to those who expect and require "good" political art to remain within the broad Lutheran tradition of memorialising the "exemplary body" of the heroic man—the "good" class hero, the good "AIDS victim," and so on. In this "poetics of AIDS," there is no question of a humanist/expressionist aesthetic rooted in notions of "sincerity." For many of us, the dead are so intimately codeterminous with the living that the direct meaning of both terms is radically upset.

In any case, as Stravinsky pointed out long ago, sincerity is the sine qua non that guarantees nothing. Rather, we may consider the great variety of strategies and modes or signification being mobilised in

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Blood), 1992,  
plastic beads and metal rod, size varies with installation /  
"OHNE TITEL" (Blut), Plastikkugel und Draht, Grösse von der  
Installation abhängig. (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



Felix Gonzalez-Torres

relation to HIV/AIDS, from Gonzalez-Torres's foregrounding of the US health insurance industry in his "Untitled" (Blue Cross) stacks from 1990, to the drama of police lines fighting to prevent young men from leaving the remains of their loved ones outside the President's bedroom window. Unsurprisingly perhaps, critical commentary concerning Gonzalez-Torres has overwhelmingly concentrated on his supposed "appropriation" of Minimalism, and his re-wiring of its cultural connotations. Yet how terribly desiccated and precious much seventies Minimalism looks by comparison with his work. What we should notice is the way in which he relays meanings between different works, by means of the formal development of individual elements. Thus the row of light bulbs from "Untitled" (Go-Go Dance Platform) from 1991 have now taken on a formal life of their own in numerous subsequent light pieces involving strings of light bulbs, just as the gently chiming curtain of glass beads that gave access to the platform has been reworked with red and transparent beads in a visually and conceptually stunning analogue of red and white blood cells, blood vessels, and medical technology. Thus the light pieces also carry with them, as it were, memories (and forgettings) of their original context and its associations. And all his light pieces, with their poetic connotations of garden parties at night, discos, the Fourth of July, as well as boxing arenas and operating theatres, also carry with them an ever more ghostly shadow of the beautiful Go-Go boy on Prince Street in 1991, proudly and expertly dancing to his favorite Pet Shop Boys remix, and by contingency on the associative field of Placebo, which is also a packed dance-floor...

### Conclusion: A Note on Friendship

It would be difficult in the extreme to exaggerate the significance of the impact of HIV in the lives and identities of gay men around the world—the extraordinary uncertainty and complexity and determination to which it leads us as individuals facing a frankly appalling reality. In this respect certainly we are not like other people. In these circumstances we often feel that we owe one another "a terrible loyalty," to borrow from Tennyson. Without marriage and

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (*Lover Boys*), 1991,  
355 lbs. wrapped candies, dimensions vary /  
161 kg eingewickelte Bonbons, variable Grösse

its attendant rituals and institutions, gay men's most intimate and important relationships are frequently misunderstood and undervalued by heterosexuals, who simply cannot understand what one is actually saying when one tells them that a "friend" is sick or a "friend" has died. When old friends of mine die now I eventually come to picture them quite easily seated on clouds in some heaven designed by Pierre et Gilles, talking, laughing, having sex. This is not denial. We know they're dead. We also know we have to continue to fight on behalf of the living. This is what Felix Gonzalez-Torres's extraordinary work is "about." We have rediscovered Purgatory.

1) Timothy F. Murphy, "Testimony," in eds. T. F. Murphy and S. Poirer, *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language and Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 317.

2) J.-B. Pontalis, "On Death-work," *Frontiers in Psychoanalysis: Between the Dream and Psychic Pain* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), p. 184.

3) *The New Yorker*; October 25, 1993, p. 124.

4) Simon Wamey, "Preface: My Project," *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1994).

5) Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* Vol. XXIV, no. 161. Nov./Dec. 1991, p. 86.

6) Simon Watney, "The Image of the Body," *Figures* catalogue (Cambridge, England: The Cambridge Darkroom, 1987).

7) Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual c. 1500-1800* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), pp.26-28.

8) *Ibid.*, p. 102.

9) Terry Atkinson, "Rites of Passage: A & D, 1/2. Jan./Feb., 1994.

10) *Ibid.*

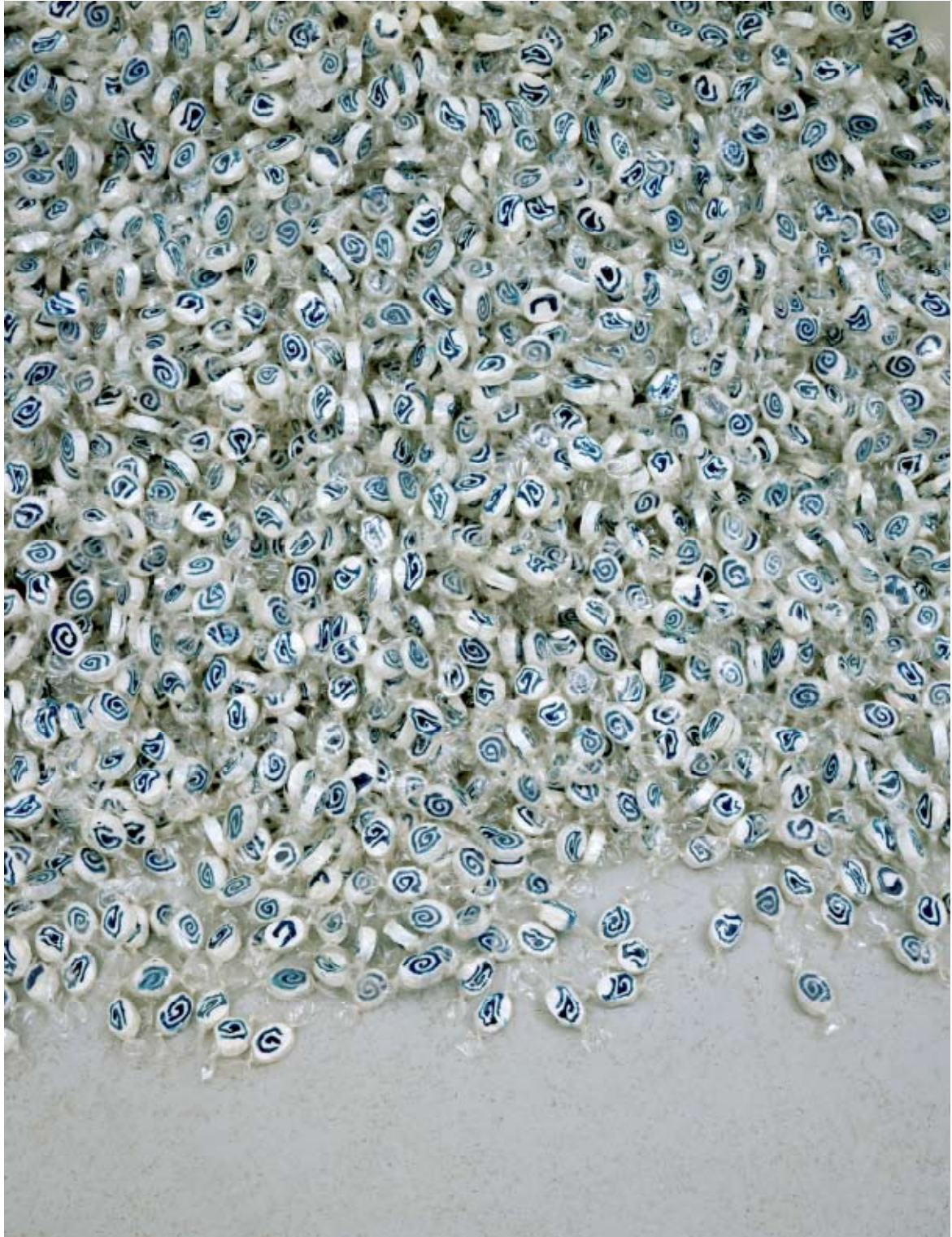
11) *Ibid.*

12) *Ibid.*

13) Nickas. op. cit.

14) For example, for Anthony Iannacci the candies "call to mind the ritual of communion. the consumption (of) the body and blood of Christ," and death itself is seen "as part of a sublime cycle, mirroring the Christian belief in the circularity of Christ's existence and resurrection." (*Artforum*, December 1991, p. 112)

15) In this context we might also consider th.. ways in which the titles of other pieces by Gonzalez-Torres (such as "Untitled" [Blue Placebo]), and the work itself, introduces the metonymous shade of Andy Warhol, and connotations of blue Marilyns, Liza, Electric Chairs, and so on. This is only to observe that here, as elsewhere, Warhol emerges as the most genuinely enabling of all the great post-War American artists, in relation to Gran Fury as much as to Gonzalez-Torres or Gober.



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (*Lover Boys*), 1991 Candies individually wrapped in silver cellophane.



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Blue Cross), 1990,  
offset print on paper, endless copies, cloth, 9 x 59 x 59" aprx./

"OHNE TITEL" (Blaues Kreuz), Offsetdruck auf Papier, unbegrenzte Auflage, Tuch, ca. 22,8 x 150 x 150 cm.

(PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED", 1992,  
individually wrapped candies, ideal dimensions: 2 x 48 x 48" /

"OHNE TITEL", verschieden verpackte Bonbons, ideale Größen: 5 x 122 x 122 cm.

(PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Revenge), 1991,

325 lbs., ice blue candies / "OHNE TITEL" (Rache) 147 kg, eisblaue Bonbons.

(PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED", 1991,  
c-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag, ed. 3, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 /

"OHNE TITEL" c-Print-Puzzle in Plastiksack,  
ed. 3, 19 x 24, 15 cm. (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, Installation view: "EVERY WEEK  
THERE IS SOMETHING DIFFERENT", May 2-June 1, 1991 /  
Installation: "JEDE WOCHE GIBT ES ETWAS ANDERES",  
2. Mai-1. Juni 1991 (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, Installation view: "EVERY WEEK  
THERE IS SOMETHING DIFFERENT", May 2-June 1, 1991 /  
Installation: "JEDE WOCHE GIBT ES ETWAS ANDERES",  
2. Mai-1. Juni 1991 (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Waldheim to the Pope),

1989, c-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag, ed. 3, 8 x 10" /

"OHNE TITEL" (Waldheim zum Papst),

c-Print-Puzzle in Plastiksack, ed. 3, 20,3 x 25,4 cm.

(PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Portrait of Austrian Airlines), 1993-94,

Billboards installed in 3,000 outdoor locations throughout Vienna, December 1993-February 1994, dimensions variable /

"OHNE TITEL" (Portrait der Austrian Airlines),

Plakatwände an 3000 Standorten im Freien in ganz Wien, variable Grossen.

(PHOTOS: MUSEUM IN PROGRESS, VIENNA)



*UNTITLED (North) 1993*





FG.T. *Untitled (Sand)*, 1993-1994. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, N.Y.

TERRITORIES

# Felix Gonzalez Torres: The past to come

BY CHARLES MEREWETHER

*Come -Come: how do you name that which I am coming from? - that .limn which I have come? that which I come (am about) to say? Derrida. Pas.*

In a recent series of photo-gravure, entitled: *Untitled (Sand)* (1993-94), Felix Gonzalez-Torres returns to an image that has appeared intermittently throughout his work. The image is of footprints in the sand and the series of eight works offers a sequence of similar images. Nothing more. How then do we speak of this work, except as an exercise in registering the play of light and shadow as it fills the hollowed out spaces? What we are given is what is left behind: traces of an absent subject, a “body” of evidence of that which has disappeared. And yet, as in other work by Gonzalez-Torres such as the strings of light, the curtains or even the paper

stacks, this apparent simplicity veils an elaboration which is, in essence, the guide to following the movement undertaken by the work. This will be our point of departure.

