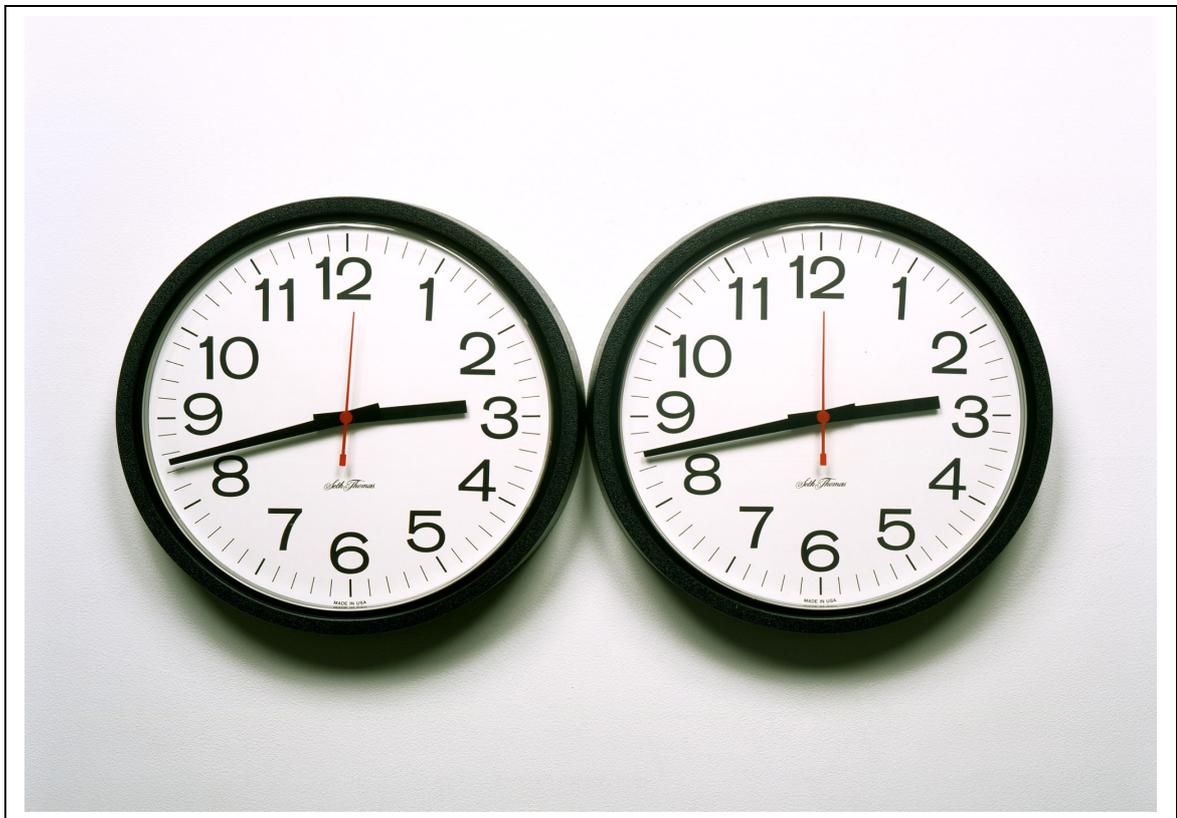


# The continuous present

in the art of

# Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Shane Enright, City University, London, August 2006



*"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990*

Wall clocks, 13 ½ x 27x 1 ¼ in. overall

Two parts: 13 ½ in. in diameter each

Edition of 3, 1 A.P.

Photo: Peter Muscato

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation  
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

*This thesis is submitted to City University, London,  
in part fulfilment of the requirements of the award of  
Master of Arts in Arts Criticism and Management*

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All works illustrated are by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. For credits and copyright, please refer to the caption accompanying each image.

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I dedicate this work to  
**Liz Mazonowicz and Niall Enright**

And to the memory of  
**Alaric Sumner (1953-2002)**

And, with thanks for their love and sustenance, to  
**Jane Barker, Arturo Gonzalez Bravo, Mogib Hassan, Laurie Hill,  
Jason Lucchesi, James Lynch, Grzegorz Mielaniec, Raul Ortega Lopez  
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#### **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

### **Shane Enright The Continuous Present in the Art of Felix Gonzalez Torres**

This study considers the art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres in terms of its connections with minimalist and conceptual art antecedents, focusing in particular on the status of the art object and the nature of the exchange between artist and viewers or owners. It proposes that the art of Gonzalez-Torres is best evaluated in relation to the circumstances of its encounter, and that the contingency of subjective responses represents both a strategy for engagement and a risk to the work's integrity. In seeking a pluralistic and indeterminate approach to interpretation of these works, this study critically considers biographical exegetical accounts and the place of sexuality, mourning and AIDS within his work. This study also reviews some of the principal theoretical questions that have informed debate about his work, and offers an interpretative insight into works that have rarely been critically evaluated, as well as proposing new directions for future consideration of his work. It concludes that his works' capacity to augment its viewer's subjective self-awareness is a living and dynamic feature of his art, rooted in a "continuous present," which is lived experience.

**16, 883 words**

## 1. Preface



*"Untitled" (For Jeff)*, 1992  
Billboard  
Dimensions vary with installation  
Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.  
Gift of Peter Norton Family Foundation, 1995  
© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation  
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

**“The composition is the thing seen by everyone living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing that they are doing. Nothing else is different, of that almost anyone can be certain. The time when and the time of and the time in that composition is the natural phenomena of that composition and of that perhaps every one can be certain.**

[...]

**The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.”**

Gertrude Stein  
*Composition as Explanation* 1926<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Stein, Gertrude, 1926, *Composition as Explanation*, reprinted in Van Vechten, Carl (ed), 1972, *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, New York: Vintage Books, p516

life is more true than reason will deceive  
(more secret or than madness did reveal)  
deeper is life than lose: higher than have  
-but beauty is more each than living's all

multiplied with infinity sans if  
the mightiest meditations of mankind  
cancelled are by one merely opening leaf  
(beyond whose nearness there is no beyond)

or does some little bird that eyes can learn  
look up to silence and completely sing?  
futures are obsolete; pasts are unborn  
(here less than nothing's more than everything)

death, as men call him, ends what they call men  
– but beauty is more now than dying's when

e e cummings  
*l x l [One Times One], 1944<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>2</sup> Cummings, E. E., 1944, *LII* from *l x l* reprinted in *Complete Poems 1904-1962*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 1994) George J. Firmage (ed.)  
New York: Liveright p 592 [NB: authors' punctuation and grammar]

## 2. Preamble



*"Untitled"*, 1989

Paint on wall, dimensions vary with installation

Installation view at Brooklyn Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1989

Photo: unknown

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, and Brooklyn Museum of Modern Art, New York

## 2. Preamble

This study of the art made by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, was prompted by two specific observations about his intent as an artist that, amongst all the many contradictions and complexities of his work, struck me as particularly curious. The first was an assertion by Andrea Rosen, whom Gonzalez-Torres had entrusted to represent his work. In the course of an account of his practice, she remarked: “*Within Felix’ living dialogue, the most essential message and his most fervent desire was to instil in everyone the awareness of the power of one’s own subjectivity.*”<sup>3</sup> The second, was from the artists himself, repeated in various formulations in different interviews and statements, an emphatic assertion of uncompromising ambition: “*to make the world a better place*”<sup>4</sup> through his art.

These are strong claims to make about an artistic intent, and they prompt in particular thoughts about the relationship between subjectivity and solidarity, between self-empowerment and collective action. What seems also extraordinary to me is that these claims were being made in relation to generally highly un-didactic, non-argumentative works that were often produced from commonplace materials. What qualities within his art might engender such an empowering self-consciousness or support a political aim for social change; are these even compatible or consistent outcomes, or qualities that can both be contained in the same work?

Looking at his art through the lens of these thoughts, the challenge in part resolves itself as one of disentangling the artist (in terms of biography and intent) from the work (in the sense of whatever autonomy it might have to produce its effect), and to distinguish both of these from the subjective perspective of the viewer (or more broadly, the reception of the art). This, it turns out, is very difficult, though it will be a recurring point of return in this account. The problem partly arises because, as I shall explain, Gonzalez-Torres set out to produce work that was profoundly contingent, open to disparate meanings, reliant on mimicry, paradoxical, ambiguous, deeply rooted in the haphazard reception of viewers and commitment of its owners.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosen, Andrea, 1997, “*Untitled*” (*The Neverending Portrait*) in Elger, Dietmar, 1997a (ed.) *Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Vol. I: Text*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Germany, Edition Cantz, p56

<sup>4</sup> “*I do have a very clear agenda, and that is to make this place a better place. I trust that agenda.*” Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1993, *Interview with Tim Rollins* in Bartman, William (ed) 1993 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Los Angeles: ART Press, p28

The way forward has been to focus on some central premises: to consider the scope for mutability of some of his art over time, and to account for the specificity and individuality of its effects on its audience. By recognising these, it might be possible to establish the capacities of the art to achieve its effects. The metaphor I want to deploy to capture this sense of the life of the work within its context and within the subjective responses it evokes is “*the continuous present*.” This notion, which provides the source for my title, is the condition that Gertrude Stein was describing in the quote from her 1926 lecture that prefaces this study. The ‘*continuous present*’ is, therefore, a condition of the viewer, or the circumstances of the viewing, or the disposition of the owner; it only becomes a quality of the work through the agency of its audiences. Stein’s description of a compositional act by her readers also prefigures some of the considerations and complications later discussed in this presentation.

To make the case, and to describe what is special about his art, I will repeatedly turn and return to the work itself. Many of the works that are highlighted in this study have not received the critical attention that I believe they deserve, and some of the associations that I will make – with other artists and traditions – have been largely unexplored in the extensive critical literature on Gonzalez-Torres’ work. I present these interpretations with some pleasure at offering fresh perspectives, and with the ambition of contributing some original insight, but the particularity of my choices is also itself a reflection of the wide horizons for interpretation that his work opens itself to, and a manifestation of the subjective powers for reflection and association that his work stimulates. I aim to weave these novel perspectives into a dialogue that gives due regard to the rich cultural landscapes and critical debates within which Gonzalez-Torres practiced his art and within which it has been received.

In his lifetime, Gonzalez-Torres strove to complicate the reception of his work. He reproduced recognisable forms and used methods from minimalism and conceptual art but contradicted their ideology and intent. He both maintained an “*extraordinary degree of control*”<sup>5</sup> over his work while “*allowing for the complete erasure of his own contribution*”<sup>6</sup> as the artist. To appreciate how he did so, it will be necessary to make some comparison with his antecedents, and to consider some of the key theoretical and philosophical debates

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<sup>5</sup> Deitcher, David, 1997, *Contradiction and Containment* in Elger, Dietmar, 1997a (ed.) *Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Vol. I: Text*, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Edition Cantz p110

<sup>6</sup> Kwon, Miwon, 2006 *The Becoming of A Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce* in Julie Ault (ed.) *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl/dangin, 2006 p305

within which his art has been articulated. In doing so, I am neither aiming to provide a comprehensive historical accounting, nor to place Gonzalez-Torres within any particular ideological frame. The critical interpretation of Gonzalez-Torres' art can lead in a number of directions, and I point to some potential new pathways for future exploration. I agree with Walter Benjamin that "*The work of art does not compete with philosophy itself – it merely enters into the most precise relation to philosophy through its affinity with the ideal of the problem*"<sup>7</sup> and this means, I believe, returning repeatedly to the work itself, but also requires some attention to the theoretical issues which his work reflects or disturbs. In this regard, I follow Gonzalez-Torres' own advice<sup>8</sup>: "...*always think about practice. The theory in the book is to make you live better, and that is what I think all theory should do.*"

The second prefatory text that I have chosen to bracket this account within is a poem, in its own precise punctuation, by e e cummings. If Stein's words form a prelude in the sense of offering a point of departure for this study, cummings offers a tentative destination: a postscript in which the now-ness of life is celebrated, a joyful but serious conversation that brings aspects of Gonzalez-Torres' art to life in the intuitive, allusory and imaginative terms that it has impacted on me.

The contradictions and ambiguities in the work discussed also find their mirrors in this study. I will argue against the foreclosing of interpretation within his work, but will both provide my own perspective and criticise those of others. I will argue against biographical exegesis but will root some works within that possibility. I will try to both attend to artistic intent, while insisting on the autonomy and spontaneity of the viewer. At points it has been necessary to take shortcuts or make generalisations, or to side step potential debate.

