

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

Miwon Kwon

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

Kaja Silverman¹

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

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

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

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



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

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

before in altogether different, public encounters – on streets, in museums and galleries, in the pages of art magazines – in confronting FGT's *public* address, that is, his works of art.

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

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

A CHANCE TO SHARE

I start with a minor piece of personal correspondence – a piece of ephemera that the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation does not consider a work of art – to attempt an understanding of FGT's vision, or more accurately his *theory*, of the public.² It should be clear by now that I believe FGT tried to produce a public (and not only through his art) that is predicated on a kind of intimacy. But this intimacy, as I have already tried to show through my own encounters with his work, is not one that idealizes or realizes a self-other identification or communion. On the contrary, the intimacy that is often pictured in FGT's work, and always produced by it, is predicated on there remaining something or someone that stays unreachable, not unlike those quietly shocking moments of estrangement when one senses an abyss of distance while lying next to the most familiar body of a lover. Simultaneously offering *and* failing the possibility of being fully present to another, FGT's work captures the profound alienation and distance at the very heart of all intimacy. The power of his work lies here for me, to the extent that this paradox of intimacy is not betrayed or disavowed in his effort to imagine a public.



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Untitled” (*Revenge*), 1991
Light-blue candies individually wrapped in cellophane, endless supply
Overall dimensions vary with installation
Ideal weight: 325 lb.

and
“Untitled” (*Loverboy*), 1989
Blue sheer fabric and metal rod
Dimensions vary with installation
View of the artist installing the work for Felix Gonzalez-Torres: *Traveling* at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1994



“Untitled” (*Still Life*), 1989
Offset print on paper, endless copies
6 in. at ideal height x 11 x 8 1/2 in.
Installation view at Terrain, San Francisco, 1990



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

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

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



Clockwise from front:
“Untitled”, 1989 / 1990
 Offset print on paper, endless copies
 26 in. at ideal height x 29 x 56 in. overall
 Two parts:
 26 in. at ideal height x 29 x 23 in. each
 and
“Untitled” (Blue Cross), 1990
 Blue fabric and paper, endless copies
 9 in. at ideal height x 59 x 59 in.
 Fabric: 59 x 59 in.
 Paper: four parts: 9 in. at ideal height x 23 x 23 in. each
 and
“Untitled”, 1990
 Offset print on paper, endless copies
 17 in. at ideal height x 23 x 87 in. overall
 Three parts:
 One part: 17 in. at ideal height by 23 x 29 in.
 One part: 12 in. at ideal height by 23 x 29 in.
 One part: 8 in. at ideal height by 23 x 29 in.
 Installation view of inaugural solo exhibition,
Felix Gonzalez-Torres at Andrea Rosen Gallery,
 New York, 1990

of the Stonewall riots), and content, the immediate and continuing reception of the work emphasizes its status as a gay political statement, as a work of art that gives voice to the repressed history of the gay and lesbian community. Such an emphasis is not surprising or inappropriate given the artist’s own statement regarding the conception of the work as a site-specific commemoration of the Stonewall Rebellion and a date-specific project to be on view during the Gay and Lesbian Pride march in June 1989 in New York City.¹⁸ The most sophisticated interpreters of the work, however, have recognized that the work’s most significant politics lie not in the assertion of gay content but in formal attributes that radicalize conventional structures of historical narrative. For David Deitcher, the work “testifies to the artist’s mistrust of institutionalized, linear methods of historical inscription, such as those that commonly render lesbians and gays invisible while claiming to tell the whole truth.”¹⁹ Similarly, Simon Watney has written of the work: “History is thus specifically not presented as a seamless progressive narrative, expressing some supposedly unified historical force or will.” Instead, as Watney continues, “events and institutions coexist, as in memory, in no particular order or sequence beyond that of our own active interpretative making. The ‘private’ defiantly invades ‘public’ space.”²⁰