What then is this elaboration? Each print of *Untitled (Sand)* is a photographic image of footprints on sand, in which the artist’s use of photographic film and print technique doubly mimicks the grain of the sand and the impression of the footprint. By means of seriality and techniques of reproduction the work’s elaboration is to relentlessly displace the original by that which comes after so that, as Andre Bazin has noted of the photographic image, “it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the mode!” [1]

A playful conceit then of language. A disenchanted world where there can never be a returning or restitution of presence. But what if we were to accept the groundlessness on which the work has been elaborated as the place from which to begin? If we begin with these images as indexical rather than symbolic, then the economy of the work is one in which distancing precedes. And the choice by which the image comes into being, the mediating process and form by which it is transferred in order to make an appearance, turns our attention to the footprint in the sand as itself a form of trace. Blanchot writes:

*Effaced before being written. If the word trace can be admitted, it is as the index that would indicate as erased what was, however, never traced. All our writing...would be this: the anxious search for what was never written in the present, but in a past to come. [2]*

It will be this use of the indexical by the artist that while serving notice on the concept of the original, equally sets the stage for a distancing presence from itself. To this we will return, but first to elaborate more upon the economy of displacement through which the subject of Gonzalez-Torres work appears.

## TAKING STEPS

Not only there is no original but traces, no iconic image but indexical, but equally a conspicuous abandonment of the proper name, whether it be as given





Felix Conzalez Torres. *Travelling*. Installation at MOCA. *Untitled (Strange Bird)*, 1993. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photo Sue Tallon

by signature or title (except parenthetically). There is no essence to which one can appeal.

This is, I would call, a second staging of distanciation, an effect of the first operation as if the space opened up by the mediation, drives the reader towards the title in search of an answer to the lack which the indexical generates. That is, by neither repeating nor returning us to the place of origin, the indexical

opens up an interval that is discontinuous with what has gone before. The use of tile parenthetical following “untitled” marks the unfolding of a space that is at once supplementary and heterogeneous to itself.

We might say that the work appears to gather its meaning by way of an estranged relation to itself. Edmond Jabes will speak of the desert as an experience of “emancipated nakedness.”

*It is only in the desert, in the dust of our words, that the divine word could be revealed. A nakedness, a transparency of the word we have to recover each time if we are to preserve the hope of speaking. Wandering creates the desert. [3]*

The step taken is not given. It is made possible by coming after the trace of that which has been erased. As with seriality, this movement of deferral exposes us to another scene and secret



Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (North)*.1993.

filiation. The coupling of titles like the pairing of objects and the resemblance of images, each are given to a field of energy whereby one becomes the subject of the other. An attraction whose very contingency always puts itself at risk of total depletion. To this we might say: we do not appear to one another in the

light of reflection but rather, in a time when the non-identity of the same becomes the measure of both difference and communality

#### IN TIME

Writing of a now of time, Walter Benjamin observed that "History is the

object of a construction whose 'place is not homogeneous. empty time, but time filled by the now... [4] The work of Gonzalez-Torres brings us face to face with this gaping space in time, unbreachable even and most emphatically by representation itself, where the trace exposes history except as the promise of a past to come [5]. There is here the sense of an aporia, a non-identity to self, a hollowing out, an encounter with the outside of self, its exteriority. Rather than claiming an adequation of self through a restitution of the trace. The work of Gonzalez-Torres exposes itself to radical incompleteness. Defining the fragment, Blalichof writes of how:

*The fragment, as fragments, tends to dissolve the totality that it presupposes and that it carries off towards the dissolution from which (strictly speaking) it does not form itself; but to which it exposes itself in order, disappearing (all identity disappearing along with it), to maintain itself as the energy of disappearing [6].*

In this sense the work, as offered, becomes a fragment whose completion lies always both beyond and before itself. The encounter with the outside of the self is the self's origin. Art's vocation will be to give meaning back to the viewer rather than as already given. It will seek an interlocutor whose "eyes would reply to mine", an encounter that also produces a kind of sensual

anonymity gathered in the movement of its dispersal. At this time we hear the murmur of the other, whose voice will overcome our estrangement with proximity and the heart of solitude by intimacy.

It is, in this way, a sentimental journey and yet whose steps in the sand begin with erasure. It is a stepping out, an act of dis/placement that while effacing the trace of another time also generates, as if anew, its own figurative livelihood at the horizon of time, a time that will remain before and after us.

As wandering creates the desert, so art too is defined by what lies without. Along these borders we, in time, recognize our finitude and of our being in common, a community of strangers, of lovers. As the sand, so too the image of the sky and sea appear throughout the work of Gonzalez-Torres. An opening that lies before us - an

immeasurable fullness - yet nothing if not a dispersal, an infinite expanse.

In the time of exile, of the immigrant., the question of the trace can serve as a poignant reminder of the irrevocable passage in which there can be no returning, no point of origin against which one can measure the future to which one is abandoned. First steps, the setting sail for distant shores: the exposure to a horizon of freedom and death, the past to come. As Blanchot asks:

From where does it come, this power of uprooting, of destruction or change, in the first words written facing the sky, in the solitude of the sky, words by themselves without prospect of pretense: "it" - the sea?

Notes

[1] Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (University of California Press, 1967),14,

cited in R. Krauss "Notes on the Index: Seventies An in America", October No.3. 1977.75. Drawing on Bazin and the work of Jakobson and Lacan on language, Rosalind Krauss characterizes both the work of Duchamp and the art of the Seventies as functioning through the indexical. (68-81).

[2] Maurice Blanchot. *The Step Not Beyond* (New York: State University of New York, 1992),17.

[3] Edmond Jabes, *From the Desert to the Book*. (New York: Station Hill Press.1990), 68.

[4] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968). 261. Arendt notes that Benjamin uses the word "'jetztzeit'" to mean not only the present. but also Illystical "'nunc slans'"

[5] For this reason too, I would suggest that on occasion dates are important to the work of Gonzalez-Torres. They mark the performative of history and ourselves as part of that history, of its passing. And therefore both erases history, but always mindful of its dates. it is in turn an art of memory, of circumstance.

[6] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 78.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Travelling*. Installation view at MOCA. *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-For Roni)*, 1993.



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# JOSEPH KOSUTH AND FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

## A CONVERSATION

Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Joseph Kosuth. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. 20 Jan. – 18 Feb. 2005. Catalogue.  
[The first in a series of two-person exhibitions exploring Gonzalez-Torres's affinities with other artists].

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: One thing I'm always very interested in dealing with is the notion of public and/or private. The billboards can only be shown in public. They're privately owned but always publicly shown.

Joseph Kosuth: That's interesting. We probably don't know details of each other's work, but my work from 1968, the beginning of *The Second Investigation*, was where I started doing anonymous advertising in public media. Through to 1979, I refused to sell anything. In particular, I didn't want those investigations that were large installations to end up in somebody's home. I said, you can't buy it, but you can give me a grant like you give a scientist. And for this, I'll give you the right to put it in a public space. It couldn't be in a private one, in a domestic space. The only collector I ever allowed to do that even temporarily was Giuseppe Panza, because the space he had was like a museum. He also promised to put my works in public context eventually - which he is doing. But he was an exception. I got very little support for this work. I got support from the National Gallery in Canada and the Neue Gallery in Kassel which displayed a work for years on loan from a collector. But there were very few people who wanted to spend their money without getting some 'goods', you know.

FGT: Well, you opened the way for other artists. People can buy these billboards, but they have to put them in public - they have to rent a public space. It's like buying edition prints, except that you put them up on billboards. It's also doing a service to the collectors because they don't have to put the works into storage!

JK: This goes from the earlier idea of the collector as someone who buys nicknacks to the idea of the collector as patron. It's a certain kind of leap that has more to do with intellectual engagement and less to do with reducing art to nice little things in the apartment.

FGT: You know, someone once asked me to make an edition of prints. But I thought, why make an edition, why make a print? The world doesn't need any more prints by artists. So I said no. But then I thought about it, and I said, well, why don't we push the limits and do a billboard? The conditions are such that you can only show it in public. You have to show it in public.

JK: That's the thing. When you get an invitation which takes a certain traditional form, the point is not simply to reject it from some kind of moralistic 'ivory tower' position. But rather to play with the form and its larger context, so you end up turning it inside out. You make a cultural

act and a political act out of the authority of the form that has always been there, unproblematically. That's the interesting material to work with.

FGT: Well, my first reaction was a very predictable leftist reaction which more and more I am questioning and finding very static and self-defeating. At this point I do not want to be outside the structure of power, I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative to what? To power? No. I want to have power. It's effective in terms of change. I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are, in other words, replicating themselves, because that's the way the culture works. So if I function as a virus, an imposter, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions. And I think that maybe I'm embracing those institutions which before I would have rejected. Money and capitalism are powers that are here to stay, at least for the moment. It's within those structures that change can and will take place. My embrace is a strategy related to my initial rejection.

JK: It's another formalism to reject them a priori.

FGT: Right.

JK: As you know, in that kind of prescription based on habit which implies a moral ...

FGT: At one time you had a point in rejecting them because there was the opportunity for genuine change within another socio-economic model.

JK: Well, the point I was making was that in the 60s we were very much thinking about the fact that we really wanted to break the form of making meaning radically and we didn't want to show in galleries and museums. We wanted to work directly out in the world. And the work I did at that time reflected this. However, we began to realise that, in fact, there was already a discourse, a sort of circuitry of galleries and museums in which information could flow. Unplugging your microphone somehow didn't really seem to be the way to go. So when Leo Castelli asked me to show with him, in 1969, when I was 24 years old, it was the right crisis moment for that 'truth'. I realised that there were a lot of people who could not ignore the kind of work I was doing, which was becoming known as conceptual art, and that if I was in a gallery like Castelli, they had to take it seriously. So I went there. The space was often very loaded for me because of what had gone on in it before. And that was often problematic. But that was part of the texture of what I had to work with.

FGT: That space had a meaning, a kind of frame of reference in which the work was shown. I think that for you to have shown your work in a space like that is very crucial, very important, because as we know institutions have power and a very specific meaning, you can show in another space and not have the same effect that you had because you showed at Castelli. Also, when we think about the world, about showing out there in 'the real world', we tend to forget that the galleries are also real. We tend to make a distinction between the inside and the outside. But sometimes, just because a work is 'out there' doesn't make it public, you know. A work inside a gallery, in a so-called 'private space', will sometimes be more public because it can relate to the public much more than anything that is outdoors. Some artists who do outdoor sculpture, they haul what is usually a large thing outside, into a place where people have no reference at all to this kind of thing. It's the difference between art in public and art for the public.

JK: Right.

FGT: Showing in a place like Castelli was important because that place already had a voice of authority within culture and the market.

JK: Well, what we realise is that in this society, cultural engagement is expressed in economic terms. It wasn't simply about wanting to have money; it was an understanding that unless people could get engaged in your work, it would not have a cultural life. That really became very much part of the context of the material which one had to work with, that kind of struggle against the dynamic of the market, to fight for the meaning of your work in relation to what formed it. You know, you can sit in isolation and do 'perfect' works, but until you're engaged with a community, the work really has no meaning. It needs to be in the world to have meaning. However the world seems to be constituted. Your perception of what that 'world' is, ultimately is what the work is.

FGT: Well, it depends on how you define the world. For me, the world, my world, my public, was always just one person. You know. I've said that sometimes as a joke, sometimes seriously. For most of the work I do, I need the public to become responsible, and to activate the work. Otherwise, it's just another kind of formalist exercise that looks very fitting in the European sense, but not in America at this point in history. There's one question I wanted to ask you, about Ad Reinhardt. Sometimes it seems like two different bodies of work, two completely different styles of subject matter also. Well, in a sense, you put them side by side. It has almost a kind of formal quality.

JK: That's the perception.

