



(sans titre), Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Lewis Baltz

All the new thinking is about loss. In this it resembles all the old thinking.
Robert Haas, *Meditations at Lagunitas*. Praise.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Redux: The Artists’ Voice after the Death of the Author*, David Hickey quoted a colleague of artist Ray Johnson, learning of Johnson’s suicide, “A smart career move.” Hickey explained this cynical and not entirely original remark (it was also attributed to Gore Vidal about Truman Capote’s death) with the argument that death, and only death, provides the necessary closure for an objective assessment of an artist’s contribution. Hickey is probably right in the long term, but the short term is more problematic. When artists die prematurely their work is often seen only through the prism of a truncated mortality: criticism collapses into anecdote, or worse, hagiography. For artists like Diane Arbus or Robert Mapplethorpe, death confers an irrefutable authenticity to their vision: “they weren’t tourists in the world that they moved through; they shared the ultimate complicity with their subjects. They died as they lived; they died for their art.” And so on.

For Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose work thematized the ephemerality and fragility of life, an early death compounds the risk that unwanted sentimentality might infect the elegiac with the mawkish, which is contrary to what his art demanded. Gonzalez-Torres was many things: Cuban immigrant, gay man, poststudio artist, mourning lover, a person with AIDS, and an articulate and sympathetic spokesman for all of these facets of his identity. He also possessed the finest artistic intelligence to emerge in American art in the past decade. His work had been exposed in solo exhibitions in America’s most important museums. His positions on art and social activism, delivered in conferences, lectures, and interviews, transformed oppositional art discourse. There was nothing in his art, his social engagement, or his statements that suggests that he perceived himself as a victim. His death last January left a relatively small, but highly influential body of works in a variety of mediums and a deep lacuna in the landscape of contemporary American art.

The artistic milieu that Gonzalez-Torres entered, New York in the late eighties, was a drastically impoverished one for a thoughtful artist. The waves of innovation that had swept the New York art world since 1945 had subsided, leaving behind a monolithic commercial edifice purpose-built for marketing reactionary paintings to a newly created class of speculators who demanded, and of course received, a traditional and easily comprehensible art. Oppositional practice mirrored the sterility of the market. Feminist discourse devolved from the complexities of Eva Hesse into the polemics of a Barbara Kruger. Gay art, in the previous decades defined by artists like Johns, Rauschenberg, and Warhol, was replaced by a dominant practice of homoerotic pinups.

Page 209:
Clockwise from foreground:
“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” (March 5th) #2, 1991
40-watt light bulbs, extension cords, porcelain
light sockets
Overall dimensions vary with installation
Two parts: approximately 113 in. in height each
Edition of 20, 2 A.P.
and
“Untitled” (Double Portrait), 1991
Offset print on paper, endless copies
10 1/4 at ideal height x 39 3/8 x 27 1/2 in.
and
“Untitled” (Orpheus, Twice), 1991
Mirror
75 x 55 in. overall
Two parts: 75 x 25 1/2 in. each
Beyond doorway:
“Untitled” (Revenge), 1991
Light-blue candies individually wrapped in
cellophane, endless supply
Overall dimensions vary with installation
Ideal weight: 325 lb.
Installation view of Felix Gonzalez-Torres
(Girlfriend in a Coma) at Musée d’Art Moderne
de la Ville de Paris, 1996

Left:
“Untitled” (Orpheus, Twice), 1991
Mirror
75 x 55 in. overall
Two parts: 75 x 25 1/2 in. each
Installation view of Group show at Andrea Rosen
Gallery, New York, 1991



"Untitled" (America), 1994
15-watt light bulbs, waterproof extension cords,
waterproof rubber sockets
Overall dimensions vary with installation
Twelve parts: 65 1/2 ft. in length with 24 1/2 ft.
of extra cord each
Installation view in Limerick for *EV + A:*
Exhibition of Visual Art, 1996



“Untitled” (Portrait of Ingvild Goetz), 1993
Paint on wall
Dimensions vary with installation
Installed with the work of:
Alan Charlton
Four Panel Painting No. 14–12–4–3 D, 1981
Acrylic on canvas
Four parts 70 7/8 x 23 5/8 x 1 3/4 in. each
Right:
Untitled, 1973
Acrylic on cotton
Overall dimensions: 86 x 86 1/8 x 1 3/4 in.
Installation view of *Monochromie – Geometrie* at
Sammlung Goetz, Munich, 1996