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

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

“Untitled”, 1989
C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag
7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.
Edition of 3, 1 A.P., 3 additional A.P.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

portraits, which maintained the format and concerns of the datelines but focused on private experience as a point of departure for the understanding of the public.²⁹ Although many art critics and art historians still tend to categorize FGT's work in terms of his identity as a gay artist,³⁰ the horizon of the public that his work continues to produce is far more expansive and encompassing. This public is an imaginary public, which is not to say that it exists only in the realm of the artist's private fantasy. Following Michael Warner, it means rather "the public is always in excess of its known social basis. . . . It must include strangers."³¹ Warner explains:

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

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

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

A POSSIBILITY OF RENEWAL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Untitled" (North), 1993

Detail

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

Overall dimensions vary with installation

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

Beyond door:

"Untitled" (Passport), 1991

White paper, endless copies

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

Installation view of *Currents 22: Felix Gonzalez-Torres* at Milwaukee Art Museum, 1993



"Untitled" (Leaves of Grass), 1993

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

Overall dimensions vary with installation

One part: 42 ft. in length with 20 ft. of extra cord and

"Untitled" (Ischia), 1993

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

Overall dimensions vary with installation

One part: 42 ft. in length with 20 ft. of extra cord

Installation view of *Lux / Lumen* at

Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, 1997



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

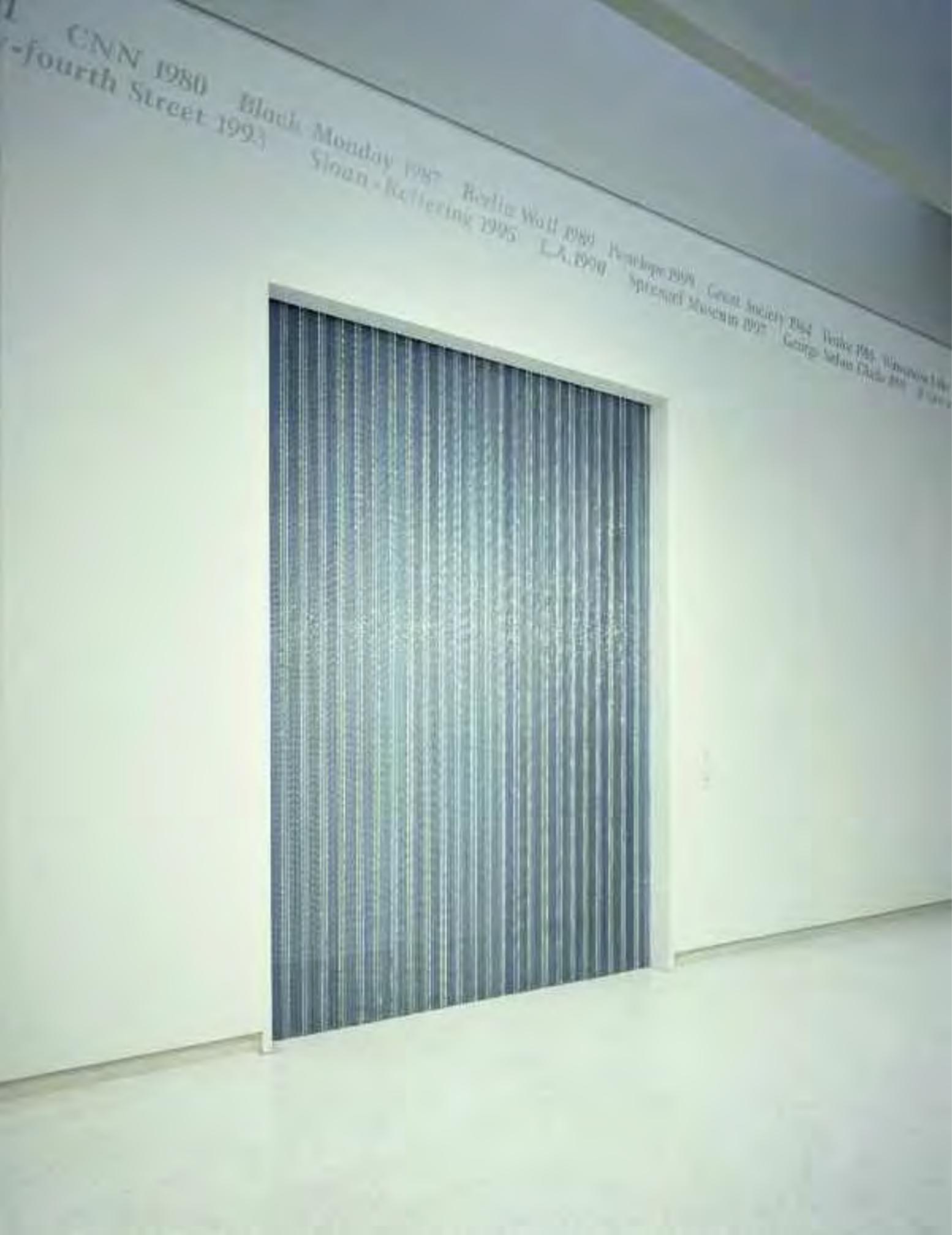
Far from being the enemy of form, death is what animates it, what allows things to be something other in the present than they were in the past. And this axiom pertains as much to the psyche as it does to the phenomenal world; all truly vital subjects are constantly emerging anew out of the ashes of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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