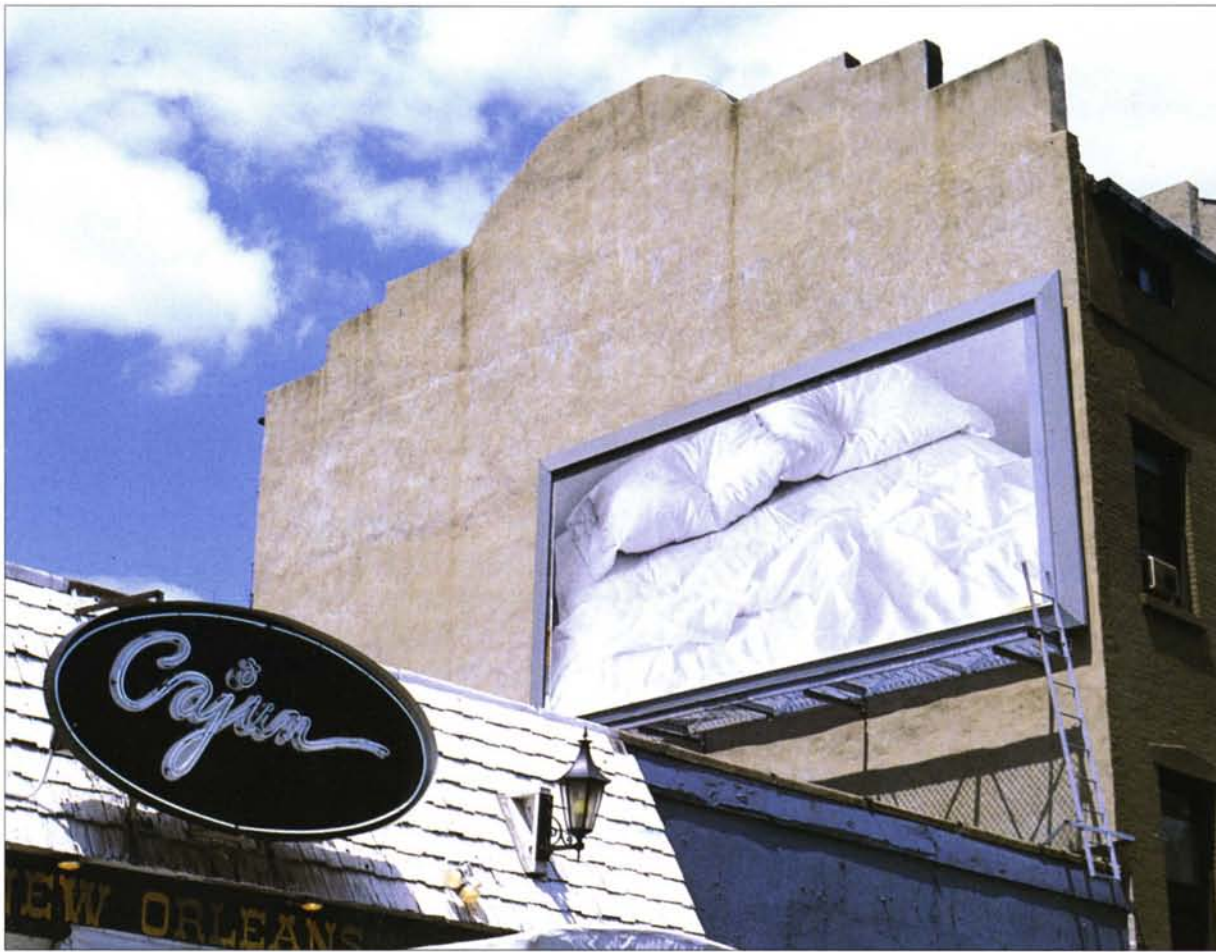
FGT: They are very similar. They're both, in their own area, extremely radical in terms of the artist and artistic practice. Completely radical. You know, Reinhardt as a 'painter' at that specific time in history, not only in art history but in that particular cultural moment. And with your work in the late 60s, which was a time in which America was going through a complete upheaval, a complete shift in morality and economics

and the Vietnam War was going on, suddenly you had an art work that people could not even depend on as something to hang on the wall. The work you were doing in 1968 refuses to look like art. Culture was changing so much, it was in such a state of upheaval, that one could not even count on the vital artistic drive to produce easily recognisable art work. You were dealing with a resemblance, a photostat on the wall, which even today doesn't feel comfortable with the label of art.

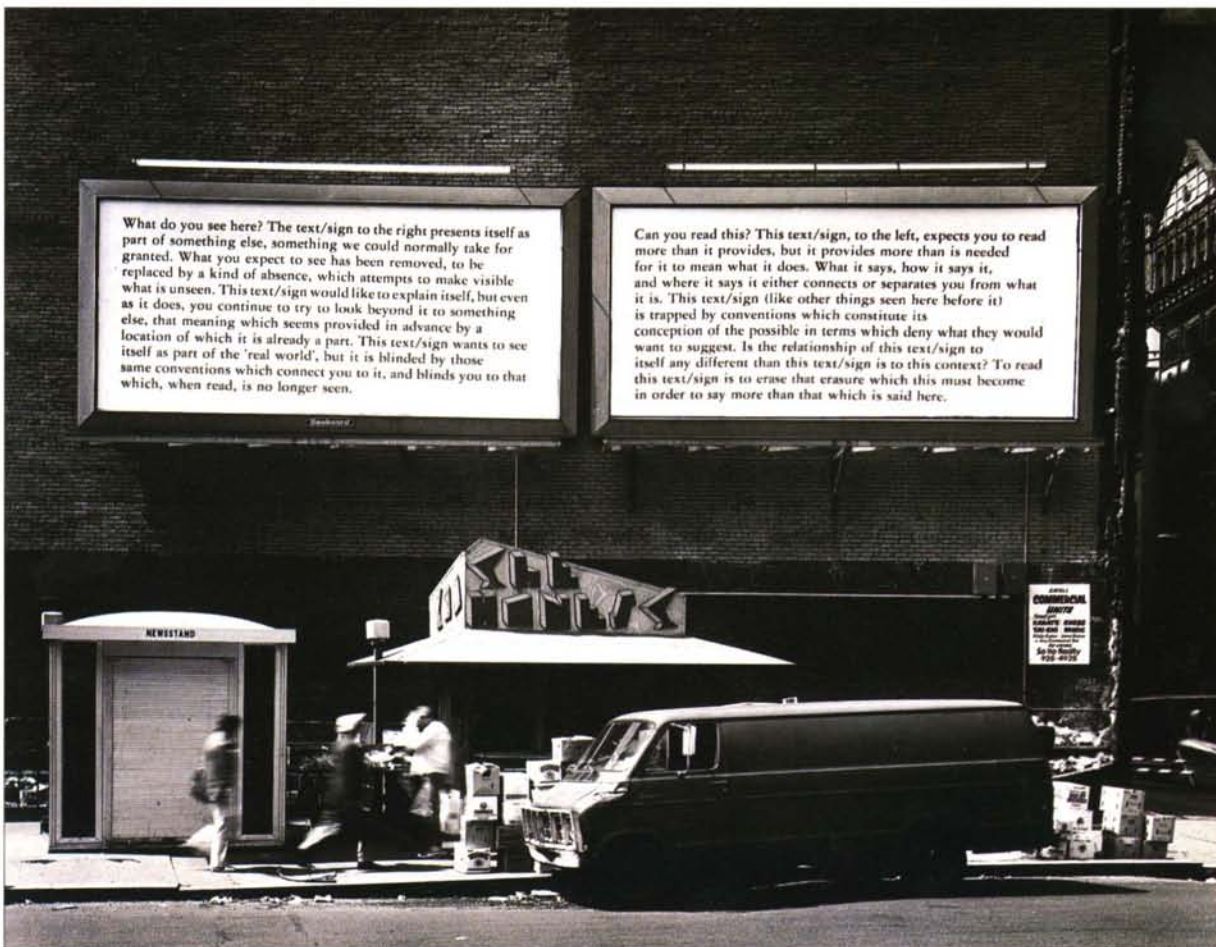
JK: Yes. It's surprising. 25 years later and my work still gets this reception. The use of photography, texts and just common objects is still in areas where people don't know its 'pedigree'. Art's life after decoration is a bumpy one ... You know, I always had problems in getting museums to deal with common objects as common objects. The Museum of Modern Art, for example, is always putting a little podium underneath the chair in *One and Three Chairs*. It's only the thickness of a board, maybe an inch and a half high, but they wanted it to be clear that people - some tired art tourist - wouldn't sit in the chair. I've had people putting velvet ropes around these works and, with a work such as *One and Five Clocks*, one of which is in the Tate in London, I've had people making sure that the clock is really running and showing the right time. I wanted them understood as just common objects, as props to a proposition about art, and not, in fact, as having any kind of special auratic quality emanating from them. The relicry of Christendom continues to be applied to the desire mechanism of the modernist art market. That was a very difficult thing to rupture, those presumptions about art. The reasons for using photography at this point - in the mid-60s - was because of earth art, of artists bringing in photos from the desert, and other artists who, a couple of years later, by 1968, began using photography as the work. For me, this was becoming a new kind of paint. That's when I began to use public media. Anonymous works in magazines, newspapers, billboards, bus advertising, and so on. I dropped handbills out of an aeroplane, I had 30 seconds on coast-to-coast Canadian television - you know, all sorts of public media. There was no prejudice about that. And of course, I refused to sign the newspapers, to turn them into more traditional work. I simply collected them up, and finally, years later, there became a repository for them, still unsigned, at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. It was important for me to let one see the activity as something serious, not an expensive form of home decoration but as something that had its own validity. Something that could use the tradition of art which in some ways could be seen as conservative, but pull out of it something that could be meaningful in another way for those living at this end of the century.

FGT: Well, I think that art gives us a voice. Whatever it is, whatever we want to make out of this thing called art. People generally complain about the art world. My students were complaining about it and I said, well, there's no such thing as the art world. You can't go to a building down Broadway with a big sign outside saying 'Art World'. You can't knock on the door and say, 'Hi, Art World. How are you doing?' There are different art worlds. It is not a monolithic structure.

JK: Different art worlds that overlap.



*Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'Untitled', 1991, billboard, Location #9 133 Eighth Avenue, 16th Street, photograph from The Museum of Modern Art, New York 'Projects: Felix Gonzalez-Torres', May 16-June 30 1992, photo Peter Muscato; Joseph Kosuth, Text/Context, 1978, New York City, photo Leo Castelli*



What do you see here? The text/sign to the right presents itself as part of something else, something we could normally take for granted. What you expect to see has been removed, to be replaced by a kind of absence, which attempts to make visible what is unseen. This text/sign would like to explain itself, but even as it does, you continue to try to look beyond it to something else, that meaning which seems provided in advance by a location of which it is already a part. This text/sign wants to see itself as part of the 'real world', but it is blinded by those same conventions which connect you to it, and blinds you to that which, when read, is no longer seen.

Can you read this? This text/sign, to the left, expects you to read more than it provides, but it provides more than is needed for it to mean what it does. What it says, how it says it, and where it says it either connects or separates you from what it is. This text/sign (like other things seen here before it) is trapped by conventions which constitute its conception of the possible in terms which deny what they would want to suggest. Is the relationship of this text/sign to itself any different than this text/sign is to this context? To read this text/sign is to erase that erasure which this must become in order to say more than that which is said here.

FGT: There are different institutions, in the same way that there are a lot of different artistic projects that we can use for our own ends. That's how I see art, as a possibility to have a voice. It's something vital.

JK: I'm thinking of that in relation to Ad Reinhardt. You pointed out that you see the passage of those works within a history of the middle of this century. Perhaps it's about that period of transition from the original ideas of modernism that were formed, through to where we are. He went through it, he was that passage, and the work really was a development of a voice of art as it was understood at that time, and in some ways, it could even look conservative. But what's interesting is that he took that 'passage' with such severity and such single-mindedness that finally when you get to his important work, the black paintings, there is this incredible totalising force. And by being so full, they appear to many as being empty, which is one of the delicious paradoxes of Reinhardt. And for me, as I've said, when you get to that 'emptiness', the fullness of it is clear in all the other aspects of Reinhardt's signifying activity. In those cartoons, in his teaching, in all the panel discussions that he participated in, in those incredible slide shows, in his writing. I mean, all that history makes one realise the important responsibility of the artist, the moral agency of the artist. And this, for me, was important and taught me much as a young artist. Artists have a special responsibility. Our activity must make a difference. As Reinhardt said, 'Art is not the spiritual side of business.' This is central to a shift from the artist being a decorator concerned with forms and colours to being a cultural activist concerned with meaning. Reinhardt's total signifying activity was my source to identify the need for this shift. There's a difference between what artists do, and there has to be that kind of moral agency behind the activity of the artist. Without it being simply moralistic, however, at the same time. We have to, as a practice, mean something. This is always a political act.