Gonzalez-Torres refused this (and every other) gay stereotype as repressive and, moreover, as playing directly into the hands of the homophobic ultraright. Instead, he adopted a strategy of subverting received forms of high culture, *i.e.* minimalism, conceptualism, et al., for his own purpose. Appropriating the idiom of the master narrative, Gonzalez-Torres proposed an art with multiple and conflicting readings. He mainstreamed the “gay agenda,” or *his* gay agenda, by addressing both gay and straight audiences, with works that were not only personally and politically charged but offered a meditation on the conditions and possibilities of art. The themes of time (as the instrument and arbiter of mortality) and of generosity (as an engine to defeat, or forestall mortality) are pervasive in Gonzalez-Torres’s work. His allusions to mortality are sometimes blandly literal, as in “Untitled” (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987–1990, two synchronous battery-powered wall clocks placed side by side, marking the passage of time until one or the other falls out of sync, slows, and stops. His portraits invert the received idea of portraiture, “immortalizing the sitter.” Timelines, installed as friezes, melting significant moments in his subjects’ lives with dates of contemporary historical events, imbedding them in the passage of time and the corruption of the flesh, an homage of sorts to the best known unexecuted portrait of the last century, that of Dorian Gray.

In a much-published interview Tim Rollins asked Gonzalez-Torres what he would like from his students. He replied that he would like them to be generous.

It was a revealing answer from an artist who placed a high priority on generosity in his own work. The celebrated paper stacks and the arrangements of candy, from which the visitor was invited to take one (or more) elements, are described by the artist as having an ideal height or weight, to be replenished as necessary from an endless supply, function as symbolic generosity while alluding to another, impossible, generosity; the hope of endless renewal, like divine grace. This is the language of prayer, and the gesture of transubstantiation, but, like the wily priest, Gonzalez-Torres’s gifts create obligations. The “gift” works seem to fulfill an unkept promise of the sixties, the de-commodification of art, but they are not precisely that. Gonzalez-Torres proposes a transaction as old as the ritual of gift giving: to accept an element of his work is to be implicated in its realization, and in its future.

In 1992 Gonzalez-Torres started his most eloquent works, twenty-four light sculptures each consisting of twenty-four or forty-two, fifteen- or twenty-five-watt white light bulbs distributed evenly over several meters of electrical cord. The works are identical, varying only in their titles and their installation, which is left to the discretion of the installer. Sublimely beautiful, yet so commonplace that outside of a museum or gallery context they resist identification as art, the light strings are Gonzalez-Torres’s ultimate gesture of implicating of the perceiver in the construction of meaning.

I didn’t know how these pieces are best displayed. I don’t have all the answers – you decide how you want it done. Whatever you want to do, try it. This is not some minimalist artwork that has to be exactly two inches to the left and six inches down. Play with it, please. Have fun. Give yourself that freedom. Put my creativity into question, minimize the preciousness of the piece

In 1995 the Guggenheim Museum organized a retrospective exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres works, which was exhibited at the Musée d’art Moderne in Paris last April to June. The installation of the Gonzalez-Torres retrospective was unusually affecting. Exhibitions in L’ARC are most often installed to exploit the building’s finest quality, its unbroken circular flow of space. Gonzalez-Torres’s exhibition ended abruptly in a cul-de-sac at the point where one would usually continue into the connecting galleries. The installation recalled Dani Karavan’s *Homage to Walter Benjamin* at Portbou, Spain, where the visitor descends a steep staircase incised into a cliff facing the sea (Somewhere better than this place.) only to find his progress blocked by a wall of glass. Like Benjamin, he must then retrace his steps, up the stairs and back to the world (Nowhere better than this place.).

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“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
and
On Kawara
Sept. 6, 1992, 1992
Liquitex on canvas
18 x 24 in.
Installation view of *A series of rotating installa-
tions providing the opportunity for the gallery to
realize the juxtaposition of various works: Félix
Gonzalez-Torres and On Kawara* at Andrea Rosen
Gallery, New York, 1994



“Untitled” (America), 1994
15-watt light bulbs, waterproof extension cords,
waterproof rubber sockets
Overall dimensions vary with installation
Twelve parts: 65 1/2 ft. in length with 24 1/2 ft.
of extra cord each
Installation view of *Félix González-Torres (A
Possible Landscape)* at Centro Galego de Arte
Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, 1995