I begin this study with an introduction to Gonzalez-Torres' art by looking at one work, *Forbidden Colors*, an early but revealing piece that has particular resonance at the time of this writing. This leads in the next chapter to a consideration of the *form* that his work takes, and describes the conditions that permit the work's renewal, which makes it manifest in the world. Here I will reiterate a narrative of this work that has been elaborated by a number of commentators.<sup>9</sup> In part this will be an art-historical accounting, but the purpose

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, Walter "*Goethe's Elective Affinities*" in *Selected Writings* ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1996 Vol. I: p834

<sup>8</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1995, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion* (Interview with Robert Storr), *Art Press* 198 (January 1995): 24-32. Reprinted in Ault, Julie, (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl p 230

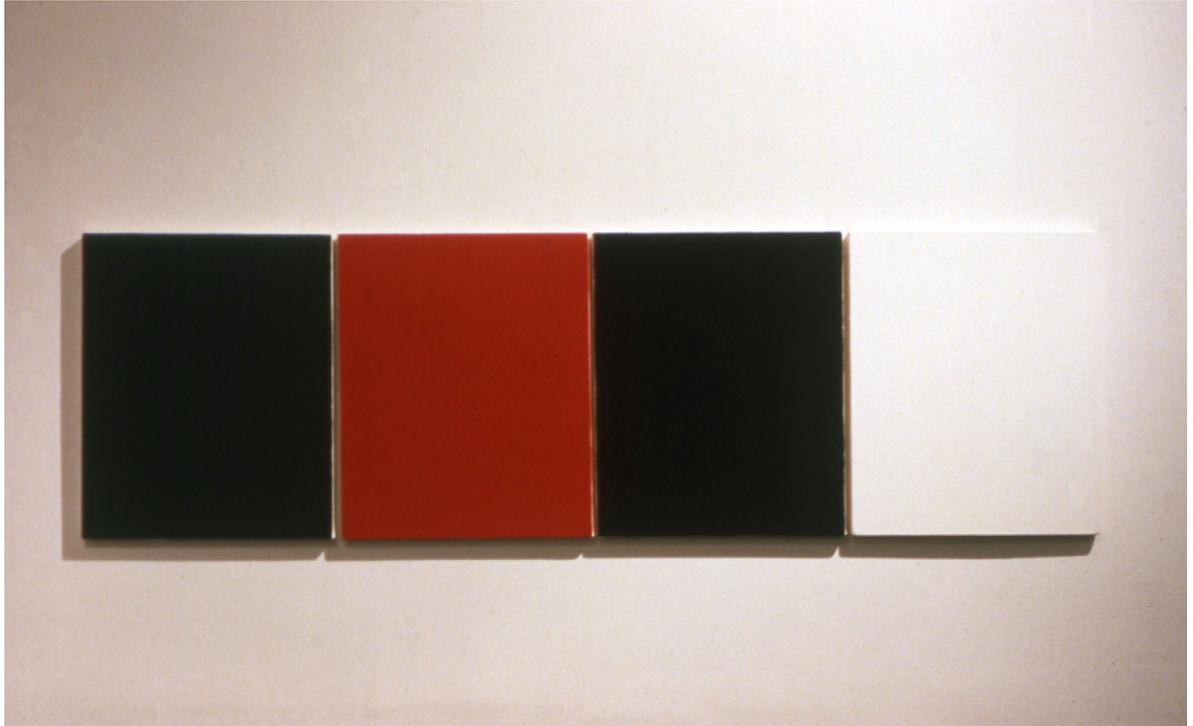
<sup>9</sup> Readers are referred to Spector, Nancy (1994); Ferguson, Russell (ed) 1994b, and Ault, Julie (ed) 2006 for key critical commentaries. See bibliography.

is not to categorise his work, but rather to identify its distinguishing strategies and distinctive qualities. Of all the complexity and richness of Gonzalez-Torres' art it is the intricate, paradoxical, reticent and contingent relationships between artist and audience, mediated in the work, which will become the central motif under consideration; a reformulation of the question of subjectivity and solidarity that provoked this investigation.

In the second substantive chapter, I turn away from questions of form and strategy to propose an emphatic challenge to some of the commonplace accounts of his work that are rooted in historiographic approaches. These, I argue, do not sufficiently recognise the *continuous present*, and provide an interpretation based principally on the artists' biography and identity that is antithetical to the works' open-ended possibilities. To both confound and confirm this critique, I will take a look at a group of works that have been little commented upon. This chapter deals with AIDS and mortality, and memorialising, and is written with e e cummings somewhere to mind: "*– but beauty is more now than dying's when.*"

Where much of the preceding discussion has been analytical, I end more discursively on some of my intuitive responses to Gonzalez-Torres' work, concentrating on new directions for scholarship. I conclude with a summation of the work and its foreseeable trajectories.

### 3. Introduction: *Forbidden Colors*



Forbidden Colors", 1988  
Acrylic on panel  
20 x 68 in. overall; four parts: 20 x 16 in. each  
Photo: Peter Muscato  
© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation  
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

### 3. Introduction: *Forbidden Colors*

I want to introduce the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres through “*Forbidden Colors*,” a work made relatively early in his career, in 1988, that conveys, albeit sometimes in a nascent state, several of the key qualities of his art that will recur as themes for investigation throughout this account.

“*Forbidden Colors*”<sup>10</sup> is made up of four 20x16 inch panels, each painted flatly and with no adornment in a monochrome colour – green, red, black, and white. Installed side by side as a row of colour blocks, *Forbidden Colors* is non-objective, with monochromatic surfaces that appear untouched by the artists’ hand. There is a reductivist abstraction to the work, which seems designed to engage the audience through its formal visual qualities – the physical scale of the colour blocks and the interplay of juxtaposed colour planes: the result may or may not appear beautiful, sensual or evocative.

There is a resemblance in this work to the four and five panel colour sequences of Ellsworth Kelly paintings from the mid-1960, such as his *Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red* of 1966.<sup>11</sup> In their tonality – the use of muted rather than primary colour (an olive green, and a post-box red) they also bring to mind the multi- panel works that Brice Marden was painting in the late 1960’s. Though smaller in scale than these minimalist antecedents, there is an immediate visual equivalence to this piece, a mimicry that on the one hand may be intended to trigger a similar sensual response from the viewer, or that on the other might also provide a place - for those familiar with these antecedents – for an art-historical categorisation. Either way, the work’s adaptation of earlier minimalist forms is apparent and appears deliberate.

In her accounting of the painting by Kelly referred to above, which is in the Guggenheim in New York, Bridget Alsdorf comments: - “*By defining the structure and shape of each canvas through color—matte, uniform, and without gestural nuance—Kelly eliminated any figure-ground illusion and brought painting into the sculptural realm of objects; the painting itself became the figure, with the wall as its ground. [...] Blue, Green, Yellow,*

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<sup>10</sup> On first reference to particular works, I shall provide the Catalogue Raisonné number as listed in Elger, Dietmar, 1997b, (ed.) *Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Vol. II: Catalogue Raisonné*, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Edition Cantz: In this instance, CR# 41. Spellings of titles and in quotations, follows the original (often American English), otherwise UK English applies.

<sup>11</sup> Illustrated in Spector, Nancy, 2004, *Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated)*, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, p87.

*Orange, Red exemplifies Kelly's lucid, forthright style. Five monochrome panels are arranged in the order of the chromatic spectrum, the primary colors balanced by their intermediary values of green and orange. The concentrated colors are charged by their interaction with each other, and the work's size—monumental, yet at a human scale by virtue of its breakdown into vertical panels—further strengthens its presence [...] unframed and unmarked save for their color, they are a more emphatic denial of the window-onto-the-world view of the traditional four-sided easel painting.*"<sup>12</sup>

There is much in this description of Kelly's work that might resonate when looking at *Forbidden Colors*. Yet Gonzalez-Torres did something quite extraordinary by turning this aesthetic approach on its head. Rather than working with absence, anonymity, and a disinterested presentation of the possibilities of colour combination, he infused his work with a vivid social dimension. He gave the work a very specific, window-on-the-world that the minimalist object he mimicked would deny.

In an artists' statement accompanying the exhibition at which *Forbidden Colors* was first shown, FGT elaborated: - "*It is a fact that four colors – red, black, green and white – placed next to each other in any form are strictly forbidden by the Israeli army in the occupied Palestinian territories. This color combination can cause an arrest, a beating, a curfew, a shooting, or a news photograph. Yet it is a fact that these forbidden colors presented as a solitary act of consciousness here in Soho, will not precipitate similar reaction.*"<sup>13</sup>

This work gathers its meaning through its title, which tells us that the colours we see are forbidden, which the artists' statement then augments. Language, in the form of words, is often incorporated into his works or their (generally parenthetical) subtitles and even when words are absent, there is often some 'readable' symbolic content. The title (sometimes. the imageless caption) opens up a dimension of interpretation that overlays and coexists with the purely visual and formal qualities of the piece, but turn them away from a self-reflexive exercise in colour into a potentially shocking (and at the time of this writing, highly relevant) visual evocation of the censorship of identity and the prohibition of expression; language and empathy turn out to be the materials from which this work might gather its meaning.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/movement\\_work\\_md\\_Hard\\_edge\\_painting\\_72\\_1.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/movement_work_md_Hard_edge_painting_72_1.html), accessed 20/08/06, no page.

<sup>13</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1988, *Artist's Statement on Installation at the New Museum New York*, unpag. Reprinted in Ault, Julie, 2006, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl/dangin p121

In this respect the work now looks not to be a reformulation of minimalist antecedents, but rather closer to what is categorised as conceptual art, in which the idea or the proposition is the significant element in the artwork rather than the physical object through which it is represented. After all, *Forbidden Colors* could be produced in a variety of formats and still convey the same ‘message’. Language, in this work, is as much the medium as acrylic paint or board, and propositions or provocations through language and signs appear throughout the very varied forms that his work has taken. Gonzalez-Torres himself commented: “*I may make objects without language, but everything in culture happens within language. Nothing happens outside of language.*”<sup>14</sup>

The second quality of *Forbidden Colors* that I want to pick up on is something that is only intimated in this instance but becomes a key quality of some later works. Gonzalez-Torres’ narrative explains that these colours are forbidden in any configuration, and his own ordering of the colours in his statement does not match the sequence visible on the wall.<sup>15</sup> That suggests that there may be an arbitrariness in the works’ presentation, which in turn opens up the possibility for the viewer to imagine and for the owner or curator to provide different displays of the work – for instance: should the red be placed next to the green?<sup>16</sup> Such ambiguity is characteristic of his art, and in this respect *Forbidden Colors* prefigures a central quality of his work in which artistic reticence and very subtle allusion are deployed to invite – perhaps seduce – the viewer or owner into a participative or collaborative role.

In *Forbidden Colors* this ambiguity is not deployed to invite the owner or viewer into an actual rearrangement of the piece, but rather points to the recognition that *any* imaginative preference we might have about the work would itself be proscribed, were we in the occupied Palestinian territories rather than New York, in 1988. Looking at the work is no longer a matter of whether we like these rather dull flatly painted un-decorative panels, but an encounter that raises issues about the proscription of identity and affiliation, and the censorship of all possible conceptions of the work, including our own. Such a coming

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<sup>14</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1991 *All the Time in The World (interview with Robert Nickas)*: reprinted in Julie Ault (ed.), *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl/angin, 2006, p40

<sup>15</sup> Installation photograph: Julie Ault (ed.), *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl/angin, 2006, p120

<sup>16</sup> Coincidentally, not only are the shapes and sequences of the colours in *Forbidden Colors* potentially arbitrary, it seems the colours themselves are not, in fact, fixed: *Al Bitar* of the Palestinian Embassy at Bucharest, has commented: “*In reference to the colour, this remains uncertain as there are no real specific colours. The green for instance could vary from turquoise to forest green.*” Accessed at <http://flagspot.net/flags/ps.html> 27 August 2006

together of intellectual engagement and parallel sensual responses is extremely refined in his work.

From the description I have given, it does not seem crucial whether Gonzalez-Torres actually painted these panels himself, and very many of works he made rely on ‘readymade’ materials; office clocks, light bulb strings, or sweets, which he subtly imbues with often-intense meaning. How he does so will be a recurrent point of attention in this study, and that will mean examining the *effect* of his work; in other words, privileging the audience rather than the artist. But if his art is about ideas, rather than objects *per se*, that means that we cannot turn away entirely from artistic intent – after all, *Forbidden Colors* makes sense through the artists’ caption and explanation. How explicit does the artist’s interpretation have to be, and should the audience pay attention to it? As it happens, *Forbidden Colors* is uncharacteristically didactic, but how did Gonzalez-Torres insert himself more generally in his work? Who, in fact, does the *work* in his artwork? In Gonzalez-Torres’ practice, the relationship between the art object and the viewer or owner is complex and variable, and open to a range of theoretical perspectives and interpretative approaches, which are considered in the next chapter.

#### 4. The *Continuous Present*: Contingency and Subjectivity



*"Untitled"*, 1991

Billboard

Dimensions vary with installation

Installation at 133 8th Avenue at West 16th Street, New York,  
for "Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres" at Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1992

Photo: Peter Muscato

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation  
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

#### 4. The *Continuous Present*: Contingency and Subjectivity

*Forbidden Colors* points to some of the key qualities that recur throughout Gonzalez-Torres' work: the adoption of minimalist sensibilities and conceptual art strategies, the use of readymade materials, an ambiguity in the work's presentation or manifestation, and scope for the audience to complete the works conceptually as well as to experience them sensually. If anything, *Forbidden Colors* is untypically didactic, for at the heart of his artistic practice was a desire to provoke an open-ended response to his work, marked by ambiguity of meaning and the possibility of multiple and contradictory interpretations, which rest in the reception given to the work by the viewer. The contingency of his arts' reception is summed up in the opening quote from Gertrude Stein: "*The composition is the thing seen by everyone living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living.*" This is the "*continuous present*" within which his works manifest themselves, and within which a creative act can take place: a complex and mutable interaction between viewer, object and a subtle and generally restrained authorial presence.