FGT: I'd like to return to what we were talking about before, that art is like an antenna of what's going on in culture, what's really going on and what's going to come out of it. After those years of conceptual art that demanded so much from the viewer, so much participation, so much of an intellectual involvement, we had a return in the 80s to the expensive home decorations, you know? Big paintings to fill those now empty office spaces downtown. That was a very scary time for me, because I saw this as a very ahistorical artistic practice.

JK: It was depressing to see after so many years of fighting against that.

FGT: It was as if we had no collective memory, no past.

JK: Exactly. It's complete elimination.

FGT: It was like this celebration ... It was too scary to be funny.

JK: It was an ahistorical parading of history - as tradition - for the market.

FGT: Sure. It renounced any kind of history, any kind of involvement, any

kind of judgement involvement with the work. It was just a massive excessive production of splatters of paint that meant nothing. But in a way this excessive gesture devoured itself, it proved how empty it was by its own default.

JK: It only cited artistic forms that could function as an authority, an authority that would function in the market as quality. In other words, it was only the skin, it had not the heart of art.

FGT: Well, it was not like Reinhardt's painting in which there's an intellectual demand on the viewer about accepting and engaging this painting that's just black on black. And you even need a few minutes to see that the blacks in the painting are different. It's very different to what was requested from the viewer with those huge paintings with a lot of splattered colour and tacky figures doing something in the East Village. Kids from middle America, living in the East Village, gentrifying this neighbourhood and doing paintings late at night. Wow, how Bohemian.

JK: Wearing expensive suits ... Dress like a yuppie and paint like Pollock.

FGT: Right. And then painting with those suits on. And then telling it to People magazine. Look, we are a whole bunch of whackies, of weirdos running around doing these crazy things late at night. That's what the artists are according to the script. Those people ...

JK: But that was the only thing that could be shocking, that you could paint in a Versace suit. The element of the avant-garde shocking the middle class - the art couldn't do it anymore. They had to wear the suit to do it, the last icon to break.

FGT: That's a funny thing. I never even thought about that. But the thing that always amazed me the most is that those people were so willing to live the life of an artist. It was demanded from them, to live the role of an artist, to make a statement once more. We have to look again at what was going on economically and politically at that time in America. It was the height of the Reagan empire. The height of the junk bond market. And that new clientele needed something that ...

JK: They needed a meaningful social context in which they could use that money.

FGT: It became the spiritual side of business. (laughter) But what a spirit! I mean, again, it reflected what was happening in business. The junk bond days and the Savings and Loans feast - I don't even have words to describe that, because it's what we're paying for right now. You might not know this, but right now we're no longer a welfare state, because in America for every dollar we spend on welfare, we spend six dollars to bailout the Savings and Loans.

JK: Which was basically gutted by the coterie around the past 12 years of Republican administration.

FGT: Right. The Republicans were going to eliminate the deficit, and they tripled it. They changed the priorities of our economy and our society. Take their military complex. In 1980, for every dollar we spent on housing, we spent six dollars on the military. In 1989, for every dollar we spent on housing, we were spending 31 dollars on the military. So no wonder that after 12 years of this, artists are going to become the final threat. Cultural production is their final frontier. They have already changed the economics of this country. So what do they want to do now? They want to have a clean culture that reflects the ideal, you know, American family values, whatever those might be. At the same time, we have to recognise that there was also a lot of very valuable artistic practice happening in the 80s, mostly by women, within the feminist camp.

JK: Absolutely. When you had the Schnabel and Lupertz type of artists

doing these incredible, big 'Expressions', these phallogocentric productions, the perfect antidote, the perfect alternative was being made by a group of women. This existed also in Europe, but it was much stronger in New York. It was just the best work that was being done.

FGT: I think history will take care of that, hopefully.

JK: Those processes have already, I think, very much relativised that production. Because it essentially got its meaning from the market. And the market has left it behind. And once the market does that, there's no meaning left - to put it simply. It was funny that when there was an oil glut in the market, there was an oil glut in the art world as well. You know, most of my life, we never knew what our colleagues were selling for. We were almost embarrassed to even know. It's something I would never even have asked. I remember one day at the gallery one of the people working there was just amazed that the new younger artists who came in could quote each other's prices.

FGT: A stockmarket index.

JK: It was a horse race, and that was how you could tell whether you were winning or not. It was hard to tell from the work.

FGT: It's funny that at that time, in the 80s, if these people didn't sell out their shows at the openings, their careers were going downhill! The master narrative in full colour. I was just thinking about the recent television programme on art on 60 Minutes.

JK: It was very stupid. Completely ignorant. You know for years, whenever I was flying somewhere, I would read Time or Newsweek. I would never read the art because it was terrible, they didn't know what they were talking about in most cases, but I would read the science or other things, you know, really read it. After a certain point I said to myself, wait a minute, if they're idiots about the one topic I know well, then they're probably the same with all the other topics.

FGT: Well the 60 Minutes programme was, in a way, very gratifying to me because it was so extremely 50s - it deconstructed and parodied

itself. What's art and what isn't? Come on! Give me a break. At this point, to ask those questions is so sad. Everything happens in culture because it is needed. 60 Minutes makes a programme in 1993 about certain of these recent artistic productions that question the market and criticise it, but they never made a programme criticising the retro-practice of the 'heroic' painters of the 80s.

JK: Sure, because the market is weak. This would never have happened in 1980. Too many people had too much work ...

FGT: But also, Joseph, the art they decided to criticise, the art they decided to portray, is art that pushes the limits. I mean Koons' art, whether you like it or not, is a parody of itself. A parody of the economic crimes and excesses of the go-go 80s. It was an artistic production that was necessary and meaningful.

JK: And it's interesting when those limits are identified with artistic ones. But still, it's a limit. And it makes people nervous when art deals with this.

FGT: I wonder how much more comfortable they would have been with painting than with what were mostly objects.

JK: Well, apparently even Ryman was radical. Ryman, I mean, is the darling of middle-class academics who function now as the most conservative critics - neo-formalist theorists like Thierry de Duve or Yve Alain Bois. Whatever Ryman meant in the 60s, is not what he means now (and we can fairly ask whether or not it's the artist's fault). This is something that one has to take into account. But anyway, on this programme a Ryman was seen as an empty painting.

FGT: But still, I think that's the beauty of it.

JK: Which is where Reinhardt is, for me, worth much more. He did 'empty' paintings too, but the difference is what else he did. Unlike Ryman, he didn't passively let the critics create the meaning of his work. Reinhardt was radical.

FGT: Still, we feel very uncomfortable with the label of art, you know, like most of your stuff ... and I think it's pretty ... that, for me, is beauty.

JK: Yes?

FGT: That within this so-called art, we are expected to fulfil certain roles, to produce certain objects with very specific qualities. We still reject those notions and can produce a whole body of work, objects that don't follow those restrictions. And, for me, that is the beauty of this kind of ... I don't even know if we can call it radical practice.

JK: Yes, it's difficult. But what else?

FGT: Reinhardt is a very specific voice, a very special voice. Very unique



and in away, very effective. The book you have of Reinhardt's, when he showed at the Jewish Museum, I was very impressed by the biography, how he mixed historical events with his life. I've never seen that so thoroughly done. That touches me because I believe social, political and historical issues should be part of the 'studio', the same way that these issues shape who we are.

JK: I remember standing at the opening, looking at that and thinking, what a brilliant thing to do. It was considered a very, you know, wild thing to do at the time. I remember everyone was thinking, how come he's bringing all this stuff into his biography?

FGT: The last 30 years, with psychoanalysis and Marxist analysis and feminism more than anything else, studying how subjectivity functions, this division between private and public becomes very questionable.

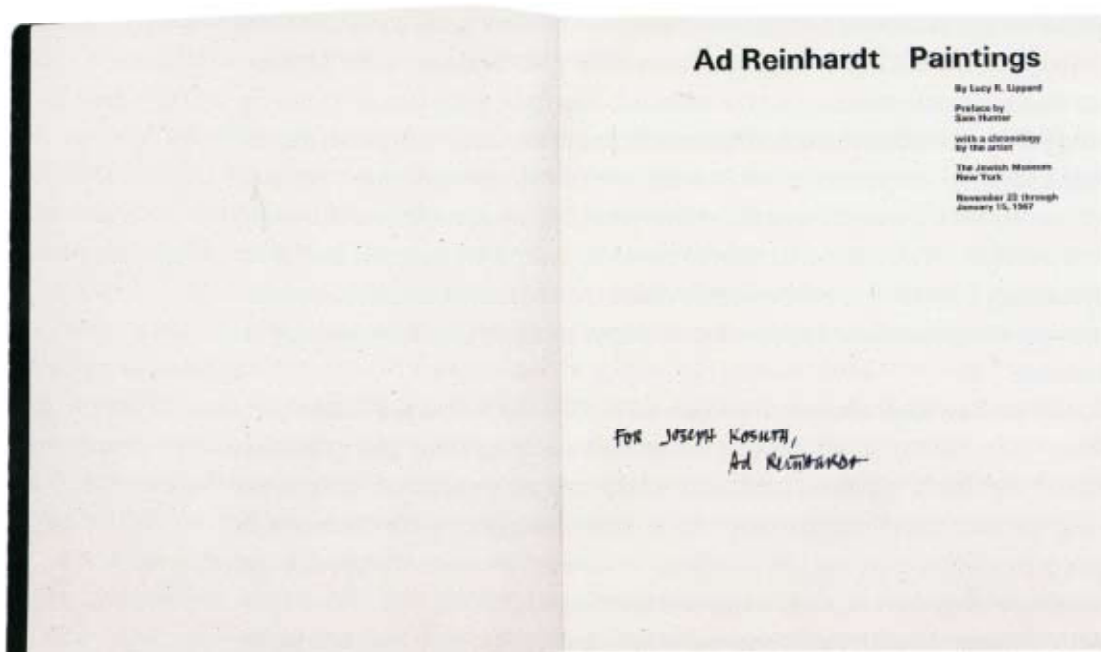
JK: You've dealt with that so well in your work.

FGT: Some of the works I've been doing for the last few years have been portraits in which I asked a person to give me a list of events in their lives, private events, and then mix those up with public events, more or less relating the public to these so-called private events. At this point in

history, how can we talk about private events? Or private moments? When we have television and phones inside our homes, when our bodies have been legislated by the state? We can perhaps only talk about private property. It was very revealing for me to see how Reinhardt included the independence of India in his biography. Because such things affect who we are in private - our most private practices and desires are ruled by, affected by the public, by history.

JK: What I was referring to was how the younger neo-formalist critics are distorting, well, really missing the point. They look at Reinhardt's black paintings and they don't realise that the biography you're talking about is as much about Reinhardt as those black paintings. You can't separate the two. The man who had that as his biography in his retrospective in 1966 is the same man who made the black paintings. The problem with the critics I'm referring to is that they don't see the total signifying production as one large work. They look only at those nominated 'art works' because that's what the market recognises as the production. They're still leaning on the market to provide the meaning for the activity. But we, as artists, understand that it's one large process, that you can't somehow prioritise specific, given forms in that way. They inform each other.

This conversation was recorded in Joseph Kosuth's studio, New York, 10 Oct 1993.



Ad Reinhardt Paintings, The Jewish Museum, New York, catalogue signed by the artist

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felix gonzalez-torres

projects



The Museum of Modern Art

New York

May 16-June 30, 1992

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,  
We make a dwelling in the evening air,  
In which being there together is enough.

Wallace Stevens  
from *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour*

These lines from a Wallace Stevens poem describe a fictive space, a dwelling place constructed from imagination. Upon rereading these words in late 1991, the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres realized that some deep memory of them lay behind his decision, earlier that year, to photograph his own empty double bed. Closely cropped, Gonzalez-Torres's photograph, which is displayed here in the Museum's Projects gallery and on twenty-four billboards throughout New York City, is an intensely private image that recalls the intangible space Stevens described.

Gonzalez-Torres came across *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour* in a book of Stevens's poetry given to him by his lover, Ross, in 1988. Between the time of this gift and the present moment lie not only years, but irrevocable loss. In 1991, Ross, whom Gonzalez-Torres has referred to in the past as his only audience, his public of one, died of AIDS. His illness and, ultimately, his early and tragic death permeate the panorama of Gonzalez-Torres's art.