"Untitled", 1989
Paint on wall
Dimensions vary with installation
Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* at
Kunstverein St. Gallen Kunstmuseum, 1997

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

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

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

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

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

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

A FRAGILE TRUCE

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

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

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



Clockwise from left:

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

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

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



- ¹ Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 27.
- ² Although snapshots taken and distributed by FGT during his lifetime to friends and acquaintances have gained much art world interest in recent years as a significant aspect of the artist's oeuvre, the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation considers such materials "functioning non-art." For clarification on this designation, see Andrea Rosen, "'Untitled' (The Neverending Portrait)," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1 (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz, 1997), 45. See also David Deitcher's essay in the same volume and in this volume, pp. 317–28.
- ³ Interview with Robert Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," *Art Press* no. 198 (January 1995): 30. In this volume, pp. 229–39.
- ⁴ Since the early 1990s, the discourse on public art has benefited from a more rigorous engagement with critical theory and political philosophy. A major contribution in this regard is Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). See also Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
- ⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 57. Emphasis in the original.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 51–52.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 57. Emphasis in the original.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹¹ Bourriaud asserts this very point himself at the end of his book, couched in the glossary section under the heading "Co-existence criterion." *Ibid.*, 109.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ¹⁷ I am paraphrasing Michael Warner's thoughts here regarding the definition of the public. His book *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002) will be taken up in greater detail in the next section below.
- ¹⁸ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Statement," pamphlet produced in conjunction with Sheridan Square billboard project (New York: Public Art Fund, 1990), n.p. In this volume, p. 198.
- ¹⁹ David Deitcher, "How Do You Memorialize a Movement that Isn't Dead?" *Village Voice*, June 27, 1989, 93. In this volume, pp. 201–03.
- ²⁰ Simon Watney, "In Purgatory: The Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Parkett* 39 (March 1994): 41. In this volume, pp. 333–47.
- ²¹ Attributed to the artist in Deitcher, "How Do You Memorialize a Movement that Isn't Dead?" 93.
- ²² Warner, 167.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 165.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 165–66.
- ²⁵ For the "classic" theorization of the bourgeois public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
- ²⁶ Interview with Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November–December 1991): 87. In this volume, pp. 39–51. The artist often said that the public – the realm of Language, Father, Law – contains, regulates, or, in the artist's words, "intercepts" private experience, the subjective realm of dreaming, fantasy, and desire. He sought to reverse this relation or at least interrupt the colonizing force of the public as he understood it.
- ²⁷ Warner, 167.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ FGT's thoughts concerning this shift were communicated to curator Anne Umland as he prepared for his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. See Umland's personal archive, notes regarding their conversation of March 29, 1991.
- ³⁰ For example, in what will likely be a highly influential textbook survey of twentieth-century art by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, FGT's art appears as paradigmatic instances of "queering of art" and "gender trouble" in the late 1980s. The authors of the survey assert: "Gonzalez-Torres was influenced by poststructuralist critiques of the subject. Yet his art is concerned more with the making of a gay subjectivity than with its unmaking, for the simple reason that such a deconstruction would assume that gay identity is secure and central in a way that cannot be assumed in our heterosexist society. In his art, then, Gonzalez-Torres attempts to carve out of heterosexual space a lyrical-elegiac place for gay subjectivity and history."