Gonzalez-Torres privileged his audiences (by which I mean viewers, owners, curators and all those who interact with the work) by shifting key elements of decision-making about the work to them. Viewers are invited to take some works home, owners are free to determine the contexts within which the work is presented, and in some instances to change works to such a degree that, potentially, nothing remains of the makers' original.

To tease out what is distinctive about Gonzalez-Torres' form of audience engagement, and authorial intervention, I will briefly review the relationship of his works to their minimalist and conceptual art antecedents, focusing on the features that can distinguish his work from those progenitors that he often mimicked, while also drawing out strategic similarities in relation to questions of authorship, authenticity and originality. The aim is certainly not to attempt an historic or genealogical account of his work, and my descriptions of the various artistic styles and strategies is highly generalised for the purpose of identifying broad categorical distinctions.

A brief sketch of some of the works on view at Gonzalez-Torres' London retrospective, organised by the Serpentine Gallery in 2000, gives an impression of the diversity of media

that he deployed, the contexts in which his work might be displayed, and the puzzlement that it might provoke.

One work consists of a large black and white snapshot image of an unmade bed with the impressions of two now absent sleepers, reproduced on large street billboards and on subway platform posters located at a dozen sites across the city. Another piece, placed above the receptionist's desk in a lobby, is made of two standard office clocks, wall-mounted and touching one another: battery operated, as days go by, they slowly fall out of step. Other works, on show in the gallery, are made from stacks of paper, sometimes imprinted with text or image, sheets that viewers are permitted to take with them and to make their own. There are also candy piles that are, likewise, consumable, and curtains made from plastic beads that demarcate spaces through which it is possible to pass and that, as they shimmer with the movement of audiences, sound like, as Roni Horn has described, "sedges in the wind"<sup>17</sup>. High around the cornice of the round atrium appears a sequence of phrases and dates, with not apparent chronology, references to events that might be recognisable or entirely obscure. In a street some distance away, strings of low-watt light bulbs have been stretched between lampposts to illuminate the already lit. On a rainy evening their pinpoints of light reflect on the passing car bonnets, perhaps provoking the curiosity of drivers or pedestrians. Other works appear in the public spaces and private institutional sites of a hospital, a museum and an art college studio, where, like the billboards, they might be either sought out with premeditation or encountered by coincidence.<sup>18</sup>

In order to provide a backdrop to some theoretical conceptions about Gonzalez-Torres' art, I want to introduce two amongst the works mentioned above, by way of preamble. The first is the pair of synchronised wall clocks. These are standard items of office equipment - simple round plastic framed battery-operated wall clocks with second hands, familiar in public and institutional spaces, with no embellishments or distinguishing features to obstruct legibility. They are located at the reception desk of the Gallery. Visitors might puzzle at the opening of the show why there are two touching synchronised clocks, when one would do; by the end of the show one dial will be ahead of the other, but by an arc of the red second hand rather than any notable number of minutes sufficient to question the

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<sup>17</sup> Horn, Roni, 1996, *An Uncountable Infinity (for Felix Gonzalez-Torres)* in *Roni Horn* (ed. Louise Neri, Lynne Cooke, Thierry de Duve), 2000, London: Phaidon Press p120

<sup>18</sup> The exhibition is well illustrated in the catalogue *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000

time. This work could be a prompt for thoughts about time and relativity, but as with *Forbidden Colors*, its emotional and cognitive power comes through its title, or rather through a parenthetical subtitle that Felix Gonzalez-Torres only sometimes gave to his virtually universally “*Untitled*” works.

In this case the work is “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*).<sup>19</sup> [Illus. front cover] This offers a frame of reference, and as with *Forbidden Colors*, the recognition or identification provided through the title gives a possibility for a cascade of metaphoric associations, emotionally and cognitively. For Lisa Corrin this work was a response to homophobia and homoeroticism: “*two clocks nudge one another and tick side by side in unison.*”<sup>20</sup> Amanda Cruz had a premonitory feeling: “*inevitably, imperfectly one will cease before the other*”<sup>21</sup>, while Lewis Baltz considered this allusion to mortality to be “*blandly literal*”<sup>22</sup>, such reactions are indicative of the diverse subjective resonance that the work is capable of provoking. Gonzalez-Torres’ own reactions to the work were themselves not constant; in 1988, he wrote to his lover Ross Laycock below a drawing of the double clocks: “*Don’t be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous to us [...] We are a product of the time [...] We are synchronised, now and forever.*”<sup>23</sup> By 1991, after his lover’s death, he commented in an interview with Robert Nickas “*Time is something that scares me... or used to. The piece I made with the two clocks was the scariest thing I have ever done. I wanted to face it. I wanted these two clocks right in front of me ticking.*”

I don’t want to prefer one commentary on these works to any other, but simply to present their diversity. My own impression is optimistic: In all the reproductions of this work, the clocks are shown in synchrony, but to me what is interesting is what happens when they fall out of step: the red second hands sweep so slowly out of time with each other that it takes six months for them to be at opposite ends of the dial, and the steady dual tick-tick meanwhile maintains a metronomic rhythm, a double pulsation, consistent and reliable regardless of the second hands’ relative positions on the dial. Meanwhile, the minute hands have deviated imperceptibly, and just as they begin to diverge by a single discernable minute, the second hands will swing back round into another approximation to synchrony.

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<sup>19</sup> “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) 1987-1990, CR # 108

<sup>20</sup> Corrin, Lisa G., 2000, *Self-questioning Monuments* in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* London: Serpentine Gallery p12

<sup>21</sup> Cruz, Amanda, 1994 *The Means of Pleasure* in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Travelling*, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art p57

<sup>22</sup> Baltz, Lewis, 1996, (*sans titre*), *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, reprinted in Julie Ault (ed.), *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl/dangin, 2006 p213

<sup>23</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix: letter to Ross Laycock, 1988, reproduced in facsimile in *Selected Correspondence* in Julie Ault (ed.), *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl/dangin, 2006 p155

To me this work is an affirmation of the durability and rhythms of relationships rather than a pointer towards their eventual inescapable fallibility, but other responses will be just as meaningful: “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) points to an ambiguity of reception that seems to be somehow deliberately engineered. There is a dialogue going on, but it seems the artist is proposing a question rather than supplying an answer.

With *Forbidden Colors*, Gonzalez-Torres imbued the minimalist object with a political message. With the ready-made clocks of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) he generated conundrums about relationships by re-labelling the commonplace. In the case of “*Untitled*” 1991<sup>24</sup>, there is no linguistic label (parenthetical or otherwise) to help. This is what I will describe as the ‘unmade bed billboard’ that appeared on road sites and underground stations across London in 2000, and has been widely displayed worldwide [Illus. p19]. The unmade bed with the traces of two sleepers evokes all sorts of possibilities. To the early morning commuter or passer-by it might be a warm reminder of a moment just departed, or to someone lonely it might bring to mind a wistful past or wished for future. In terms of Gonzalez-Torres’ own life it has been regarded as elegiac and mournful. But it is open ended; there are cues but no more.

A commentary by bell hooks on seeing the unmade bed billboard, considers the work in terms of separation and remembrance of fulfilment: “*This image taunted with remembered connections. Where the body of love could be, where the intimacy of lying close could be seen, there was only absence. Each individual looking into that vacant space must come to terms with what is not there. Once again, Gonzalez-Torres gives us art that is not meant to usurp, stand in for, replace experience.*”<sup>25</sup> As with much of Gonzalez-Torres’ art, recognition of the work’s meaning may generate a point of spontaneous engagement or connection, but the effects might also be prolonged or postponed. With “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) a point of poignancy may come from a moment of recollection when looking at another wall clock in a different place. For Lisa Corrin the bed billboard “*is not only about the ‘aftermath of sleep or sex’ but also the aftermath of the image. Lodged in our consciousness, the image is poised to resurface at some unexpected moment, or reconnect with some unexpected place within ourselves.*”<sup>26</sup> In all these instances authorial reticence comes together with what bell hooks described as a ‘subversive beauty,’ to create work that

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<sup>24</sup> CR # 184

<sup>25</sup> hooks, bell, 1994, *subversive beauty: new modes of contestation* in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Travelling*, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994 p 47

<sup>26</sup> Corrin, Lisa G., 2000, *Self-questioning Monuments* in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* London: Serpentine Gallery, p13

is a: “life force, affirming the presence of intense intimacy, closeness, our capacity to know love, face death and live with ongoing yet reconciled grief.”<sup>27</sup>

The relationship between artist, work and audience has most often been couched in Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ practice in terms of Roland Barthes’ influential 1968 text *The Death of the Author*<sup>28</sup>. This essay remarks on the process of theatrical ‘distancing’ developed by the playwright Bertold Brecht, but argues that a more definitive disconnection is needed: “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination,” Barthes asserted, before concluding that “the birth of the reader must be at the expense of the death of the Author.” Gonzalez-Torres’s cited both Brecht’s and Barthes’ ideas when describing his privileging of the autonomy and subjectivity of the viewers, and texts by both writers are included in the major compilation of critical writing on Gonzalez-Torres edited by Julie Alt in 2006.

An equally pertinent, though unreported, perspective lies in Marcel Duchamp’s 1957 lecture *The Creative Act* which opens with an invitation to consider “the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.” In this short text Duchamp put forward the radical idea, prefigured by Stein in *Composition as Explanation*, that “the creative act is not performed by the artist alone.” Denying both the autonomy of the artwork and the privileging of the artists’ intentions, Duchamp instead turned his attention on the viewer, stating that “the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act”<sup>29</sup>

Both these texts crystallised the approaches taken by a variety of artists who were seeking an anti-authorial artistic practice in the 1960s and 1970s. Helen Molesworth, in her essay *Work Ethic*<sup>30</sup> links the emergence of these approaches to a shift after the 1950s from a manufacturing economy founded on the production of tangible standardised goods, to a service economy that generates intangible activities performed for particular clients, creating new, managerial, divisions of labour. A variety of strategies were used to obscure artistic intent, or at least to minimise the artisanal. The use of chance operations by the

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<sup>27</sup> hooks, bell, 1994, *subversive beauty: new modes of contestation in Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Travelling*, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994 p 45

<sup>28</sup> Barthes, Roland, 1977, *The Death of the Author* in Barthes, Roland, 1977, *Image Music Text* (Selected and translated by Stephen Heath) London: Fontana Press pp 142-148.

<sup>29</sup> Duchamp, Marcel (1957) *The Creative Act* In, Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, (eds.) *Theories & Documents of Contemporary Art*: San Francisco: Univ. California Press, 1996, pp818-819

<sup>30</sup> Molesworth, Helen, 2003, *Work Ethic* University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press

composer John Cage and the adoption by Sol LeWitt of serial systems and mathematical logic to generate his drawing were each aimed at diminishing artistic subjectivity as determinant of the work. Some, such as the sculptor Donald Judd, turned the production of their work over to fabricators and assistants to further remove traces of the authorial mark, while photography's capacity for mechanical reproduction was also deployed. A rejection of authorship was not only a means to affirm a new managerial rather than manual role for the artist but also represented, on occasion, efforts to make works of art that would resist assimilation into the commodifying realms of the art market, for instance by the artworks' dematerialisation from object to concept or situation or happening.

The minimalists, and before them the users of the ready made, had presented possibilities for the spectacle and spectatorship of art, drawing out the sensuality of objects and the performative potential of the art work. Whether they generally achieved the self-referentiality they sought from their work, or truly escaped commodification, is another matter, what is relevant here, is that they were working through materials.

Conceptual art, on the other hand concerned itself with ideas, and that meant language. As Joseph Kosuth put it: "*The basis of a conceptual practice is not what you see but what you understand. It is this process of coming into understanding that links the viewer/reader with the work and concretizes that experience as part of the same event that formed that work, as meaning.*"<sup>31</sup> The language, signs and symbols that provoke the cognition that Kosuth alludes to had become a key domain for critical theory and postmodern philosophy during the 1970s and onward, but has deep roots. Ferdinand de Saussure was delivering the lectures that lead to poststructuralism even before Gertrude Stein was studying the connection between consciousness and language at medical school.