Two risks are taken in introducing the topics of homosexual love and death at the outset of this discussion. First, there is a chance this work will be misinterpreted as being only about AIDS. And second, there will always be those who find in such subjects cause for discomfort. Yet the risks are intentional. For as the artist himself has said "[My work] is all my personal history, all that stuff ... gender and sexual preference.... I can't separate my art from my life."

In striking this intimate note, then, the aim is not to limit our perception of Gonzalez-Torres and his work, but to ground it in reality. It is to begin with the artist's own story about the origins of the image of this vast bed. It is also to emphasize what is really at issue here: not private revelations- of personal history and sexual preference-but what happens to such revelations when they are placed in a public context. Much of Gonzalez-Torres's art questions what we mean when we describe things as "private" or as "public."

Are we referring to private lives, for example, or private thoughts? To private property or to private spaces? Are we responding to how these meanings conflict, intersect, and draw significance from their apparent opposite, that which is "public" -public personas, public opinions, public art, public space?

The artist uses diverse formal means to explore this territory; he works with billboards and books, words and images; he uses materials that range from candies and cookies to jigsaw puzzles and stacks of paper; he takes advantage of commonplace techniques such as offset printing and photography to make his art. In so doing, he creates work that can adapt, chameleonlike, to whatever a particular set of circumstances requires.

One way to think about Gonzalez-Torres's art and about the questions of public versus private is to think about the

conceptual and physical spaces in between things. In his "caption" or "dateline" pieces, the artist runs apparent non sequiturs such as "Pol Pot 1975 Prague 1968 Robocop 1987 H Bomb 1954 Wheel of Fortune 1988 Spud" in white type across the bottom of black sheets of paper. Here he asks the viewer to consider not only the correlations of the events or things named, but also the historical or conceptual gaps between them.

In an analogous manner, Gonzalez-Torres invites people to take away pieces of his candy-spill and paper-stack sculptures, activating the literal physical terrain between audience and art object, rather than the conceptual space of history. By focusing on the public implications of a private individual's actions, Gonzalez-Torres complicates conventional distinctions between the two realms.

Like those of many other artists of his generation, Gonzalez-Torres's concerns extend beyond the self-contained boundaries of the art object to encompass the circumstances that surround it. At issue here is not only the artist's choice of image (his bed) and medium (photography) but also the decision of where and how to display the picture (on billboards, scattered across New York City, repeated twentyfour times over, enlarged to superhuman scale). The exhibition focuses not only on the photograph's personal content but also on its social context and on the inextricable connections and differences between the two.

Whereas in previous works Gonzalez-Torres has taken elements from the public discourse-newspaper snippets for instance-and isolated them in the center of large sheets of paper, here the process is reversed. Rather than clipping something from the mass media and repositioning it within the clean smooth space of a work of art, he makes the photograph of the bed the informational fragment, and collages it into the broad and varied pattern of the contemporary urban landscape.

The artist has explained that by "taking a little bit of information and displaying this information in absolutely ironic and illogical meetings," he hopes to reveal the real meaning of issues. The juxtaposition of an image that we are inclined to read as private and a space usually conceived of as public is what Gonzalez-Torres would describe as an "illogical meeting." When we call something illogical, we are essentially saying that it runs counter to our expectations. A bed, for instance, might most simply be defined as one of the smallest amounts of space that we can call our own. But Gonzalez-Torres presents his audience with something quite different-a bed that has been recast in a new and extraordinary form. Some of our most basic associations with this familiar piece of furniture-its human scale, its domestic location-are upset.

In displaying his work not only within the relatively intimate space of the museum but also outdoors, the artist challenges yet another assumption. Most of this exhibition is not here in the museum-where we naturally expect it to be-but elsewhere. The gallery contains only keys to the whole: a billboard- scale enlargement of the photograph of the bed, identical to those posted throughout the city, and this brochure, which documents the billboards in situ and guides viewers to their sites. Museumgoers enter the gallery only to find that the artist wants to send them back out into the world.

By presenting this work in twenty-four different locations, the artist shifts emphasis away from the photograph's content to its context. Through its reiteration, what becomes distinctive is not the image, but what surrounds it. The white, undifferentiated surface of the gallery wall is supplanted by the variegated features of industrial, residential, and commercial zones. Given the vitality of these places, it becomes almost impossible to keep our eyes on the photograph. This is the artist's intention. The viewer is encouraged to note the contrasts between the rich colors and textures of the local scene and the gray and white tones of the photograph. The artwork and peripheral phenomena (passing cars, architectural details, advertisements, and signs) trade places, slipping back and forth between the center and margins of our focus.

Yet while city and image vie for our attention, the urban landscape serves as a colorful foil against which the photograph's absolute reticence and interiority are revealed. Set high above the street, the image of the bed is literally remote from the viewer. Thus what may at first seem to be an act of self-revelation—the placing of one's bed on public display—ultimately gives nothing away. Rather than being confronted, as we might anticipate, with intimate clues to the artist's presence, we are instead presented with overwhelming absence.

**A**bseence shadows Gonzalez-Torres's work in every way. Rumpled bed sheets and dented pillows are presented both as evidence of and as a sign for two absent human bodies. Ghostly contours are all that is left of beings who are no longer there. Pasted to and inseparable from both gallery wall and billboard surface, the image hugs its supports rather than taking up space. To remove the picture is to destroy it. Awareness of this fact heightens our consciousness of the physical fragility that inhabits the work as a whole.

Also absent are human touch, which is banished by the use of photography, and color, which is eliminated by the use of black-and-white film. In addition, there is no original. No "unique" art object is presented, and the "whole" of this work can never be seen all at one time. In each instance, what is visible is defined by the invisible. Presence, whether of bodies in bed or of art in a gallery, becomes only a mirror of things unseen.

When Gonzalez-Torres's photograph is compared to other billboard displays, it becomes clear that something else is missing. There is no language, no logo or label. Through the omission of caption or text, Gonzalez-Torres leaves the picture's significance open-ended, responding to the varied nature of his audience—wanderer, worker, commuter, citydweller, all those who will pass the billboards by—and to the wide range of associations they may bring to the work.

Surrounded by the predominantly vertical structures of New York City, Gonzalez-Torres's bed is resolutely recumbent. An empty bed invites us all to "climb in," no matter who we are—gay or straight, male or female, black or white. Thus, the artist establishes a common ground. At the same time, one of the merits of art like this is that it reminds us that no one work of art, no single image, means the same thing to everyone.

Unmade beds with tousled sheets may provoke sexual fantasies for some, and evoke painful memories for others.

Nearly all of us were born in beds, and many of us know people who have died in them. Between these moments of birth and death, beds are a place where we can rest. And in this city with its huge homeless population, the image of a bed reminds us of something lost.

**F**or' Gonzalez-Torres, the bed suggests not only personal and social realities, but another reality, which is the law. To him, one of the most important meanings to be attached to this work returns us to the question raised at the start: what do we consider public and what do we deem private? While most of us might prefer to think our beds are private, the artist insists they are anything but, and the law concurs.

In the 1986 case *Bowers versus Hardwick*, the Supreme Court determined that the zone of privacy—that area which in principle we can call our own—does not encompass a private individual's right to engage in certain sexual acts. This decision frames Gonzalez-Torres's perception of the bed: for him it stands as a legislated and socially contested zone. For him private space no longer exists.

This said, Gonzalez-Torres is uncomfortable with the label "political," fearing that the larger meanings of his work will be impoverished. Yet his art is far from political in the limited sense of the word. It does not simply illustrate a programmatic message at the expense of form. It is not, in other words, about politics. If anything, it seeks to act as politics, to trigger action of some sort, any sort, inspired by the artist's fundamentally romantic desire to "make this a better place for everyone."

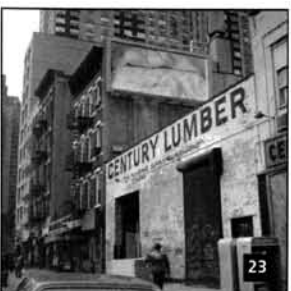
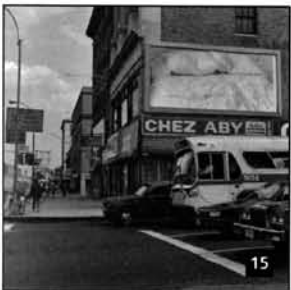
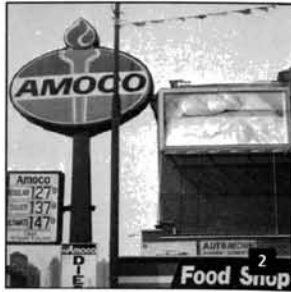
Action for Gonzalez-Torres is not an abstract matter. Nor need it take place on a grand scale. Everything begins with the individual, in this case with the museum visitor who leaves, ready to cast a fresh eye upon her or his surroundings. What is important is the idea of passage, from museum to street, from the personal (the loss of a loved one) to the political (the loss of privacy), from private to public, and then back again. At issue are notions of change and renewal, the idea that meanings are not static but shift according to who we are and where we are at any given moment.

These billboards will remain in place only through the end of June. Twenty-four in number, they commemorate the date of the death of the artist's lover, Ross. At the end of June, they too shall pass, torn down to make way for new images, new messages, new meanings. In the photographic print from which they were generated, however, lies the potential for hope. A photograph promises the possibility of replication, of reemergence in a different time and under different historical circumstances, a moment when this poignant image of "a dwelling in the evening air" may come to mean very different things.

Anne Umland, Curatorial Assistant

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Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Guaimaro, Cuba, in 1957 and now lives and works in New York City. He has exhibited extensively in recent years in both national and international exhibitions, and is a member of Group Material, an art collaborative dedicated to cultural activism. Further information on the artist is available at the Museum's Information Desk.



## Billboard locations

Each billboard image is 10'5" high and 22'8" wide.  
Unless otherwise noted, the billboards are in Manhattan.

1. 2511 Third Avenue/East 137th Street, Bronx
2. 144th Street/Grand Concourse, Bronx
3. 157 Kings Highway/West 13th Street, Brooklyn
4. 30 Dekalb Avenue/Flatbush, Brooklyn
5. 412 Fifth Avenue /8th Street, Brooklyn
6. 47-53 South 5th Street/Berry Street, Brooklyn
7. 765 Grand Street/Humboldt Street, Brooklyn
8. 656 Metropolitan Avenue/southeast corner Leonard Street, Brooklyn
9. 133 8th Avenue /West 16th Street
10. 1886-88 Park Avenue/East 129th Street
11. 31-33 Second Avenue / East 2nd Street
12. 27 Cooper Square/northeast corner East 5th Street
13. 520 East 14th Street
14. 2060 Second Avenue/southeast corner East 106th Street
15. 77-79 Delancey Street/southeast corner Allen Street
16. 275 West Street/Desbrosses Street
17. 254 West 42nd Street/between 7th and 8th Avenues
18. 365 West 50th Street/between 8th and 9th Avenues
19. 310 Spring Street/Renwick Street
20. 950 Columbus Avenue/West 107th Street
21. 13 Carmine Street/northeast corner Bleeker Street
22. 504 West 44th Street/between 10th and 11th Avenues
23. 1873 Second Avenue/East 97th Street
24. 31-11 21st Street, Queens

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The Contemporary Arts Council provided additional support for this exhibition.

Cover: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Untitled. 1991. Black-and-white photograph. Dimensions vary depending on installation.

Billboard photographs © Peter Muscato and Alessandra Mannoni, 1992

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# Los Angeles Times

November 7, 1991



"Untitled" by Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Take Home a Souvenir.

## ART REVIEWS

# World of Gonzalez-Torres Teeters on Joy and Despair

By DAVID PAGEL  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The installation by Felix Gonzalez-Torres at Lühring Augustine Hetzler Gallery captures the magic of being in a crowd. His piles of brightly wrapped, bite-size candies and stacks of cheaply printed sheets of paper give physical form to the ways individuals get subsumed by massive groups. Simultaneously, facelessness and identity emerge from the contradictory sense of belonging that his art engenders.