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

- ³¹ Warner, 73.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 75. For Warner, "participation" in the public is constituted by mere attention to its address.
- ³³ The artist made such an assertion frequently. See, for instance, the interview with Tim Rollins in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 5–31, excerpted in this volume, pp. 68–76; the conversation between the artist and Joseph Kosuth in *A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), 76–81 and in this volume, pp. 348–58.
- ³⁴ In this sense, FGT's work reaches for what Gregg Bordowitz, following Emmanuel Levinas, has called an impossible ethical ideal: "Intimacy is an unresolvable dichotomy. One can not be an 'I' without an Other, yet one can't fully become identical with an Other. Intimacy is a paradox. Being for the Other is an ethical ideal, absolutely necessary, fundamentally inescapable, and ultimately impossible." Gregg Bordowitz, *AIDS Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986–2003* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 278.
- ³⁵ Anna Chave's reading of minimal art as embodying a corporate and even militaristic "rhetoric of power" has been controversial for rendering its aesthetic program a hyper-masculinist project. See Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 (January 1990): 44–63. Interestingly, FGT at one point thought of his "simulation" of minimalist forms as a kind of drag performance. See his interview with Robert Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," 32.
- ³⁶ Michael Fried saw in minimalist objects a stand-in for humans, an anthropomorphism that the minimalists denied and Fried found a problematic aspect that linked minimal art to theater. See his "Art and Objecthood," first published in *Artforum* in 1967 and reprinted in numerous anthologies, including Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
- ³⁷ Robert Storr, "Setting Traps for the Mind and Heart," *Art in America* 84 (January 1996): 76. Characteristically, Storr means to assert an anti-theory position to say that FGT's work is free from theory's oppressive influence. Yet, as is well-known, FGT was highly influenced by and engaged with the writings of many theorists, including Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, and Sigmund Freud.
- ³⁸ In addition to works that are open to physical transformations, paired and multi-part photo pieces, drawings, paintings and puzzles are accompanied by certificates. Only single puzzles, photographs, photostats, bloodwork drawings, bloodwork and double fear paintings and bottles within FGT's oeuvre do not come with a certificate.
- ³⁹ The exceptions to this general neglect, as far as I am aware, are David Deitcher's essay in this volume, pp. 317–28, first published in FGT's catalogue raisonné in 1997, and Martha Buskirk's book *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
- ⁴⁰ Marcel Duchamp enacts this split earlier in the twentieth century, of course, with his readymades, but it is in the postwar period that it becomes more pervasive and defining of the conditions of artistic production. See Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (Baltimore and University Park, PA: The Baltimore Museum of Art and The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003) for a thorough consideration of this problematic as it emerges in the 1960s and continues into the present.
- ⁴¹ There is a historical rhyming of this shift with the broader socioeconomic shift away from manufacturing to the service and information economy in the 1960s if not earlier. This has promoted a hierarchy of labor within contemporary art, with intellectual and mental labor, often of managerial variety, trumping manual labor as the labor that really counts. Indeed, this hierarchical outlook has become such a norm in advanced art practices today that it is hardly noticed, never mind questioned. For instance, who these days seriously asks about the actual labor involved in the making of a Jeff Koons sculpture or a Thomas Hirshhorn shrine?
- ⁴² See Josiah McElheny, "Invisible Hand," *Artforum* (Summer 2004): 209–10.
- ⁴³ Count Giuseppe Panza, the collector for whom Judd produced his certificates of authenticity, wanted his works to bear the artist's signature as the mark of authentication. It is Judd who "teaches" Panza that a signature is not necessary once proof of ownership is supplied by the certificate of authenticity. Unless otherwise indicated, this and subsequent references in this essay to the Panza collection, including details concerning certificates of authenticity for specific works and

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



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