Amongst the pioneering conceptual artists, such as Joseph Kosuth (with whom Gonzalez-Torres exhibited and entered into public dialogue)<sup>32</sup>, the aim was more often than not to expose the possibilities and limitations of language itself, rather than to use language for the purposes of an authorial narrative. Over time, postmodernist perspectives gave greater prominence to the system of signs and consigned the subjective viewer to a less autonomous role. Douglas Crimp and Adam Ralston have noted: "*Questions of identity, authorship, and audience – and the ways in which all three are constructed through*

<sup>31</sup> Kosuth, Joseph 1994 *Exemplar* in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Travelling*, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, p56

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance: Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1994, *In Conversation with Joseph Kosuth* in *A. Reinhardt J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility* London: Academy Editions, pp76-81

representation – have been central to postmodernist art, theory and criticism. The significance of a so-called appropriation art, in which the artist forgoes the claim to original creation by appropriating already existing images and objects, has been to show that the “unique individual” is a kind of fiction, that our very selves are socially and historically determined through pre-existing images, discourses and events.”<sup>33</sup> Many such approaches were engaged with political concerns. During the late seventies, a number of artists, including a variety of feminist makers, were using visual culture as sites to confront or subvert narratives of power and to deconstruct patriarchal language. For Hal Foster this pointed to a “*shift in practice [that] entails a shift in position: the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular.*”<sup>34</sup>

Of course, what artists were doing in the real world was more complex than the roughly sketched categorical distinctions in these synopses might suggest, and certainly by the time Gonzalez-Torres was working in New York, many of these styles, and the issues they raised, had become institutionalised and academicised. In her extensive study of *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Martha Buskirk cautions: “*If art from the first phase of postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s could still be understood according to certain movements and categories, a second phase predominant in the 1980s and 1990s has been characterised by artists who have felt free to pick and chose between the entire range of possibilities established since the late 1950s, pulling apart and recombining elements associated with many different movements*”<sup>35</sup>

This was the milieu in which Gonzalez-Torres’ work was produced. Where his work is unusual is in its capacity to combine effects with subtlety yet considerable precision. If minimalism provides several of the facades that Gonzalez-Torres uses to bring beauty into his work, it is not because he is interested in the purely phenomenological effects that the self-reflexive and non-referential object could generate. *Forbidden Colors* is not a formal study in color theory, though that is not to deny its capacity to stimulate at that level, not to negate the beauty of such forms. Neither, on the other hand was he entirely concerned with

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<sup>33</sup> Crimp, Douglas and Ralston, Adam (1990) *AIDS DemoGraphics* Seattle: Bay Press) p18

<sup>34</sup> Foster, Hal, 1985, *Subversive Signs* reprinted in Cahoon, Lawrence, 2003 (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p310. [Artists he names in this context are Sherrie Levine, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Allan McCollum, Jenny Holzer, Krzysztof Wodiczko]

<sup>35</sup> Buskirk, Martha, 2003, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* London: MIT Press, p11

the subversion of signs as an objective, as practiced by some of his contemporaries, though he used the citation of signs as a method. Gonzalez-Torres describes his frame of reference thus: “*Work like Jenny Holzer’s and Barbara Kruger’s had a very specific purpose, it was trying to shift the dominant order. But things have changed. I may make objects without language, but everything in culture happens in within language. Nothing happens outside of language. The dominant narrative is not static. It changes very quickly. It requires new modes of contestation.*”<sup>36</sup>

Where minimalism seeks to absent the artist/sculptor entirely (the “*what you see is what you see*” of Frank Stella’s much quoted aphorism)<sup>37</sup> Gonzalez-Torres’ art seems to suggest that such detachment and formalism is itself a moral stance, insufficient for the social and humanist messages to which his works are open.

If Barthes’ was proposing the ‘*Death of the Author*’, Gonzalez-Torres’ art seems in fact closer to Duchamp’s earlier mentioned proposition of a dialogue in which the viewer performs a ‘*Creative Act*’ on the work and thus enacts it by bringing it into meaning – a notion prefigured in Stein’s concept of composition that prefaces this study. Whatever the residual degree of authorial direction, the key is in the reception. Gonzalez-Torres alluded to the sensibilities that he wanted to trigger by citing a metaphor deployed by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In his “*Blood-Remembering*” Rilke argued that experience forms the basis of understanding, and that experiences need to become memories, but that memories alone are not sufficient: “*Not till they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguishable from ourselves – not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them.*”<sup>38</sup> This text points towards an effort in his work to connect with these intuitive, instinctive levels of his audiences’ *blood-remembering*, an infiltration that Lisa Corrin of the Serpentine Gallery described as both “*poetic and subversive*”<sup>39</sup>.

Each of the works I have so far discussed seeks to magnify our introspective capacities for reflection about life through the recontextualisation of the commonplace and mundane at

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<sup>36</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1991 *All the Time in The World (interview with Robert Nickas)*. Originally published in *Flash Art* 24 no.161 (November-December 1991), reprinted in Ault, Julie, (ed.), 2006, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl/dangin, p40

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, Mark C., 2004, *Skinning Art* in Spector, Nancy, 2004, *Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated): Art from 1951 to the Present* New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, p30

<sup>38</sup> Rilke, Rainer Maria *Blood-Remembering* (1975) [Trans. John J. I. Mood] New York: W W Norton, reprinted in Julie Ault (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl/dangin p208

<sup>39</sup> Corrin, Lisa G., 2000, *Self-questioning Monuments* in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* London: Serpentine Gallery, p8

the level of the personal and particular. David Deicher has referred to this as a reversal of Marcel Duchamp's adoption of the readymade: "*Gonzalez-Torres adopted the power of the aesthetic context to demonstrate how even the most commonplace, commercial products of industrial production – a pile of candies, a pair of electronic clocks, strings of lights, curtains of plastic beads – can be saturated with personal associations, memories, and emotions.*"<sup>40</sup> Gonzalez-Torres' art, he argued, is "*predicated upon the rehabilitation of precisely those aspects of experience that have had no place in 'serious' art,*" the ephemeral, the everyday and the sentimental. In rooting his work in the quotidian and in the instinctive internalised here-and-now subjectivity of our "*blood- memories*", there is a sense of a '*continuous present*' within an awakened consciousness. Commenting on the exhibition of four billboard works (including the unmade bed billboard already described) in multiple sites across Bogotá, curator Carlos Basualdo argued, "*His works set out precisely to recover the debased and banalised beauty of day-to-day objects. The aim of this exhibition –perhaps not entirely covert – is to recover, albeit perhaps in a fleeting way, some of the subtleties that constitute the substrate of a deep and necessary solidarity that unmistakably provides the very foundations of daily life in the cities in which it is to be presented*"<sup>41</sup>.

There is something of the pragmatic philosophical tradition, rather than postmodernism, in these perspectives on Gonzalez-Torres' work. It could be argued that Gonzalez-Torres is providing a response to John Dewey's 1931 diagnosis of a problem in art (which might, incidentally, be applied to minimalism) that "*when artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them, that renders almost opaque their general significance... Art is remitted to a separate realm where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing and achievement.*"<sup>42</sup> Dewey's call in *Art as Experience* for a "*task to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience*"<sup>43</sup> resonates with the accounts just given.

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<sup>40</sup> Deitcher, David, 1997, *Contradiction and Containment* in Elger, Dietmar, 1997a (ed.) *Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Vol. I: Text*, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Edition Cantz p 107. Ibid, p108

<sup>41</sup> Basualdo, Carlos, 2000 *La comunidad silenciosa* (trans. *The Silent Community*) in Basualdo, Carlos (ed.), 2000, *sin título bogotá*, Santafé de Bogotá: Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango p25 [Authors' translation]

<sup>42</sup> Dewey, John, 1934, *Art as Experience* (Reprint of 2005), New York: Perigee Books p2

<sup>43</sup> Dewey, John, 1934, *Art as Experience* (Reprint of 2005), New York: Perigee Books p2

Gertrude Stein's experiments in writing described in *Composition as Explanation* were influenced by the pragmatist philosophy and psychology of William James and his notion of a punctuated *stream of consciousness*, that privileged the subjective immediacy of experience.

Another way of re-formulating Gonzalez-Torres' ambition to "*make the world a better place*" was summed up in a philosophical distinction made by Richard Rorty: "[John] Dewey was as convinced as [Michel] Foucault that the subject is a social construction, that discursive practices go all the way down to the bottom of our minds and hearts. But he insisted that the only point of society is to construct subjects capable of ever more novel, ever richer forms of human happiness."<sup>44</sup> There is something too, of Walter Benjamin's ambition: "*A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citeable in all its moments.*"<sup>45</sup>

The question of the relationship between authorship, object and audience hinges on questions about the nature of language and the purpose (or meaning) of communication or consciousness. Where the pragmatic thinkers I have quoted distinguish themselves from the postmodernist (or more accurately, post-structuralists) with whom Gonzalez-Torres is more often contextualised, it is in their affirmation of a broadly humanist inter-subjectivity in which dialogue is more than citation, and where the power of subjectivity can be recognised, celebrated and enhanced. It is beyond the scope of this study to open up these rich seams of ontological philosophy, save to note two pragmatist approaches that could offer some new perspective on Gonzalez-Torres' art and its effect. Richard Rorty's 1984 essay "*Solidarity or Subjectivity*"<sup>46</sup> not only encapsulates the two poles of the question that launched this study, it also responds in an optimistic fashion to the iconoclastic consequences of some French postmodern thought by offering the pragmatic alternative that 'legitimation' is always an appeal to 'solidarity' or culture. The philosopher Jürgen Habermass advocates the possibility of freedom within human relations based on a

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<sup>44</sup> Rorty, Richard 1998 *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* Harvard MA: Harvard University Press, p31

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, Walter, 1940, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in Benjamin, Walter, (1999) *Illuminations* (Ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn), London: Pimlico

<sup>46</sup> Rorty, Richard 1985, *Solidarity or Objectivity?* in Rajchman, John and West, Cornel (eds.) *Post-Analytic Philosophy* New York: Columbia University Press, pp 3-19.

language as a tool for discourse<sup>47</sup>. A fuller account of the philosophical implications of Gonzalez-Torres' aesthetic strategies, and particularly of the nature of self-consciousness in his work, would benefit from further consideration of these authors. They reveal too a humanism and optimism within pragmatist theory that finds its expressive mirror in Gonzalez-Torres' confident privileging of the viewer's view: it could be interesting to contrast this sense of a possibility for empowerment with the post-structuralist notions of entanglement, as exemplified by the previously cited comment of Crimp and Ralston.

The changes in the role of the artist and in the nature of the art 'object' described above, not only challenged notions of authorship, but also of originality and authenticity. The creation of a readymade artwork, such as "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) involves the selection of the object, its designation by the artist and its recontextualisation as an art object.

"*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) suggests this is not a case of arbitrary selection – the object is the medium for an idea. But with this emphasis on ideas, there were sometimes gaps between conception and realisation. Other works were made to be temporary or site-specific, or performative. Lucy Lippard reflected in 1968: "*Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialisation of art, especially art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete.*"<sup>48</sup>

The obsolescence of the art object has a number of potential consequences that impact on the work of Gonzalez-Torres. The first concerns the interpretation of such work, the second its administration. As a corollary, there are also questions about how such dematerialised art might be exchanged, especially in the market.

*Forbidden Colors* is, potentially, a dematerialised object in the sense that the art is in the idea, and the object itself is readily reproducible or adaptable. This is even more the case with "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*), and questions about the object's status apply in different ways in many of Gonzalez-Torres' works, including the endlessly replenishable stacks or candy piles and billboards, which do in fact have to be reconstituted – brought back into material existence – each time they are displayed.

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<sup>47</sup> See for instance: Habermas, Jürgen, 1987, (trans. Frederick Lawrence) *An Alternative Way Out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative versus Subject-Centered Reason*, reprinted in Cahoon, Lawrence, 2003 (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp 575-591

<sup>48</sup> Lippard, Lucy and Chandler, John, 1968, *The Dematerialization of Art*, quoted in Kwon, Miwon, *Exchange Rate: On Obligation and Reciprocity in Some Art of the 1960s and After* in Molesworth, Helen, 2003, *Work Ethic* University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, p 83

The problem of interpretation of such works has been very well summed up by Martha Buskirk “...*although the artists’ touch may be less evident in the physical process of making, the artists’ ongoing presence and decision-making have become more important for contingent works where the physical boundaries of the piece have to be reconceived each time it is exhibited. Thus even if artistic intent has been repudiated as the basis for critical assessment, it reappears as a determinant of the work’s very form. In circumstances where the tangible form in which an artist’s expression is communicated to the viewer may not entirely coincide with the artist’s definition of what constitutes the work of art, attention to the object itself has to be supplemented or even supplanted by information about the artists’ conception.*”<sup>49</sup>

The second question, which I summarise as an administrative one, touches on how the integrity of the artistic work can be protected, including in terms of authenticity, originality, but also its copyright, distribution, presentation, fabrication and how (if at all) it enters the art market.

Sometimes these problems can be short-circuited with a signature: the two clocks on a lobby wall are “*the*” two clocks of Gonzalez-Torres’ work because they are, indeed, signed on the back. But a signature is sometimes not enough to make these pieces function as the artist intended: some additional translation of the concept is needed. For Gonzalez-Torres, as for many amongst the generations of minimalist and conceptual artists cited, the solution lay in the certificate: a statement, whether designating ownership, or origin, that generally set out the parameters for the manifestation of the work, including to varying degrees, the privileges and responsibilities of the certificate’s holder. The function of authentication is also served through certification, and the certificate itself becomes potentially commodifiable.<sup>50</sup> To the extent that the certificates can shed some light on the artists’ intent, it may be necessary to attend to them for the reasons that Martha Buskirk has outlined.