The Cuban-born, New York-based artist's work typically consists of simple images, messages or diagrams printed on hundreds of sheets of neatly stacked paper, or of colorful candies piled by the pound on the floor. From a distance, these accumulations of easy-to-replace items look like the precious, unalterable objects we have come to recognize as works of art. Specifically, they recall Minimalism's pristine, repeated geometries, which emphasize the brute materiality of the world.

Up close, however, Gonzalez-Torres' sculptures disintegrate. They are temporary arrangements of uncountable and unremarkable components, rather than unified structures. Their susceptibility to change suggests a fragility at odds with the sheer volume of their innumerable elements. This tension between the promise of abundance and the threat of depletion allows for the possibility of joy without forgetting the prevalence of despair.

Gonzalez-Torres intensifies this sense of vulnerability by inviting his viewers to help themselves to a single sheet from the stacks of prints or to a piece of candy from the mound of sweets. By removing a souvenir from the exhibition, every viewer imperceptibly alters the sculpture. More significantly, each "collector" of the giveaway art joins a process in which individuality comes frighteningly close to insignificance.

If what one takes away from the exhibition is only an object to be owned or consumed, one misses what is interesting in Gonzalez-Torres' art. The gallery staff simply replenishes the stacks. One's effect on the sculpture disappears. What counts is the effectiveness with which this art draws individuals together by focusing on usually invisible relationships and intangible connections among people.

"Untitled (NRA)" exemplifies the weird power of numbers at the root of democracy. On the gallery's floor, this stack of identical, offset prints of a red rectangle bordered by a black band resembles a not-so-shallow pool of blood. With clinical efficiency, the pleasure of Southern California swimming pools collides with an ugly image of bloodshed and death, whose numbing effect is too great to comprehend.

At home, on one's wall, this nearly 4x5-foot rectangle has the presence of an anemic, Postmodern abstraction—about as powerful or

engaging as a faded copy of a Peter Halley painting. Separated from the rest of the images, a single sheet loses its capacity to create meaning and becomes little more than a formal, tasteful design.

Gonzalez-Torres' work suggests that singularity only counts when it unites with others, exchanging individuality for group identity. In the beleaguered, public space of the gallery, his art thus reinvests a sense of value and personal identity usually reserved for the privacy of one's home.

Gonzalez-Torres' sculptures refuse to be excluded from the mainstream at the same time they reject society's dominant ideas. His "Minimalism" scrutinizes neither the facts of perception nor the reality of art's materials, but the social forces that hold us together and tear us apart. It willingly participates in the privileged realm of galleries only by changing the terms with which this institution normally works.

■ Lühring Augustine Hetzler Gallery, 1330 4th St., Santa Monica, (310) 394-3964, through Nov. 16. Closed Sundays and Monday.

# ARTS

## MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 1991

### PRINTS AND EDITIONS

Susan Tallman

## The Ethos of the Edition

### The Stacks of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

For better or for worse, the edition — that group of art objects which exist in numerous examples, each with an equal claim to “authenticity” — is of a fundamentally different nature from its more prestigious cousin, the unique painting or sculpture. Things that exist in multiple are seen as less authoritative, less assertive, less ringed about with that nebulous, charismatic quality that Walter Benjamin called “aura.” The idea that there might be something *interesting* in this condition, that in the difference between the edition and the unique object there might lie some poignant metaphors for broader social and cultural truths, that indeed there might be a “poetics of multiplicity,” seems to have occurred only to a handful of artists. And of them, none has pursued the issue as eloquently as Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

Gonzalez-Torres is one of those younger artists—not exactly sculptors, not exactly photographers, not exactly conceptual artists — who try on new forms and new materials as they happen to fit. His work has appeared in shapes ranging from typeset lists of names and dates (meaningful to the artist, enigmatic to the viewer), to disco-dancing platforms, to jigsaw puzzles, but the materials with which he is most frequently identified are piles of candies, spilled Smithsonian-style onto the floor or into corners, and stacks of printed paper. His style, insofar as that word is appropriate to such a protean aesthetic, is a kind of ardently lightweight Minimalism (the allusion to Smithsonian is intentional and fully felt), leavened with a subversive, anarchic streak—viewers are invited to eat the candy and to help themselves to the printed sheets. In the candy pieces, which often bear titles like *Untitled (Lover Boys)*,



Felix Gonzales-Torres, *Untitled (Implosion)*, 1991, Silkscreen on Coventry Rag, 40" x 30", edition of 190 with 10 artist's proofs. Published by Edition Julle Sylvester.

this license makes clear allusion to desire and consumption, especially illicit desire and consumption. In the stack pieces, the act of taking away sheets has a different effect: it transforms the object into an edition; it subjects the stolidity of sculpture to the ephemerality of the leaflet.

The first stack piece was done in 1988 as a memorial: the stack was designed to be roughly the size and shape of a tombstone, and its pages were printed with advertisements for one of America's more peculiar notions of appropriate holiday observance, the Memorial Day sale. Subsequent stacks have shared these intimations of mortality: *Untitled (The End)* (1990) consisted of blackbordered, text-free

sheets of paper; in *Untitled (Death by Gun)* (1990) the pages were printed with the faces, names, and brief histories of gunshot victims. The elegiac quality of the imagery is heightened by the idea that all it would take was a bus-load of covetous gallery visitors, and the stack could just disappear or, more precisely, be scattered leaf by leaf into a vapor of dispersed souvenirs. But this appearance is somewhat deceptive: the pieces can also regenerate, starfish-like, to regain their full size. Each stack piece is created with an ideal size and proportion in mind (the dimensions of a tombstone, for instance) and Gonzalez-Torres will print as many as necessary to maintain each piece in something approaching its “ide-



## PRINTS AND EDITIONS

Susan Tallman

al” state.

So while the stack has one life as a sculpture, occupying a block of space not dissimilar to that which might be occupied by an early Robert Morris or Donald Judd box, that block is far from the inviolate cube of the Morris or Judd: it is instead in a constant state of flux—diminishing each time a sheet is removed, restored each time a sheet is replaced. Furthermore, with each removal it moves out from that concise block into the broad, dilute space of the edition, spread over a hundred walls, drawers, refrigerators (what do people do with these things when they get them home?), and there assumes a life both linked to the original sculpture and independent of it.

This kind of double life is qualitatively different from the double life of a famous painting and its poster reproduction: the painting and the poster are related by appearance only; the poster was never a part of the painting; the destruction or adulation of the poster in no way affects the painting; they have no shared history. More importantly, the poster is an afterthought, unconnected to the artist’s original intent. The displaced member of a Gonzalez-Torres stack, on the other hand, is a gift of the artist, as close to his thought as any other object. This peculiar spirit of generosity in Gonzalez-Torres’s works goes beyond the physical act of allowing people to take home pages—the pages they take are unencumbered with instruction, unlike most conceptual art, which had very specific ideas about how its objects should be treated, even (or especially) when out of the artist’s view. One artist, well versed in Duchampian theory, was very concerned about how to treat a sheet she had lifted from a stack piece: was it contrary to the intent of the work to frame it archivally, since it was, after all, a giveaway; or was it important to frame it archivally to be sure that one copy would survive? She was told that the intent of the piece was that she should do with it whatever she liked.

The fact that many of the stacks feature blank pages—pages that have only a color, or only a border, to signal artistic intervention—has a similar effect; it allows the viewer a space in which to personalize the work, so that the black-bordered sheets of *Untitled (The End)*, for example, become an all-purpose elegy, memorializing anyone the viewer has loved and lost.

But it is important to note that all these pieces have been exhibited not as “editions” but rather in the gallery and museum contexts

usually reserved for painting and sculpture. This generosity, this designed fluidity of meaning, this repudiation of artistic control, are visible largely because they mark a defiance of our expectations of the unique, inalterable art object. So what are we to make of the fact that last spring, Gonzalez-Torres produced *Untitled (Implosion)*, an edition of silkscreens, limited to 190 impressions and 10 artists proofs, signed and numbered, produced with a print publisher and exhibited in a print space? Where, one might reasonably ask, is the critical edge in that?

The trick is that *Untitled (Implosion)* is only available as a unit—the whole edition, all 190 examples plus all ten artist’s proofs, all in a tidy stack. With one clever stroke, Gonzalez-Torres has cut to the quick to the artificial, oxymoronic nature of the “limited edition,” that unsatisfactory compromise between endless repetition and the aura of originality. Just as there seems to be something perverse about a sculpture you’re allowed, even encouraged, to dismember, there is something equally contrary about an edition bound together for life. How sad and frustrated those lower 199 pages might be, sulking in the dark, never to reveal their glowing, elegant faces to the light. The image of *Untitled (Implosion)* is an even coating of dull opalescent silver—a color that is less a color as such than it is a mute reflection of whatever conditions of light surround it. Gonzalez-Torres had in mind the look of a switched-off TV tube—a dying light, morose and vacuous, its cacophony of information all played out. The blankness is seductive—unlike the dispersible stack pieces, neither the paper nor the printing here are cheap—and you want to get closer to figure out just what that strange surface may be, just what it may mean, but the construction of meaning is, like the quality of light, reflected back to the viewer.

Gonzalez-Torres is usually considered a “political artist.” This is not because his work argues a particular polemic or exposes a specific injustice, the way Sue Coe’s and Leon Golub’s do; and not even because of the element of commercial subversion in those endlessly reproducing pieces (as we know, the art-collecting public will buy anything from dirt to Letraset if convinced of the charm, or importance, of an idea). Gonzalez-Torres is a member of the activist art collective Group Material (along with Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, and Karen Ramspacher), and he has been public and articulate about his identity as a gay man, and the distance that this places him from the standard macho artistic role models. His political mindfulness appears in his art in the form of a scrupulous sensitivity to the ramifications of traditional art activity—

the business of occupying space, inserting creations into someone else’s visual territory, producing perfect, unalterable objects, imposing meanings that brook no argument.

Thus he has discovered a political use for the edition that has little or nothing to do with the history of the print as a propaganda tool, and everything to do with metaphor and language and the construction of sexual identity. Contrast, for example, the single, potent, assertive object, which takes charge, extends itself into the world at large, even strives to govern the physical and psychological circumstances around it (Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* would be a good case in point), with the multiple, adaptable, social character of the edition, content to be different things to different people. (Taking the game to its logical conclusion, one could even go so far as to compare the single, unrepeatable, urgent rush of creation with the multiple, recurrent pleasures of the edition.)

Multiplicity flies in the face of uniqueness and also of authority: as those numerous sheets flutter out into the street the artist is losing control of the piece—its physical substance and its meaning. Also, every time you have more than one of something you open the door to difference: differences of natural variation, differences of human treatment, differences of interpretation. Repetition is possessed of two very different kinds of power: that generated by a mass of something in one place, and the more elusive power of an equal mass of something spread out into a thousand small instances. It has been generally assumed that concentrated power is more effective than dispersed power. That Gonzalez-Torres should willingly choose the latter over the former suggests that power may not be his aim.

Outside the realm of art these are issues of general social interaction—questions our mothers would have filed under “Polite” rather than “Political.” But part of the enduring myth of the Avant-Garde is that important art must be impolite, must be driven by a brutally assertive urgency of expression. Gonzalez-Torres calls the myth into question with an art that is radical, not in its stridency, but in its reticence.

To a degree, of course, politics are in the eye of the beholder. Speaking about a recent stack piece whose pages read WE DO NOT REMEMBER in German—a piece that speaks through the historically specific to address questions of collective will and individual responsibility—Gonzalez-Torres said, “I don’t think my work is political. I think it’s about the stuff that doesn’t let me sleep at night.”

*Susan Tallman is an artist and writer. Her column on prints and editions appears regularly in Arts.*



ARTFORUM

# This is my body

Artforum February 1991

Jan Avigikos

Late on night forty years ago,  
Tony Smith took a car ride on



**Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (Fortune Cookie Corner), 1990**, approximately 10,000 fortune cookies. Installation view. Private collection NY



**Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (USA Today), 1990**, approximately 3000 pounds of Fruits & Berries candies. Installation view, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York

the not-yet-completed New Jersey Turnpike and had an epiphanal experience that he likened to art:

The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art.