There is a paradox here. Any of the certificated works produced by Gonzalez-Torres exists in its own terms: in the time and the place and in the person viewing it, but behind the autonomy and spontaneity of the viewers’ response there is an authorial touch, that might delimit the conditions for the encounter, even while eschewing a visible authorial presence

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<sup>49v</sup> Buskirk, Martha, 2003, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* London: MIT Press, p16

<sup>50</sup> Some of Gonzalez-Torres’ certificates are unusual in that they name the owner. Each time a work is transferred a new certificate is issued by the Foundation. The certificates also accrue records of the works’ manifestation or changes over time. In some cases they specify preferential repurchase rights.

in the subject matter of the work. The role of the certificates in the interpretation of his artistic intent will conclude this chapter, and will prove particularly helpful in delimiting the degree to which subjective decision-making by owners is inserted into the works, but first I want to consider the elements of choice, or engagement that is directed at the work's viewers, who would typically be responding to the manifestation of the object rather than to its hidden documentation.

If its audiences bring Gonzalez-Torres' art to life through a creative act, then that act can be seen as constituting an exchange between the artist and the viewer. Within his work, this was an especially significant part of his practice, transferring authority to owners, and inviting audiences into a performative - collaborative - act through, for instance, taking candies from a pile. Lisa Corrin has argued about Gonzalez-Torres' work: "*...his artistic gifts bring with them the 'obligations of reciprocity'. He must give his gift but he also reminds us that the work of art is an exchange between artists and viewer in which he or she must give in return. His art is a generous provocation that values this dialogue above all else. This provocation is, in an odd way, also a contract between the artist and anyone involved in viewing the work. We become not only complicit in, but also accountable for, its status and its fate.*"<sup>51</sup> But whether the viewer takes the offering or not, and how they treat what they have received, will be entirely individual and contingent. It could be as simple as a matter of taste: as Robert Storr has written: "*Within the realm of commodities, then, Gonzalez-Torres's materials range from dime-a-dozen fortune cookies – "fate" in a brittle shell – to dollar-a-piece Baci chocolates – moist kisses in fancy foil.*"<sup>52</sup>

Miwon Kwon has discussed the obligations and reciprocity that might be involved in such an exchange, and describes his gift giving in terms widely deployed in commentaries on Gonzalez-Torres' art. This is her first-hand account of a visit to the 1995 Guggenheim Museum retrospective of works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres: "*The large number of museum visitors cheerfully collecting sheets of paper and grabbing handfuls of candy as they moved through the spiralling exhibition seemed to bear out the observation of many critics and curators that these works are acts of unusual generosity. And the thought of Gonzalez-Torres' work being distributed around the world through the movement of his audience (rather than through the standard art market as a precious and expensive commodity)*

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<sup>51</sup> Corrin, Lisa G., 2000, *Self-questioning Monuments in Felix Gonzalez-Torres* London: Serpentine Gallery p9

<sup>52</sup> Storr, Robert, 2006 *When This You See Remember Me* in Ault, Julie (ed), 2006, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* Göttingen: steidldangin p24

*heartened me, and I considered how modestly yet effectively art can enter the spaces of people's daily lives.*"<sup>53</sup>

But this expectation, often and enthusiastically reported in commentaries on his work, proved in practice short-lived: *"Even before leaving the museum, however, I was shocked by the sight of overstuffed garbage cans in the lobby, jammed with rolled and crunched sheets of paper from Gonzalez-Torres' stacks. Outside the museum, too, Fifth Avenue waste bins were filled to capacity with what were, only a few yards away, inside the museum 'works of art'".* Miwon Kwon was, perhaps, describing an unusual situation, but the response she observes reinforces the fragility of the strategy. Just as a casual glance, label unread, at *Forbidden Colors* might consign it as a more or less interesting experiment in colour, so too his gift giving becomes contingent on an engagement, a provocation, that will touch some and not others. In this sense his work relies upon a particular and personalised rather than a universal response.

For some, owning and framing a piece from a Gonzalez-Torres stack might provide not only scope to enjoy and share the work, but could also be a marker of the particular time and place within which the work was encountered. There is therefore the possibility of establishing an affinity with the work based not only on its content, but also on the moment and circumstance of its exchange. The relationship between the work and its audience has the potential to exist in a performative action, as well as in an act of recognition (the 'understanding' referred to by Kosuth), and in the subtly altered perceptions that come with the after-thought of the image or idea (as noted by Lisa Corrin). In each of these instances, it is the creative affinity of the viewer that becomes entrenched.

Though the gift giving interactions with viewers has received much attention, in Gonzalez-Torres' art it is, in fact, owners that are often given the greater freedom in determining the manifestation of the work. Where certificates were used by many conceptual artists as instruments of control, to tie down and demarcate the precise properties of the manifested object or the context for its presentation, Gonzalez-Torres deployed them to achieve the opposite: to engage his art's owners' in a participative function which requires the insertion of their own creative act. Of course, many works by Gonzalez-Torres do not carry

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<sup>53</sup> Kwon, Miwon, 2003, *Exchange Rate: On Obligation and Reciprocity in Some Art of the 1960s and After* in Molesworth, Helen, 2003, *Work Ethic* University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press p93. Nancy Spector (1994) records this exhibition in her major monograph on Felix Gonzalez-Torres; see the bibliography. Subsequent quote, op cit, p93

certificates: his photographic jigsaw puzzles and photographs could be signed, as could the objects from which he produced some conceptual works, such as *Forbidden Colors* and “Untitled” (*Perfect Lovers*). In terms of his artistic practice certificates were issued for six series of works. All quotes given in the following description are taken from Dietmar Elger’s excerpts from the certificates, published in his 1997 *Catalogue Raisonné* of Gonzalez-Torres’ authorised oeuvre.<sup>54</sup>

For the *Stacks*, Gonzalez-Torres typically specified an original manifestation, in terms of paper size and weight, image etc: “*If this exact paper is not available, a similar paper may be used*”. “*A part of the intention of this work is that third parties may take individual sheets of paper from the stack. These individual sheets and all the individual sheets taken from a stack collectively do not constitute a unique work of art nor can they be considered the piece. The owner has the right to reprint and replace, at any time, the quantity of sheets necessary to regenerate the work back to an ideal height.*” “*The physical manifestation of this work in more than one place at one time does not threaten this work’s uniqueness, since its uniqueness is defined by ownership.*” For the *Candy Pieces* very similar terms were used. These works were typically of an ideal weight (sometimes corresponding, in the artists’ own accounts, to the bodyweight of his partner, or combined bodyweights, or the weight of the person to whom the work was dedicated). There was similarly flexibility about the exact candies to be used, though in one instance, a version using fortune cookies, he specified that if the recommended original supplier was not available an alternative source might be used “*providing that the messages are optimistic.*”

For the *Billboards* his specifications were precise in terms of the composition and cropping of the image, but entirely open in assigning rights in terms of the scale of reproduction, and decisions over the location that the work is presented, though he specified that if these works were to be exhibited, they must “*be recreated in at least one outdoor location.*”

Rather than height or weight, in these cases he specified the ‘ideal’ number of simultaneous presentations of the billboard image<sup>55</sup>. With his *Lightstrings* the materials were very

<sup>54</sup> Elger, Dietmar, 1997b, (ed.) *Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Vol. II: Catalogue Raisonné*, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Edition Cantz, p14 and p15. The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation has offered the following clarification: “*Those works which are multipart have certificates of Authenticity which do not name the owner. They are issued not because ownership needs to be defined, as in the case with works that can be regenerated, but because they consist of multiple parts that must not be separated. Certificates that name the owner for those types of works that can be regenerated such as candies, stacks, billboards and lightstrings are called Certificates of Authenticity and Ownership in comparison to Certificates of Authenticity which are for multipart pieces*” (Michelle Reyes in an email correspondence with the author, Summer 2006)

<sup>55</sup> The Felix Gonzalez Torres Foundation has clarified the following: “*the billboards must exist in at least 6 locations. The ideal number of locations is 24 and Felix specified that if this was not possible, it could be increased or decreased by multiples of 6 with the bare minimum outdoor locations set at 6. If there are at least 6 outdoor locations there is a possibility for there to be one interior location.*” (Michelle Reyes in correspondence with the author, Summer 2006)

precisely specified but he added: “*A part of this work is that the piece is completed upon the owner’s unique choice of installation. The work may be displayed in a different configuration each time it is installed, and the owner has the right to change the manner of installation at any time, thereby visually changing the work. The owner must replace bulbs as they burn out. The piece may be exhibited either with all the bulbs off or all the bulbs on.*” For the *Beaded Curtains* the materials and size, type and sequence of colours of the plastic beads was specified, with the right of substitution by similar, if the need arose. The bead curtains were required to be installed in “*entranceways*” i.e. in spaces through which viewers could pass, and it was necessary that the bead curtain fill the entranceway completely from top to ground and side-to-side.

The most remarkable of his certificated works are his *Portraits*. These comprise, like his dateline billboard and Photostat works, of unchronological sequences of events and dates, focused both on private experience and historical incidents or events. These were produced collaboratively between the artist and his “sitter,” and resulted in a combination of dates significant to each, but contextualised in broader historical events recognisable, at least in part, to some viewers. These sequences are recorded as conceived, within the certificates. In terms of their manifestation, these works are directly painted on walls, immediately below the ceiling. Of all his certificated works, these convey the greatest freedom (and perhaps responsibility) to their owners: “*The owner has the right to extend or contract the length of the portrait, by adding or subtracting events and their dates.*”

The certificates resolve some of the uncertainties about authenticity and originality that Gonzalez-Torres playfully exploited: “*an individual sheet of paper from one of the stacks does not constitute the ‘piece’ itself, but in fact it is a piece. At the same time the sum of many pieces of the identical paper is the ‘piece’, but not really because there is no piece only an ideal height of endless copies,*”<sup>56</sup> but they raise as many challenges as they solve. At an administrative level, the certificates have provided the principal point of reference for authorial intent. They also provide a degree of control over the dissemination of the work, reinforced by the copyright vested in the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. But the aesthetic significance of these certificates has been overlooked in much commentary on Gonzalez-Torres’ work, though it is considered in detail by David Deicher (1997) and in a very recent essay by Miwon Kwon (2006). From the excerpts produced here, it is clear that

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<sup>56</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1993, *Interview with Tim Rollins* in Bartman, William (ed) 1993 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Los Angeles: ART Press, p23

these certificates act as both vehicles for the expression of authorial intent and plans of action – interpretative functions – as well as providing an administrative framework for the definition of rights of ownership and reproduction. In a very real sense, the artworks *are* their certificates, and the resulting manifestations are collaborations, within defined parameters, between the owner and artist. They become promissory notes that require a serious level of trust, which involve the transposition of the typical relationship of owner to artists, one in which the purchase conveys not simply rights of acquisition, but also a relationship of obligation: a shift from proprietor to protagonist.

One example, a portrait piece “*Untitled*” 1989, which has no parenthetical subtitle naming its subject because it is, in fact, Gonzalez-Torres’ own self-portrait, provides a case study. As with all his *portraits*, he was seeking to present a mutable series of recollections of past relations traces of others’ presences, and significant way marks. Presented as sequences of events and dates like the dateline pieces, the ‘text’ offers points for recognition or imagination by the viewer. But just as self-perception changes over time, and new or different events come to prominence in our narratives about and accountings of ourselves, so too with these portraits, that present not a “timeless” version of their subject, but instead offer a mutable one, based on erasure and refilling transformations dictated by their owner, rather than their originator.

When first displayed, “*Untitled*” 1989 comprised of seven entries: Red Canoe 1987 Paris 1985 Blue Flowers 1984 Harry the Dog 1983 Blue Lake 1986 Interferon 1989 Ross 1983 [Illus. p9]. Miwon Kwon offers the following account of the works’ evolution “*By 2002, six years after the artist’ death, the eleventh version of “Untitled” 1989 was exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, now comprising sixty-six entries and sixty-six dates...the changes to it since 1996...have been made by third parties no matter what legal authority they might have had to make such changes. Further complicating this situation is the fact that this portrait is now co-owned by two museums, not even persons, sharing the rights to and responsibilities of re-writing Gonzalez-Torres’ self-portrait each time it is exhibited or loaned to another institution.*” Kwon goes on to comment: “*Given such a set-up, it is not improbable, 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 to the artist today.*”<sup>57</sup> Though Miwon Kwon is right to highlight the potential

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<sup>57</sup> This raises interesting questions, too, about the potential for these *portraits*, invariably made of sitters who become owners, to be transformed into self-portraits by this process.

total erasure of the work as it was conceived, the process is simply a more extreme instance of the privileging of the owners prerogative and of the viewers perspective that is evident in much of Gonzalez-Torres' art.

In any case, the 1980s events cited in the original version of the self-portrait will likely be entirely unfamiliar to any but those who knew Gonzalez-Torres closely; this is therefore not just a case of authorial reticence, but of a biographical specificity which was not expected to be transparent even at the time of the work's conception.