The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art ....<sup>1</sup>

What Smith euphemistically designated the "end of art," Michael Fried termed "theater" in his now infamous proposal that "theater is ... the negation of art."<sup>2</sup> Claiming that theater is what happens between the individual arts, the metaphor for which is Smith's experience of

the empty or abandoned situation, Fried argued against Minimalism's inherent theatricality and its "objecthood." "The experience of literalist [a.k.a. Minimalist] art," he writes, "is of an object in a situation, one which, virtually by definition, includes the beholder." Robert Morris went one step further:

The concerns now are for more control of... the entire situation. Control is necessary if the variables of object, light, space, body, are to function. The object has not become less important. It has merely become less self-important.<sup>3</sup>

Fried responded: "It is, I think, worth remarking that 'the entire situation' means exactly that: all of it - including, it seems, the beholder's body."<sup>4</sup>

Fried was one of the first to describe the subjugation of the beholder to the Minimalist object, an object that remains as the center or focus

of the situation; an object that constitutes experience as something outside the beholder rather than as self-generated; an object that distances, overwhelms, and confronts the beholder in such a way that it is placed not just in our space but in our way.<sup>5</sup> A major flaw in his argument, however, was his inability to differentiate between the theatricality of Minimalism, which assigns to the beholder a passive role, and that inherent in Smith's experience, which grants an empowered participant an active role in the construction of meaning.

The distinction is critical when we approach the work of many younger artists currently appropriating and deploying Minimalism, together with an inherited set of questions concerning theatricality and subjectivity. Minimalism's original intent was refractory: to clarify esthetic experience and to minimize content, the mirroring function of art was negated in favor of



locating content outside the art object, and for this reason a viewer was prerequisite. This viewer, however, was construed less in intellectual terms than as physical; the viewer, as Fried observed, was a *body*. Whereas Minimalism's failure to supersede institutional values and commodification was foregrounded in first-generation appropriation art, which situated its critique in the realm of displaced desire (and of Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum), the current generation constructs its critique somewhat differently by fetishizing the "body" of the Minimalist object as gendered and erotic, and recoding the viewer in his or her relation to the object as ideologically determined. For these artists, the formal and rhetorical language of Minimalism - the rigid, unyielding structures, the harshly cold materials of industry and technology - and the passive subject position of the viewer are seen as analogous to the phallogocentric, patriarchal order wherein representation acts to regulate and define the subjects it addresses. Eschewing the impersonality of the Minimalist object, they have sought to radicalize the post-Modern concept of the simulacrum by "de-naturaliz[ing] the traditional historiographic separation of... the personal and the political."<sup>6</sup>

Prominent among these artists is Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose work, while personal in nature, is not constituted in terms of individual expression; rather, he deals with systems of meaning operating within conventions that are socially produced. By inscribing his practice within the framework of sexual politics in general, and homosexual experience in particular, he seeks to index the unavailability of subjectivity to homosexuals in patriarchal culture, disrupting the putative neutrality of the process whereby viewing subjects are caught up in, formed by, and construct meaning. Historically formed by Conceptual art as well as by Minimalism, Gonzalez-Torres' work includes textual elements - parenthetical titles, aphorisms, or paratactic captions that emphasize the linguistic basis of the formation of social and sexual identity.

Blank spaces that simultaneously proffer and defer a promise of meaning are central to Gonzalez-Torres' work. For the inaugural exhibition at the Andrea Rosen Gallery last winter, stacks of immaculately clean sheets of paper were installed in various configurations: a column of white papers edged in black; a short stack of light blue papers; three thick steps of white paper printed with a centered wide blue stripe; and four low piles of white paper precisely aligned on the corners of a square blue cotton cloth mat, all 1990. A pair of symmetrically opposed tacked pages of equal height bore offset-printed inscriptions: "Nowhere better than this place." and "Somewhere better than this place." All the pieces were untitled, yet some included parentheses - "(The End)," "(Lover Boy)," "(Blue Cross)" - that allude to homoeroticism and loss.

Monolithic at first sight, especially when seen from a distance, the single stacked columns are reminiscent of Morris' 1966 untitled plywood box, and the geometric arrangement of *Untitled (Blue Cross)* seems more than coincidentally related to his 1965 untitled sculpture of four fiberglass polyhedrons that define a cross pattern in their interstices. Even *Le vide papier*, as work of art, has appeared sporadically over the last century, dating back to 1883, when the obscure Symbolist writer Alphonse Allais, a member of Stephane Mallarme's circle, mounted a clean Bristol sheet with four thumbtacks to the wall at the *Salon des Incoherents* and entitled it *The First Communion of Young Virgins on a Snowy Day*. Gonzalez-Torres' esoteric references to sexuality - for example, a stack of bare, blue papers is parenthetically referred to as "Lover Boy" - seem far removed from Minimalism's refusal of social content, but even here a precedent may be found in Morris' 1963 sculpture *Untitled (Cock/Cunt)*, a schematic wooden plaque mounted with an elongated block of wood. In fact, criticism of the artist's work has primarily been directed at its presumed derivative nature. More important than questions of influence and originality, however, especially in view of the gay psychosexual component of his work, is to ask whether Gonzalez-Torres merely attaches a politicized (and heretofore illegitimate) content to the hermetic vehicle of Minimalism while leaving its phallogocentric conventions intact, or, through more radically invasive techniques, dismantles its ideological standards from the roots

up. Put another way, either an appropriated form is "filled" with content (which would be to revert to an expressionist model) or content is found in it.

The meaning of apparently monolithic structures or blank pages will inevitably alter according to the discursive social formations in effect, thus creating a margin of meaning in the distinctions between an appropriated and an antecedent form. Yet essential differences will not always announce themselves through large declarations. No Minimalist artist ever made stacks of loose papers. As fetishes of hierarchical primary structures, Gonzalez-Torres' paper columns are specifically designed to be peeled away, layer by soft, permeable layer, and the individual pages of the stacks are free for the taking. Theoretically, because they exist in endless copies, any number of pages could be taken without diminishing the whole; in reality, the whole is subjected to perpetual instability by the very nature of its partitive construction.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the somatic or phallic identity of Minimalism's rigidly unified form is transformed into a model of dissemination and renewal. The codes of displacement (connoted by the dispersable columns) and of erotic desire and loss (collectively articulated in the parenthetical titles) converge on the blank or empty pages that serve as symbolic sites of homosexual identity. An Other, like woman, whose identity is often likened to a blank page (as in Allais' conflation of the virgins and an empty sheet of paper, or the smooth surface designated as feminine in Morris' *Untitled*



(Cock/Cunt), the gay male is denied representation within the patriarchal order.

Gonzalez-Torres activates the blank page, however, through his frequent use of the color blue, traditionally a symbol for both melancholy and the romantic, and his choice of delicate and beautiful shades of blue suffuses the blank page with an emotional and psychic resonance. Blue is also the color for boys, and a cultural password for the erotic, as in “blue movies.” Blue movies, and equivalent countercultural forms, disrupt the patriarchal order by empowering desire and subjectivity. Thus the blue blank page presents a parodic interweaving of political disenfranchisement and eroticized subjectivity.

Concurrent with the paper stack pieces, Gonzalez-Torres began to design corner spills, not of asphalt or sulphur or lead but of cookies and candies, that reiterate themes of dissemination and renewal. *Untitled (A Corner of Bad)*, a silver-and-blue-foil mound of approximately 40 pounds of Italian chocolates; *Untitled (Fortune Cookie Corner)*, a larger pour of folded cookies containing only good fortunes; and *Untitled (USA Today)*, a heap of red-silver-and-blue-wrapped Fruits & Berries candies, all 1990, are intended for consumption by viewers yet are easily replenishable. In the spirit of Bertolt Brecht’s insistence on the incompleteness of an artwork without the viewer’s participation, each act of consumption is, in fact, also one of completion. The relation of part to whole, however, remains problematic: the spills could easily disappear given a crowd with a voracious appetite.

Aside from their benign pun on “alchemic” spills of substances like tar, sulphur, and lead by such artists as Robert Smithson, Alan Saret, and Richard Serra, the lighthearted humor of the sugar spills doesn’t negate the possibility of more somber readings. Like the paper stacks, they function allegorically to reveal a psychosexual content informed by the artist’s personal experience as a gay male, a content that might be satisfying for some consumers, but difficult for others to swallow. The wealth of blue-and-silver Baci, the Italian for “kisses,” was originally created as a private piece and not for public display. The thin wax paper message folded under the foil wrapper of each testifies to the power of love, suggesting erotic pleasure between male lovers, which all too frequently must be kept under wraps. The heap of fortune cookies, all containing good fortunes, doesn’t simply extend a friendly “have a good day”; it is particularly poignant in view of the AIDS crisis. The abundant mound of red-silver-and-blue candies, with its allusion to a national newspaper that upholds traditional “family values,” points to the exclusionary politics of a culture that perceives unauthorized sexual difference,

and other nontraditional behaviors, as a threat and, hence, worthy of discrimination.

Gonzalez-Torres acknowledges that social meanings spring from a humanized source of personal experience, one that allows for poetic resonance yet does not diffuse the possibility of cultural critique. Aided by synthesizing allegorical structures that interweave public events and private moments, he works against the expressionist model, based on an expressive self and an empathic viewer who receives preconstituted meanings, by proposing a collective social and psychic space in which the beholder actively participates in the construction of meaning. Though his work is informed by autobiographical elements specific to his homosexual identity, its intent is to extend subjectivity to all partici-



Felix Gonzalez-Torres,  
*Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1987-90*,  
clocks, 13 1/2 x 27 x 1". Edition of three. Private collections, New York

pants.

This effect is most apparent in an ongoing series of works, created in various formats, in which Gonzalez-Torres returns us to the theater of blank space wherein empty surfaces are captioned with disjunctive nomenclatures. Equivalent to post-Modern genres of history painting and still life, and to texts dislocated from the page, the caption works are the epitome of counternarrative and encode multiple contents, both informational and symbolic, within one form. Perhaps the most widely known of these works is the billboard that appeared in Greenwich Village’s Sheridan Square, New York, from March to September 1989, in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. Positioned in the lower portion of an otherwise empty black surface (an “abandoned situation,” in Fried’s terminology), the caption read: “People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969.” Gonzalez-Torres’ commemoration frames a century of struggle for gay rights, beginning with Oscar Wilde’s famed decision to remain in England to face charges of homosexuality. Confirming the longstanding collaborative nature of his work with Group Material and other individual artists,<sup>8</sup> the

billboard can be understood as a conceptual collaboration with the public in that it solicits viewers to restore proper sequence to its deliberately jumbled chronology and thus to knit together its incomplete historical record. One of the consequences of this activity is a minihistory-lesson: even without knowledge of each of the events, our understanding of the continuing struggle for personal freedom is increased. In accordance with this reading, the blank space operates as a symbolic site of art itself, revealed as a place where positive values and actions can be produced.<sup>9</sup>

Not all the caption works are as thematically unified as the Sheridan Square billboard. *Pol Pot, 1988*, a framed photostat, jumbles a greater variety of themes, including historical and television events: “Pol Pot 1975 Prague 1968 Robocop 1987 H Bomb 1954 Wheel of Fortune 1988 Spud.” As Nancy Spector has noted, “Such seemingly random juxtapositions illustrate the tragic reductivism of the historical process, yet at the same time, they illuminate the spaces *between* events as the loci of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Other caption works, such as *Untitled, 1989*, assume the form of historiographic metafiction. Installed in a foyer at the Brooklyn Museum

above a bank of windows, its caption was framed by the blank, reflective surfaces of ceiling and floor and read: “Red Canoe 1987 Paris 1985 Blue Flowers 1984 Harry the Dog 1983 Blue Lake 1986 Interferon 1989 Ross 1983.” While each entry can be imagined as a meaningful moment in the artist’s life, the presumed autobiographical content is nonetheless quite remote, and the construction of meaning from the chain of disjunctive signifiers, randomly sampled from cultural! public and personal!private events, must be satisfied from the viewer’s own fantasy and lived experience.

The certainty of a fixed or predetermined meaning in the caption works rarely exists. The representational function of language parallels that of the blank surface: both are given in relation to an absent image that can only be constituted by the reader/viewer. Hence, the actual voice of these works belongs to the viewer, who is empowered to recuperate wholeness and to bring multiplicity into focus from whatever comes naturally to mind. Following Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegory, the caption works proceed from the perception that “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else.”<sup>11</sup> Concerning the nature of his relationship to his art, Gonzalez-Torres has remarked:

This work is mostly personal. It is about those very early hours in the morning, while still half asleep, when I tend to visualize information, to see panoramas in which the fictional, the important, the banal, and the historical are collapsed into a single caption. Leaving me anxious and responsible to anchor a logical accompanying image-scanning the TV channels trying

to sort out and match sound and sight. This work is about my exclusion from the circle of power where social and cultural values are elaborated and about my rejection of the imposed and established order.<sup>12</sup>

Inherent to the programmatic instability of meaning in Gonzalez-Torres' work is a subject in process who is constantly formed and reformed, positioned and repositioned, with regard to alleged or imagined content. A pair of commercial clocks, placed side by side on the wall, telling time in perfect unison, is called *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987-90. Who are these "perfect" lovers? Do the clocks memorialize another couple lost to AIDS, or symbolize the hope for eternally enduring union? Without the aid of the parenthetical title, such queries would not arise; the standard institutional clocks, part of the hardware of Conceptual art, would become real and informational rather than abstract and poetic. By fetishizing the "body" of the clock, Gonzalez-Torres converts the informational into the erotic. This transformatory process of displacement is specifically located in the vibrating gap between object and language, a gap that Conceptual art saw as a function of representation and sought to eliminate. But it is precisely his concern with the issue of representation and its politics, and also the question of desire and its gendered politics, that leads Gonzalez-Torres to designate the theatrical spaces in *between* as the site of the poetics and politics of his work as well as of its erotic psychosexual valences, which are almost always signified through language.<sup>13</sup>

A series of puzzle works rather teasingly postulates those "spaces in between," as well as themes of mobility and the play of absence and presence. Photographic images are printed on a surface broken into jigsaw pieces. Ranging from snapshots (the shadow of a couple, footprints in the snow, birds in flight) to media stills (for example, the Pope giving communion to Kurt Waldheim, or scenes of urban crowds), the images remain intact and coherent as long as the puzzle is fitted together. Usually "framed" in factory-sealed plastic bags, and essentially fragile in nature, the completed puzzle and the whole picture are under constant threat of fragmentation.

The quality of instability that characterizes actual form (the puzzles, the spills, the paper stacks), and is paralleled in the mobility of subjectivity (as is most evident in the caption works, whose empty surfaces reflect the viewer's own intentionality and desires), is itself allegorical, and can be understood as further evidence of Gonzalez-Torres' aim to dephallicize artmaking. Under attack is the concept of the master narrative and its legitimizing elements. "The narrative function," Jean Francois Lyotard observes,

is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in

clouds of narrative language elements - narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valences specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.<sup>14</sup>

What is at stake is not only the status of narrative, but of representation itself: Martin Heidegger's "world pictures" can no longer stand as emblems for the modern age.<sup>15</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres' production, by example, constitutes a consistent refusal of mastery, most notably in the voice that speaks throughout his work but that is not exclusively identified with the artist or given a fixed gender, and in the construction of meaning as a nonspecified, open-ended process. With regard to the beholder, Gonzalez-Torres envisions a fully embodied participant who is not designated as a centered point in a "field of vision" but is endowed with shifting and multiple perspectives, not to mention a complete range of the senses - seeing, feeling, tasting, smelling, touching. If this is the reduction to plurality, the "abandoned" or "empty" theatrical situation Fried so feared, then let the curtain rise and the performance begin. ■

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1. Tony Smith, quoted in Michael Fried, "Art and Object hood," *Artforum* V no. 10, Summer 1967, p. 19. Reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968,

- p. 131.
- 2. Fried, p. 125.
- 3. Robert Morris, quoted in Fried, p. 127.
- 4. Fried, p. 127.
- 5. For an in-depth, revisionist analysis of Minimalism's theatricality, see Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 no. 5, January 1990, pp. 44-63.
- 6. Lisa Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 142.
- 7. The single pages, particularly the blank white or blue sheets, raise the question of their status as art. Presumably, a single blue sheet exists as a detail of *Untitled (Lover Boy)*, or four single white sheets exist as a detail of *Untitled (Blue Cross)*. In conversation, Gonzalez-Torres has acknowledged that some have found it difficult to maintain this conceptual premise. Following one opening, the artist was dismayed to discover several papers lying crumpled in the street.
- 8. Gonzalez-Torres is a founding and current member of Group Material, whose core members include Julie Ault, Karen Rampsacher, and Doug Ashford. He has also produced works with Michael Jenkins and Louise Lawler, among others.
- 9. It is worth noting, however, that for the duration of the installation of the AIDS billboard, the adjacent billboard remained unopened, despite its prime location. Its empty surface and brief "Ad Space Available" caption created an ironic counterpart to Gonzalez-Torres' installation.
- 10. Nancy Spector, "Smart Art," *Contemporanea* 2 no. 4, June 1989, p. 96.
- 11. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: New Left Books, 1977, p. 175.
- 12. From a statement written in conjunction with his installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, September-November 1988.
- 13. Despite the ample cues to gay identity, AIDS, the loss of loved ones, etc., in Gonzalez-Torres' work, it would be restrictive to define it solely in terms of sexual politics. As he has commented, although he works within the political arena he does not make works that are exclusively "political." He often, in fact, refers to his work as romantic.
- 14. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. xxiv.
- 15. "The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture. The word 'picture' [Bild] now means the structured image [Gebi/d] that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before, in such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is," Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt, New York: Harper & Row, 1977. Quoted in Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post modernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle: Bay Press, 1983, p. 66.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Waldenheim to the Pope)*, 1989, Cibachrome-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag, 8 x 10"



## How Do You Memorialize a Movement That Isn't Dead?

BY DAVID DEITCHER

**D**eputy inspector Seymour Pine and seven other officers from the Public Morals Section of the New York City Police got more than they asked for when they raided the Stonewall Inn 20 years ago on the night of June 27. The rowdy, intoxicated clientele, including drag queens, other gay men, and lesbians, responded to yet another police raid like people with nothing to lose. They trashed the syndicate-owned dive, mocked and bloodied the police, and for several successive nights rioted and reveled in streets they claimed as their own. Dotting the West Village those nights were sporadic bonfires in which the usual urban debris was incinerated; but beyond that, an entire tradition of timidity and accommodation that had dominated gay politics since the early years of the Cold War went up in smoke, displaced by the often fractious, always more militant, lesbian and gay liberation movement.

Ever since then, there have been varied attempts to commemorate that melee and to mark Sheridan Square as the geographical center of the movement. George Segal's *Gay Liberation* remains at once the most solemn and hilarious monument to our empowerment. Ten years ago a foundation called Mariposa commissioned this graffiti-resistant, ghostly bronze quartet in which two women sit on a park bench, one's hand daring to rest on the other's thigh, while two men stand, *contrapposto*, suggesting that Segal saw shades of the classical past in the body language of cruising queers. Although approved by virtually every city agency, the sculptural ensemble was opposed by many people in the Village for

predictably contradictory reasons, including political and cultural radicalism, political and cultural conservatism, homophobia, and the impudent inverts' own insistence that the figures were "grotesque stereotypes."

Among the more modest, though no more successful, attempts to indicate the site since then, people have tried to secure plaques to the wall of the building that housed the Stonewall Inn. Ralph Hall—during the early '70s a member of the ultra-swish Flaming Faggots, and later a reporter for *Gay Power*—fashioned a flamboyant wood marker that was ripped off the wall within a matter of days. Later, a man named Earl Johnson paid for a bronze plaque that lasted about a week before it was similarly liberated. More recently, Heritage of Pride proposed a marker to the Morgan Holding Company, the building's owner. Citing concern for the building's market value, Morgan Holding Company suggested a location for the marker out on the sidewalk. Evidently the landlord prefers gross, illuminated plastic signs such as the one that currently proclaims their property the site of the Stonewall Boutique.

**F**élix González-Torres—one of three members of the artists' collective known as Group Material—has taken a different tack, producing a public work of art that will vanish by September, but for altogether different reasons. In March, with the assistance of the Public Art Fund Inc., he rented the giant billboard above the Village Cigar Store at Seventh Avenue South and Christopher Street. There he installed a work of art that attempts literally to inscribe onto

Sheridan Square a rather particular consciousness of the gay liberation movement.

Like other works by this artist—only much larger—the billboard consists of two lines of white type that run horizontally a quarter of the way up from the bottom of the black rectangle. This “date line” reads: *People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme/Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969*. These items cohere as a series inasmuch as they concern the history of gay oppression and militancy—the news, both good and bad. Included is Oscar Wilde’s decision not to flee England but to face prosecution; the election of Harvey Milk as a supervisor in San Francisco; the police harassment of all sexual outlaws that always intensified whenever mayoral elections were imminent in New York City, and the uprising that was its product in 1969; the largest march on Washington for civil rights in the history of this nation; and the determination of a remarkable group of people with AIDS not just to survive as individuals, but to form a collective in order further to flout conventional wisdom, and thrive.

Intended to stimulate the imagination of susceptible passersby, all the items in the text are suggestive, many familiar, but few readily identifiable without further inquiry. They are listed in an ambling, nonchronological order that strikes me as analogous to the thought processes of a man in the street who might pause to reflect at this geographical and historical intersection. At best, this approach testifies to the artist’s mistrust of institutionalized, linear methods of historical inscription, such as those that commonly render lesbians and gays invisible while claiming to tell the whole truth. That it is, paradoxically, so transitory a monument is also appropriate since it commemorates a living movement, its transitoriness therefore suggesting the challenge and mutability of the future. At worst, it accounts for the merely implicit inclusion of lesbians within a work of art that serves as a stimulus to ponder the movement’s history.

Consistent with the intimacy of such an approach, González-Torres has conceived of this, his most public work to date, by refusing the visual pyrotechnics and instantaneous gestalt of large- or even small-scale advertising art. As a consequence, this billboard withholds legibility to the motorists who speed, or even crawl, by on their way to the Holland Tunnel. I know of many New Yorkers who, having walked by it many times, have overlooked this 720-square-foot work of art. This, then, is a billboard that deals with public concerns while using the odd syntax of individual consciousness. As an exercise in a public mode of

address it depends upon a form derived from small, poetic works of Conceptual art. As a conundrum of the “private” and “public,” it is emblematic for an era in which the “public sphere”—that arena of putatively free-ranging political debate—can in no way be wrested from the private interests that regularly appropriate it.

Finally, there is the matter of its tone, which is dark, flat, reflective, dignified, and not just a little mournful. To be sure, the use of the phrase “Stonewall Rebellion 1969” as the ultimate item on the list does exhilarate, especially since that designation (as opposed to the more commonplace “Stonewall riots”) is still resisted by many with the power to refuse significance to the lesbian and gay movement. It was surely in a spirit of condescension—and weary with noblesse oblige—that an unidentified reporter for *The New York Times* informed his or her readers on June 2 that the event for which a block of Christopher Street between Waverly Place and Seventh Avenue South had just been named (Stonewall Place) was “a riot . . . of great historic importance in the gay community.” And nowhere else, of course, beyond the confines of the shtetl.

If González-Torres’s billboard leaves me feeling more wistful and sad than I—or anyone else—might like, this is undoubtedly due to the circumstances in which we are forced to commemorate this anniversary: in grief and fear and barely containable rage. If ambivalence marks my encounter with this work, surely it has something to do with the tug of nostalgia about the billboard the artist has rented; for it too has a history. González-Torres has said that he understands the black expanse above the text to be a space for imaginary projection. And while looking at it, there have been times when I’ve found myself recalling film footage, always black-and-white: of rage in San Francisco the night that justice was mocked by the success of Dan White’s “Twinkie” defense, or of bonfires burning on Christopher Street two decades ago. But I also flash back to this billboard in more innocent, happier, more colorful times, when, for example, in powder blue it exhorted men to come to a veritable homoerotic indoor theme park named Man’s Country, which I never visited but can still imagine. And while all of this proves the success of this strangely private and public work of art, it also testifies to the fecundity of its site and to the persistence of Eros in a time that will surely be remembered for tens of thousands of tragic and untimely deaths that occurred while so many other people—deep in denial—just drove on by. ■