It is as if the artist was reminding us that the portrayal of a life is about the sum of the important personal and often private events and experiences that have shaped it; that can at best be recorded, but not necessarily retrospectively shared. A form of withholding (rather than the oft-supposed generosity) that leaves the audiences to complete the work, but that might, ideally, permit the work to continue to manifest itself, in an ever-evolving form to meet the changing conditions and the circumstances of the culture within which it comes into existence. "*Untitled*" 1989 seems to insist on a limitation to biography as a parameter within which the work can be drawn or understood, even though it is a self-portrait. This is a question whose wider ramifications are considered in the next chapter.

5. *“beauty is more now than dying’s when”*



*"Untitled"* (t-cell count), 1990  
graphite, colored pencil and gouache on paper, framed  
19 1/2 x 15 3/4 inches  
paper size: 12 x 9 inches  
Photo: Peter Muscato  
© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation  
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

## 5. “*beauty is more now than dying’s when*”

If Gonzalez-Torres is willing to introduce anonymity even into his own self-portrait, as a means of privileging (or confounding) the narratives and subjectivities of its viewers or owners, what then of the accounts of his work that focus on his biography, and interpret his art through the particularities of his life? It was the French philosopher Jacques Derrida who said: “*what is dead wields a very specific power.*”<sup>58</sup> He was warning against a tendency amongst some of his contemporaries to declaim the “death of philosophy” or the “end of history”, but his remark serves as well to describe the tendency of much posthumous interpretation of Gonzalez-Torres’ art to become predicated upon his mortality and within narrative of mourning and loss that are wrapped up in the circumstances of his life and his times. Not only does this risk heroizing or sentimentalising his art, it also risks – by pinning his work down to specificities of time, place, and identity – to strip it of the very dynamism and longevity that it might derive in an open-endedness of reception by the subjective viewer or owner, who is, after all, intended as the principal narrators of its meanings.

In this chapter, I want to address some of these questions of interpretation by first referring to some specific recent commentaries on his work. My aim is not to deny such perspectives but to problematize them, both in relation to his practice and in terms of the work itself. This chapter concludes with a detailed commentary on some particular works that will serve both to mirror and confound the critiques I am discussing, pointing back towards the contingency of efforts to fix the works’ meaning.

In what is likely to become a standard work of reference, *Art Since 1900* considers the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres within its entry for the year 1987, which surveys activism in art ignited by the AIDS crisis, the emergence of collaborative groups and political interventions, and the articulation of a new kind of queer aesthetic – a chapter that is, incidentally, grounded largely in the culture wars in the United States.

After reporting the artists’ death from AIDS (“*a small indication of the ghastly toll suffered by the gay and arts communities*”<sup>59</sup>), Gonzalez-Torres is described as performing a “*queering of other artistic forms of the sixties and seventies.*” Following a description of

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<sup>58</sup> Derrida, Jacques, 1981, *Différance* [Extracts from *Positions* (trans. Alan Bass)] in James M Thompson (ed.), *Twentieth Century Theories of Art* Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990, p467

<sup>59</sup> All quotes in this and the following paragraph are from Foster, Hal *et al* (eds.) 2004, *Art Since 1900*, London, Thames and Hudson, pp 608-610

some of the formal qualities of his billboards, candy spills and stack pieces, the narrative turns again to biography: *“For all the spirit of offering, however, this art is also imbued with the pathos of loss. In Untitled (March 5<sup>th</sup>) # 2 (1991), for example, two light bulbs are suspended, supported by their own intertwined cords – a simple testament to love threatened by loss, as one light burns out before the other. (March 5 was the birthday of his partner who died of AIDS in 1991, five years before Gonzalez-Torres himself.) And in a 1992 billboard we see only a black-and-white photograph of an empty double bed, ruffled where two bodies recently lay – an elegy to absent lovers that also condemns antigay discrimination criminalising the bedroom.”*

In an effort to explain Gonzalez-Torres’s distance from the poststructuralist feminist critiques of the subject, the account concludes *“...his art is concerned more with the making of a gay subjectivity than 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 attempted to carve out of heterosexual space a lyrical-elegiac place for gay subjectivity and history.”*

I have quoted liberally from this textbook because it is characteristic of a tendency to categorise his art in terms of his life, through biographical exegesis or by selective projecting his identity onto his art. In a newly published essay on the limitations of biography to the interpretation of Gonzalez-Torres, Carlos Basualdo points to another textbook account: *“in the lower right-hand corner of a brief eight-page section devoted to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, inside a black border we find the description “A Hispanic Homosexual Man.”*<sup>60</sup>

Thus death and loss and memorialising, and the artists’ identity as gay or HIV-positive or Latino, have become intertwined frameworks for the categorisation and summation of this work.

Kyo Maclear provides the following: *“Until his own untimely death in 1996 of AIDS-related illness, Felix Gonzalez-Torres devoted himself to the work of mourning. With poignant effect he explored how scopophilia and desire were stricken by loss.”* The candy pieces, according to her, *“remind us that we can become gluttons for pathos. (We await the*

<sup>60</sup> Basualdo, Carlos, 2006, *Common Properties* in Ault, Julie, (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: steidldangin, p187. He quotes Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art’s Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970s-1990s* 1996, Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, p109

*sorrowful experience because it allows us to feel deeply),” while, she believes, “the sheer number of candies, countlessly consumable, register something important about AIDS mourning – conveying the catastrophic accumulation of near-identical disasters.”<sup>61</sup>*

In the first place, a general objection could be made about the limitations of such historicising exegesis, which understands art in relation to its origins and trajectory, which presents art as a social and cultural phenomenon that can be rooted in places and times and, from that knowledge, then makes an unqualified leap to a contemporary interpretation of the work that is confined within genealogy. Such tools may be useful in accounting for the source of particular art, or to describe the culture within which it has evolved, but they do not necessarily reflect its meaning today or for the future, which even within deterministic terms are surely products of the society and the culture of its contemporary audiences rather than principally those of the artist or the critical environment within which the work arose (or as in e cumming’s preface; *“futures are obsolete:pasts unborn”*). This is not a question of denying the intricate connections between life and work, but of avoiding a whole field of determinisms that make of that work only an exemplary appendage of a life.

Knowledge of, or affinity for, the artist will to an entirely personal degree contribute or not to an appreciation for, or recognition of, the work. This will always be the case – this dissertation argues that Gonzalez-Torres’ art is determined by its reception, which is mutable and individual and therefore necessarily contingent. The difficulty comes when identity or biography becomes the principal frame for the presentation of the work, and this is especially problematic when considering Gonzalez-Torres did much to mask his identity in his work and, as he put it, *“avoid the palm trees”*<sup>62</sup> and other identikit labels. An artist’s identity may influence an artists’ work without necessarily being either the motive for or the subject of the art produced. It is possible both to respect the origin of this art, and to make it entirely our own. Carlos Basualdo put it this way *“To liberate the work from the events of a narrative that seems ultimately to have neutralised it does not mean depoliticising or taking it out of the context of the truly historical ups and downs in which it took place. The point is precisely to avoid the neutralisation of its political nature through fetishization associated with the poignant narrative of a life. The point is to resist the memorialising impulse that insists on reiterating a tragic figure in the work that is*

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<sup>61</sup> Maclear, Kyo, 1998, *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness*, p137

<sup>62</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1993, *Interview with Tim Rollins* in Bartman, William (ed) 1993 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Los Angeles: ART Press, p29

*continually associated with the author.*” History – in the sense of the specificity of time and circumstance – in which this art was produced, helps locate his work’s origins, but can confound and constrain its journey to new destinations.

The broader questions of identity and the ‘other’ as constructs within art and language are beyond the scope of this work, but the point here is to urge some caution in what might appear to be either commendable, or merely accurate, efforts to characterise Gonzalez-Torres’ art as the product of a gay man and of someone reflecting the struggles of a community affected by HIV. Visibility and affirmation (and indeed, secrecy or privacy) are tightly tangled with gay identity, but labelling the work (rather than identifying the man) in such terms risks profiling it as something other than majoritarian and generalisable, predicated instead on themes of sexuality and prognosis; of ‘*otherness*’. In other words, marginalising it. Quite apart from the potential claustrophobia of such perspectives, the commentaries quoted above come disagreeably close to conflating gay identity with tragedy and loss, and to summing up the lives lived by people with HIV solely in terms of their deaths. There is also implicit within these apparently sympathetic accounts of pathos and struggle the suggestion of a condition of victim-hood within gay identity that in turn provides the ingredient for a romanticisation or heroisation of the work.

Gonzalez-Torres’ work on the contrary conspicuously avoids such chains of association. In this sense it certainly was the product of a self-aware and self-affirming person, whose insertions of his own life into his work were generally subtle, anonymised or generalisable. Carlos Basualdo points to the complex role of biography in the work: “*Two contradictory impulses literally coexist in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres: a strong autobiographical inclination on the one hand, which translates into a recurring series of veiled references to facts, people, and moments of personal significance to the artist, and on the other hand, a tendency to translate those signs of a specific, singular life into abstract, anonymous marks open to interpretation by viewers.*”<sup>63</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres’ preoccupations, and thus something of his identity, are made explicit in terms of citations and his own artists’ accounts of the work that, for example, links the empty bed billboard to the *Bowers v Hardwick* supreme court case of 1986 that ruled that the right to privacy did not include the right to consensual private sex between men, or in

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<sup>63</sup> Basualdo, Carlos, 2006, *Common Properties* in Ault, Julie, (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: steidl/dangin, p185

the ideal weight of candy spills that equated to the bodyweight of his lover, or in the Sheridan Square dateline billboard of important moments in gay history. Gonzalez-Torres addressed these issues just as he addressed the first gulf war, gun deaths, racism and other social and political aspects of life around him, often in work that was un-didactic and allusory.

Basualdo makes a convincing point that “*within the historical context in which it was produced, the work’s publicity – in other words its chances of integrating itself as an active element into the public sphere to which it is contemporary – seems to call for those biographical references as a condition for the autonomous affirmation of its political nature.*”<sup>64</sup> By usefully distinguishing between the work, and its *publicity*, Basualdo is proposing that the cultural context through which this work emerged and within which it was received, might have favoured the visibility of its author’s identity as a marker of its political integrity (and, perhaps, of its ‘sincerity’).

This is not the place to initiate any effort at a biographic account of Gonzalez-Torres’ engagement with gayness or AIDS either as activist or artist or private individual, nor is any such account necessary for an approach to the work<sup>65</sup>. Though Gonzalez-Torres will have articulated his work in relation to his life, Robert Storr is right to disabuse a causal link: “*Sickness and impending death made this game urgent in ways no one, including Gonzalez-Torres expected. Yet his art is not solely nor even primarily dedicated to the AIDS epidemic. The elegiac qualities so central to his aesthetic are deeply embedded in a critical awareness and ambition that reaches past that crisis even though, in the end, it became the lightning rod for all his concerns.*”<sup>66</sup>

There is one further particular assertion that I want address, prompted by, literally, the footnote of a glib summation, which appears in Hal Foster’s *Prosthetic Gods*, through a reference on page 437 concerning the work of Robert Gober which concludes: “*Along with such artists as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Zoë Leonard, Gober answered the call for an art of mourning that might complement an activism of militancy made by Douglas Crimp in his “Mourning & Militancy” October 51(winter 1989).*”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Basualdo, Carlos, 2006, *Common Properties* in Ault, Julie, (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: steidl/dangin, p189

<sup>65</sup> His engagement with Group Materiel, an activist’s art collective, is partially documented, but would merit further reportage.

<sup>66</sup> Storr, Robert, 2006 *When This You See Remember Me* in Ault, Julie (ed), 2006, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* p9

<sup>67</sup> Foster, Hal, 2004, *Prosthetic Gods*, footnote #20, p437

Gonzalez-Torres' work is in this instance not only circumscribed within the parameters of an art of mourning, but is also unqualifiedly assigned to "*answering the call*" of a particular strand of cultural activism and critical theory. "*Mourning and Militancy*" was both product and engine under the conditions of emergency and cultural upheaval in the USA that AIDS brought it its wake at the time that Gonzalez-Torres was making his art. In his influential essay, Douglas Crimp called for an activist art to address the AIDS crisis, an art whose goal would be to challenge authority and oppression as well as to act in witness and effect social change. The essay can provide a helpful lens through which to consider the time and the place of Gonzalez-Torres' work, but to appropriate his work as a protagonist working within the aesthetic parameters of AIDS activist art at the time seems to me to be over-determined. Nowhere, in fact, in Gonzalez-Torres' interviews or artists' statements can I find any reference to Crimp's scholarship, nor is Gonzalez-Torres mentioned at all in the comprehensive anthology of Crimp's extensive, insightful and incisive writing on AIDS, art and queer politics that appeared in 2002 as *Melancholia and Moralism*<sup>68</sup>, except, by way of a visual after-through, in the selection of one of his light strings as the cover illustration.

In fact, for a certain strand of activist, academic and critical thought, represented by Foster and Crimp and the journal *October*, Gonzalez-Torres remains largely invisible until, perhaps, the repeated contextualisation of his work as a response to AIDS, and his art's durability, generates an affiliation through which his work can retrospectively be assigned. Looking back, in an introduction to his anthology written in 2002, Crimp acknowledges limitations in his earlier essay: "*There is, though, a twofold danger in arguing for art's avowal of politics, or to argue for activist art practices as I had: First, it can too easily make it appear that there is such a thing as art that is beyond politics rather than art that simply disavows its politics; second, and more important, it can make it appear that what is political – or activist – and what is not is self-evident.*"<sup>69</sup> I will return later to the question of what might be 'political' about Gonzalez-Torres' art, but will simply note here that Gonzalez-Torres earlier echoed both these caveats: "*I realize again how successful ideology is and how easy it was for me to fall into that trap, calling this socio-political art.*

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<sup>68</sup> Crimp, Douglas, 2002, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press

<sup>69</sup> Crimp, Douglas, 2002, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press pp 25-26.

*All art and all cultural production is political.*”<sup>70</sup> Crimp and Gonzalez-Torres were each responding in their own ways within cultures and communities and with concerns that to certain degrees overlapped, and the interfaces are likely to be both complex and coincidental. It would be interesting to explore the connections further.

There are, for sure, ample references to mourning, mortality and loss within Gonzalez-Torres’ work. He made it explicit in some of his artists’ statements. Pathology is evident in the medical parenthetical titles he gave to some pieces; in his candy piece (*placebo*), in the bead curtains (*blood*) and (*chemo*), and in the stack piece (*girlfriend in a coma*), though the association comes more often from the reference – the caption – than by any literal manifestation in these pieces. Most often it resonates through inference and imagination, in the diminishing and replenishing candies that provoke a powerful metaphor for the wasting and recuperation of his lovers’ body, in the empty bed, in footprints on the sand and other signs that we might read as departure and loss. Russell Ferguson points to the role of memorialising in his work: “*One of the most important things that Gonzalez-Torres accomplished in his work is the clearing of a meaningful space in the present for the memories of the past. He shapes memories – his and ours – into works of art that offer not only the pleasures and consolations of reflection, but also the possibility of transforming the present.*”<sup>71</sup> Many times the allusions or references cannot be tied to an authorial context, as for instance in the black-bordered stack piece<sup>72</sup>, in which we see the frame of a death-notice onto which we can project our own particular associations.

The capacity of his work to memorialise through a shift of perspective from a sometimes inserted personal narrative into a generalisable and communicable affinity and then back to a viewer’s subjectivity is particularly notable in a series of works that have not yet received much attention within the critical commentaries on Gonzalez-Torres’ work. I believe this series is, incidentally, his most overt in addressing the pathos of AIDS and its enveloping menace. The *Bloodworks* and *t-Cell count* works are fine hand drawn grids, on paper or canvas, on which an equally fine diagonal line either rises or drops from left to right through the grid; signalling, in the convention of charts, an improvement or decline across the horizontal axis of time [Illus. p38].

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<sup>70</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix 1995, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion* (Interview with Robert Storr), *Art Press* no. 198 (January 1995): 24-32. Reprinted in Ault, Julie, (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: steidl/dangin, p231

<sup>71</sup> Ferguson, Russell, 1994 *The Past Recaptured* in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Travelling*, 1994, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art p25

<sup>72</sup> “*Untitled*” (*The End*) 1990, CR # 77

Here Gonzalez-Torres has reflected the form of minimalist drawing, and perhaps particularly the work from the 1960s of Agnes Martin, in which there is a shift from the close-up subtle specificity of a fine grid to a more distant luminous atmospheric haze and an eventual long-range flattening of the surface. His works show these qualities, and both artists seem to bring some beauty from the changing resolution of the picture plane, but to these Gonzalez-Torres adds another layer of meaning, distinct and concrete. With pencilled diagonals that rise optimistically through the grids from the first of the series in 1988, and with just a few declines through to mid-1992, the parenthetical subtitles afterwards become more specific, at times forlorn: (*False Hope - Bloodwork*), (*Bloodwork – Steady Decline*), (*9 Days of Bloodwork – Steady Decline and False Hope*), with “steady declines” reported in subsequent sequences that now comprise greater numbers of panels so signalling an increased intensity in the progression.

We know, now, that the crisis reported with urgency and hopelessness in these works did not pass in time for Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and there is the potential for a literal biographical interpretation of these works that is nowhere else present to such an explicit degree in his art. We can read these works as personal medical bulletins reporting of the health of his immune system, intermittently issued, and pointing toward an anticipatable, fearful, and then realised end. A *memento mori* made more morbid because it contains a permanent reminder of progression towards a particular loss; imbued with a sense of foreboding.

But whether they are factually autobiographical, or not, the *Bloodworks* also communicate a shared experience that was particular to its time. For those of us who lived the impact of AIDS in the gay communities of Britain or the USA prior to combination therapies, these works go beyond individual life stories to capture powerfully the significance and intensity of the *prognostic* meaning of bloodwork results as personal mileposts on journeys travelled by many, each following their own course at their own rate: these works bring to mind times when a casual street-corner “how are you” elicited in response the latest t-cell count whose calibrations and quantifications were recognised within its communities<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> I don't want to suggest that the importance of immune blood tests as a proxy for the progress of HIV or for the efficiency (or failures) of therapies has diminished, but rather to point to their foreboding in the absence of effective therapy prior to the mid-1990s, a situation that still appertains in much of the world.

Starting in 1988 and continuing until 1994, the series as a whole “body” of work unfolds as a chronicle that reveals the chronic (in the pathological sense of slowly progressing seriousness) danger of those times. Within the series, each work is thus a statement precisely located in its supposed point in time, more or less optimistic, but the weight of repetition within the series, particularly through the production of sequences of *Bloodworks* of varied numbers as single works, point also to changing rhythms and intensity in bloodletting, suggesting both the banalisation of routine and the constant possibility of crisis to come with the next result.

In this sense, these works serve as a very specific periodized memorial to the psychological and physiological experience of living with and confronting AIDS in the years before combination therapy. In Simon Watney’s article *Acts of Memory*, published in New York in 1994, he called for a “*symbolic but truthful memorialising of our losses,*” and stressed the need to “*develop memorials that might register the spiritual dimensions of this protracted epoch of death*” and to “*record our everyday experiences of the epidemic from the perspective of those who cannot simply go away.*”<sup>74</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres’s *Bloodworks* are, I believe, richer conveyors of these ambitions than can be found in the claims to AIDS memorialising more often ascribed to his candy pieces, to his stacks or to the unmade bed billboard, not only because they bring back to consciousness and render visible the fearful force of the crisis in our communities, but also because through the artists’ own declared ‘*steady decline*’, the work is catalysed as an *act of witness* (no matter whether real or imaginary) that simultaneously reminds us of the individuality and personality of each trajectory and affirms the uniqueness of our meanings for each other, resisting the amnesia implicit in the sort of anonymised mourning that Kyo Maclear finds in the candies on the floor. In these works, the totalizing linear narrative of AIDS proceeding ineluctably towards a determined end is, in fact, interrupted by the contingency and particularity of the individual moment; punctuations that remind us that, hopeful or otherwise, it is in our living that we are alive, and that it is in the singularity of selves that we are ourselves.

As a further rejoinder to Kyo Maclear’s “*catastrophic accumulation of near-identical disasters,*” quoted earlier, and to make a more general observation on memorialising

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<sup>74</sup> Watney, Simon, 1994a, *Acts of Memory* in Watney, Simon, 2000, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* London: Routledge, p168 (First published in *Out*, New York City, 1994)

interpretations of the vanishing, unstable, fragile but replenishable candy piles (which Gonzalez-Torres himself described as “*an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day in front of my eyes*”<sup>75</sup>) I want to return to a further comment by Simon Watney. In a reaction to critic James E Young’s question concerning the 1986 *Monument Against Fascism* in Harburg, Germany, “*How better to remember forever a vanished people than by a perpetually unfinished, ever-vanishing monument?*”<sup>76</sup> Watney’s reply was that “*The last thing we need in terms of our various local and national cultural responses to AIDS are the types or pretentiously over-intellectualised justifications for politically correct ‘invisible monuments’, or equally over-aestheticised ‘self-destructing memorials’ which in effect merely collude with the very processes of selective historical amnesia that effective memorial art is intended to arrest, or at least delay.*”<sup>77</sup>

By 1986, two years before Gonzalez-Torres began his *Bloodworks*, 10,000 people in New York alone had been diagnosed with AIDS, of whom half had died<sup>78</sup>. In the late 1980’s the UK Health Education Authority ran an ‘AIDS awareness’ shock campaign with the slogan: “*What is the difference between HIV and AIDS... TIME.*”<sup>79</sup> That’s how it was; the signs pointed and you died, even resisting. These works by Gonzalez-Torres bring their period back to mind, powerfully and poignantly, but they avoid didacticism or rage, in favour of a fuller range of emotional possibilities. For Timothy F. Murphy “*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.*”<sup>80</sup>

Hervé Guibert gives his own 1990 testimony: looking up for a moment as a nurse drew tubes of blood for his latest tests: “*I saw myself at that moment by chance in a mirror and thought I looked extraordinarily handsome, when for months I had been seeing nothing more in my reflection than a skeleton. I’d just discovered something: in the end, I would’ve*

<sup>75</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1993, *Interview with Tim Rollins* in Bartman, William (ed) 1993 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Los Angeles: ART Press p13

<sup>76</sup> Young, James, E 1993 *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* New Haven: Yale University Press, p31

<sup>77</sup> Watney, Simon, 1994, *Art from the Pit: Some Reflections on Monuments, Memory and AIDS* in Gott, Ted (ed.), 1994, *Don’t Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS* Canberra: National Galley of Australia, p60

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, p57

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Hall, Stuart (1990) *Picturing Deviancy* in Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta (eds.) *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology* London: Rivers Oram Press 1990, p25

<sup>80</sup> Timothy F. Murphy (1993) *Testimony* in Murphy, T. F and Poirer S. (eds.), 1993, *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language and Analysis* New York: Columbia University Press, p317

had to get used to this emaciated face that the mirror invariably shows me, as though it already belongs no longer to me but to my corpse, and I would've had to succeed, as the height or the renunciation of narcissism, in loving it.”<sup>81</sup> In his study of AIDS, subjectivity and the rhetoric of activism, Lee Edelman quotes this passage, and concludes “*This affirmation of a self-regard that would make every mirror a stage defines, like the poses of the drag queens at Stonewall, a strategic mode of resistance not to be slighted by the discourse of “politics” as our lives are rewritten by “AIDS” ...*”<sup>82</sup> It serves also as an apt reminder of the reflective value of Gonzalez-Torres’s *Bloodworks*.

Just as Agnes Martin’s paintings can provoke different effects according to the degree of proximity to their surfaces, so too Gonzalez-Torres’s *Bloodworks* open themselves to different layers of meaning depending on how closely we approach the traces of the artist within these works. Looked close up the lines form a pattern particular to an imagined or presumed personal narrative; at middle-distance, there is a shift from the personal to a generalisable interpretation that might evoke solidarity by pointing to the conditions of shared experience. It is however possible to step even further away – discounting knowledge of the artists’ life or withholding the empathy needed to memorialise – to locate a broader theme in the *Bloodworks*, in which these works hold up to view, generically, the “stock-checks” and moments of self-accounting (not necessarily bad) that punctuate the progression a self-aware life. Like his paired stack piece that ask us to contemplate “*somewhere better than this place*” // “*nowhere better than this place*”, or his billboard with the gothic lettering “*It’s just a matter of time*” these works offer a particular and concrete instance of the signposting of life, and invite us to consider what might be our own points of punctuation, a reflection that is always grounded in the singularity of the present moment. Even abstracted to such a degree, the documentary quality of these works bring to the foreground a manifestation of the particularity of each person’s life, and its specificity at each point in time, alluding at the power of our own self-conscious subjectivity, and thus offering an affirmation as well as an elegy.

Such a long-range reading, of course, is circumscribed by prior knowledge. Carlos Basualdo put it optimistically, but unrealisably: “*If we want to return autonomy, spontaneity in the response to these works, that requires reintroducing anonymity*”<sup>83</sup> That

<sup>81</sup> Hervé Guibert 1990 *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* Paris: Éditions Gallimard, Ch. 86, p259 [Author’s Translation]

<sup>82</sup> Edelman, Lee 1993 *The Mirror and the Tank: “AIDS,” Subjectivity and the Rhetoric of Activism*, New York: Columbia University Press, p33

<sup>83</sup> Basualdo, Carlos, 2006, *Common Properties* in Ault, Julie, (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: steidl/dangin, p193

may not be possible where there is a pre-existing familiarity, but plenty of viewers of Gonzalez-Torres' work, whether on billboards, as light strings reflecting on wet car bonnets, or in the other manifestations that appear from time to time in public or private spaces will approach the work with something close to spontaneity.

For Simon Watney, Gonzalez-Torres *“has stepped away from contestation which is directly grounded on the bodies of people with AIDS and their representations. [...] He sets out and re-enacts 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.”*<sup>84</sup>

Representing loss is just one facet of negotiating life, and as I shall argue in the final section of this study, Gonzalez-Torres' art is as consistently open to life as it is potentially a site for recalling the past.

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<sup>84</sup> Watney, Simon (1994) *In Purgatory: The Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Parkett #39, p40

## 6. Birds, Sky and Sea: Some Incidental Remarks



*“Untitled”*, 1991  
Offset print on paper, endless copies  
7 in. at ideal height x 45 1/4 x 38 1/2 in.  
Installation view of *“Art in Our Time”* at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1991  
Photo: Dan Dennehy, Walker Art Center  
© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation  
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

## 6. Birds, Sky and Sea: Some Incidental Remarks

At the time that Gertrude Stein was delivering her lectures on *Composition as Explanation* in England, Alfred Stieglitz was working in New York on his *Equivalent* photographs, an intermittently produced series of studies of segments of sky with clouds. Setting aside the difference in scale between Stieglitz's small silver-gelatin prints and the manifestations of Gonzalez-Torres's images as billboards, wallpaper and paper stacks, there is a conversation between these works that has not been reported before.

As with Gonzalez-Torres' images of sky, clouds and birds in flight, Stieglitz's prints are detached from the ground, without horizon, sometimes vertiginous. The four sky photographs of Gonzalez-Torres' "*Untitled*" 1994<sup>85</sup> perhaps offer the most literal opportunity to draw a connection between the two artists' works, but this dialogue is richer than in the paring of subject matter. For the authors of *Art Since 1900*, Stieglitz is at that time positioned as the modernist inventor of the "crop" or "cut" as a means of dislocation or detachment of the photographic image from reality in a Duchampian manner. But this effort is not entirely successful; speaking of the *Equivalents*, they say: "*But what they lose literally, they parody formally since many of the images are strongly vectored.*"<sup>86</sup> These authors are highlighting that there is still a sense of orientation that lingers in these pictures from the shadowing of moonlight or sunlight that projects direction onto Stieglitz's sky.<sup>87</sup> Through Stieglitz, they identify an effort at the depersonalisation of the photographic image and the possible contradictions and complications involved, even in relation to a subject as open-ended as the sky.

However familiar or not he might have been with the *Equivalents*, by the time Gonzalez-Torres was studying photography, the formal qualities of cropping and dislocation would have been mainstream – a tool for authorial intervention or reticence. Just as with Stieglitz, Gonzalez-Torres' skies are unmoored, ungrounded. Not only in the air, but also with his images of footfalls in sand and snow, or reflections on water, it is usually only the sense of a source of light that sometimes but not always gives orientation in what is otherwise

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<sup>85</sup> CR # 271; see Ault, Julie, (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: steidldangin, p 110

<sup>86</sup> Foster Hal, et al, 2004, *Art Since 1900*, p147. Dyer, Geoff (2005), notes (p88) that the Duchamp urinal was first displayed at Stieglitz' studio and gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue.

<sup>87</sup> I disagree with this as a generalisation about the *Equivalents*, as it looks to me that orientation *is* effectively confounded in many instances; see for instance [www.eastman.org/fm/stieglitz/htmlsrc/stieglitz\\_sum00003.html](http://www.eastman.org/fm/stieglitz/htmlsrc/stieglitz_sum00003.html), accessed 12/08/06

floating terrain.<sup>88</sup> By and large, the direction given by light in these photographic works corresponds to the up-down compass of the orientation – vertical billboards, walls or publications – on which they are presented or reproduced. But all three of the sky-scape<sup>89</sup> stack pieces he made – that is, works that by being on the floor could be open to an all-roundness of perspective – are, in fact, irresolvable in terms of their orientation. One objective of withdrawing perspective (which is what happens when you lose orientation), is for Stieglitz an effort at refusal of an authorial point of view, but by counterpoint this becomes for Gonzalez-Torres another opportunity for the audience to complete the work; a freedom to view and to hang these sheets whichever way up they decide. In other words, another instance, or more precisely, manifestation – of an invitation to action and complicity, equivalent to the intervention involved in draping the light strings or editing a portrait or site-selecting billboards, and achieved once more by a letting-go by the artist.

There are birds in many of Gonzalez-Torres' skies. Singly or in groups and always in flight, there are a variety of species: pigeons, gulls, crows, and vultures, with here and there a possible finch or starling and even a solitary osprey - by and large an urban rather than wilderness menagerie. Setting aside, for a while, the issue of what they might mean (which is not, I think, to test a birdwatcher's skill), one effect they do often provide is a sense of distance and direction against a limitless space, through the curious contradiction of having had their free flight caged in its motion by the triggered shutter.

The birds thus both anchor and orientate these horizon-less works, providing formal order, while at the same time requiring some resource from the viewer to resolve such cues as there are of depth and mood. These birds are whatever birds are to each of us. Gonzalez-Torres put it this way: - *"I watched closely the spaces between the birds. It was as if there were an invisible thread joining all the outside birds and within this fragile network they possessed the sky; it was down among them, of a paler color, moving with them. The interspaces moved in pulsation too, catching up and continuing the motion of the wing in wakes, carrying it on, as the rest in music does, not blankness, but a space as musical as all the sound."*<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Even where there is a "right side up", there can be slip: Sotheby's recently reprinted upside-down in a sale catalogue a coloured jigsaw image of reeds and reflections in water of sky and cloud (CR#152).

<sup>89</sup> Gonzalez-Torres only made four stack pieces with his photography, three of these are sky scenes; *Untitled (Aparición)*, 1991, CR#183; *"Untitled"* 1992/1993 CR#228; and another *"Untitled"* 1992/1993 CR#229. The fourth, a scene of light reflecting on water, a much-displayed work brought to life by the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, has a definite sense of orientation to the viewer [Illus. p51].

<sup>90</sup> Fax sent by FGT to his friend and gallerist Jennifer Flay on 24 June 1994, quoted in Corrin, Lisa, 2000, p8

This extraordinary positional sense of birds, which serves also as a metaphor for the invisible falling-in-between that Gonzalez-Torres aimed for in his art, is well expressed in Alaric Sumner's poem *On Slender-billed Gulls returning to their breeding site in the Ebro Delta, Spain*<sup>91</sup>: -

**Lift to a white  
lowered to a side lists  
horizontal  
of edging on  
is veered  
the corresponds  
the pull to bounce  
of hesitation  
to wave**

There is an elastic, incremental, vectored sense of attitudinal awareness of birds that often gets described as grace. It could be that there is gracefulness in these works, alongside the evocations they call to mind. Perhaps there is also in Gonzalez-Torres' birds something of Frank O'Hara's affirmation in the following: -

***“Buildings will go up and into the dizzy air as love itself goes in  
and up the reeling life that it has chosen for once or all  
while in the sky a feeling of intemperate fondness will excite the birds  
to swoop and veer like flies crawling across absorbed limbs***

[...]

***no more dying*”<sup>92</sup>**

In making his cloud images, Stieglitz said he struggled “*to hold a moment, how to record something so completely, that all who see [the picture of it] will relive an equivalent of what has been expressed.*”<sup>93</sup> It seems, then, that Stieglitz's presentation of fragmented sectors of sky was intended, through their un-specificity, to open up imagination in a way that would not so easily be sustained by representations of the material object. In Stieglitz's account, there is still something to be projected onto the audience, but the route was through subjectivity and ambiguity as conditions for unfettered imagination. The intention was a relational process in which the viewer was critical to the image's resolution.

<sup>91</sup> Sumner, Alaric, 1994, *Rhythm to Intending: Short Poems with Long Titles* Peterborough: Spectacular Diseases, p13

<sup>92</sup> O'Hara, Frank, *Ode to Joy*, 1958, in Allen, Donald (ed.) 1995, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, London, University of California Press, p281. First published in *Parisian Review*, summer 1958.

<sup>93</sup> Stieglitz, Alfred, quoted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, referencing an *Equivalent* in their own collection. Original source not known. See [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/stgp/hod\\_49.55.29.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/stgp/hod_49.55.29.htm) accessed 10/08/06

Stieglitz's assertion that: "*A yes to one's yes, a no to one's no, that is truth, one's release... it takes two to make a truth,*"<sup>94</sup> echoes Gonzalez-Torres' own insistence of the creative role of his audiences.

If Stieglitz's clouds were allegories or metaphors to mirror his moods or feelings, as Geoff Dyer<sup>95</sup> describes, over time the interpretation of the work became more autonomous, emphasizing preferentially the subjective reception of the viewer and moving away from the traces of the maker's psychology. By 1963, Minor White would write about these works: "*If the individual viewer realizes that for him what he sees in a picture corresponds to something within himself - that is, the photograph mirrors something in himself - then his experience is some degree of Equivalence.*"<sup>96</sup> In this reading, clouds become an abstracted field for self-referential, internal and reflexive contemplation; the very qualities of open-endedness that Gonzalez-Torres so consciously sought for his own images. Such "equivalence" as remains, is not between photographer and viewer, but specifically in the reception of the work within the imagination. Thus Minor White mirrors Gonzalez-Torres' own assertion that "*meaning is created once something can be related to personal experience.*"<sup>97</sup> And just as Gonzalez-Torres' works evoke responses at an emotional and experiential level, the photographer Paul Strand, considered that the *Equivalents* "*contain feelings of grandeur, of conflict, of struggle and release, of ecstasy and despair, life and blotting out of life.*"<sup>98</sup> I think Gonzalez-Torres's art offers the opportunity for such sentiment through its capacity to bring alive the momentary and sometimes incidental punctuations of life, affirming on the way the value of one's own subjectivity.

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<sup>94</sup> Norman, Dorothy, 1960, *Alfred Stieglitz: Introduction to An American Seer*, p46

<sup>95</sup> Dyer, Geoff, 2005, *The Ongoing Moment* London: Abacus p185.

<sup>96</sup> White, Minor, 1963, *Equivalence: The Perennial Trend* in the *PSA Journal*, (Vol. 29, No. 7, pp. 17-21). Quoted at <http://photography.about.com/library/weekly/aa122401a.htm> accessed 10/08/06

<sup>97</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, (1991) *All the Time in The World (interview with Robert Nickas)*, Originally published in *Flash Art* 24 no.161 (November-December 1991), reprinted in Ault, Julie, (ed.), 2006, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: steiddangin p40

<sup>98</sup> Thomas, Richard F, 1983, *Literary Admirers of Alfred Stieglitz*, Carbondale, Il.: Southern Illinois Press, p10

## 7. Conclusion



*"Untitled" (Placebo - Landscape - for Roni)*, 1993  
(Candies wrapped in gold cellophane, ideal weight 1,200lbs (544kg), endless copies, dimensions vary with installation)  
Detail: Installation view of Felix Gonzalez-Torres: *Travels, Travel #1* at Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, 1993

Photo: André Morain

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation  
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, and Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris

## 7. Conclusion

This essay began with an enquiry about subjectivity and solidarity in the art of Gonzalez-Torres and has sketched some of the qualities that can bring this art to life. In many respects the strategies he used were not new, and the critical and conceptual perspectives he considered were already provoking lively debate in the environment around him. Where he was unique is in investing in readymade and minimalist forms an extraordinary social and emotional sensibility. His gift giving has been much discussed, but I argue that the freedom he gives to his owners is more significant. In any case, he seeks from his art the capacity of an act of exchange with its public, an exchange that is permanently mutable and at risk of dissolution. Permitting change in the work, and transferring authorial prerogatives may help it towards a more durable, or enduring, future. It seems to me that solidarity for Gonzalez-Torres was not about affinity-building or affiliation, in the sense of the construction of a particular identity, but rather a reaffirmation of the utter individuality of each of us, albeit within shared systems of social dialogue. His ambition seems close to Walt Whitman's "*full play for human nature to expand itself to numberless and even conflicting directions.*"<sup>99</sup>

For the moment, his work is widely exhibited and manifested. His early works have recently been displayed<sup>100</sup>, and a major monograph has just been published. When major works reach the market, they sell for large sums. The Foundation appears an efficient advocate while appraisals and sales are managed by the Estate through the Andrea Rosen Gallery. Next month sees the opening of a major exhibition on Gonzalez-Torres in Berlin, and the US State Department has approved a proposal from Nancy Spector of the Guggenheim to present his work at the US Pavilion during next years' Venice Biennale. In the critical literature on FGT a metaphor for travelling, of displacement over time, is often deployed.<sup>101</sup> His work is "*always becoming*"<sup>102</sup>; "*each piece,*" he stated in relation to the unpredictable circulation of the sheets in his stacks, "*gathers new meaning from its final destination, which depends upon the person who takes it.*"<sup>103</sup> It seems the journey ahead is, for now, assured.

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<sup>99</sup> Whitman, Walt, *Democratic Vistas*, in Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry & Selected Prose, 1982, New York: library of America, p929

<sup>100</sup> *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Early Impressions*, New York: El Museo Del Barrio, February 24-May 21, 2006

<sup>101</sup> For instance, Spector, Nancy, 1995, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, pp 40-87.

<sup>102</sup> Ault, Julie, (ed.) 2006 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: steiddangin p xii,

<sup>103</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1993, *Interview with Tim Rollins* in Bartman, William (ed) 1993 *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Los Angeles: ART Press p28

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"Untitled", 1988  
Photostat, framed  
10 1/4 x 13 inches  
edition of 2, 1 A.P.  
Photo: Oren Slor

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation  
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

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