

# The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

newsletter

our 79th season

Fall 1994



*Traveling*

October 2 through November 6



*FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, UNTITLED (PASSPORT #II), 1993, offset print on paper, endless copies, ideal height: 8 x 31.5 x 29.5 inches. Collection Goetz, Munich. Photos Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery. Photo by Marc Domage.*

For its season debut, The Renaissance Society is proud to present *Traveling*, an exhibition of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

Presented in conjunction with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, where this exhibition took on different forms, *Traveling* opens at the Renaissance Society Sunday, October 2, and runs through November 6. There will be an opening reception Sunday, October 2 from 5:00 to 7:00 pm. at which the artist will be present. Felix Gonzalez-Torres will also speak at the School of the Art Institute Auditorium on Monday, October 3, at 6:00 pm. The talk is free and is sponsored in collaboration with The School of The Art Institute Visiting Artist Program.

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

*Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1990*

Recognizing that string of moments known as a life is to acknowledge that forever is an absurd and remorseful concept. As proof we need only consult our memories. Forcing the viewer to this critical, almost metaphysical state of reflection is the imperative running throughout the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. A pile of candy, a stack of paper, a string of lights; as simple as they may sound, these are the raw materials Gonzalez-Torres uses to address such complex themes as private and public, history and memory, and love and loss.

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*Previous page: FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, UNTITLED, (BLUE CURTAINS), 1991, set of blue curtains. Photo courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery. Photo by Giorgio Mussa*

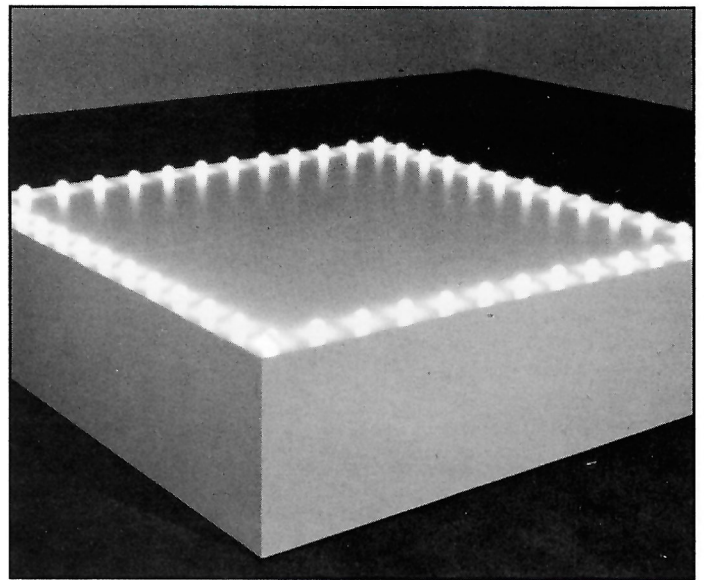


In keeping with many artists of his generation, Gonzalez-Torres, who was born in Cuba in 1957, appropriates the strategies of the previous generation of minimal, process and conceptually based artists. But unlike his contemporaries, who are perhaps wary of the past, Gonzalez-Torres seems to feel at home with his predecessors' strategies, using them as a means towards a more personal and poignant end. Gonzalez-Torres would hardly disagree with Richard Serra about the importance of such formal issues as weight and count. While for Serra these issues become an end in themselves, for Gonzalez-Torres weight could refer to his own or perhaps a lover who has lost several pounds. This is the case with the piles of candy whose weight is derived from someone of personal significance to the artist. Rather than use the notion of count or the grid in a classical geometric sense as would Sol LeWitt, Gonzalez-Torres prefers to use them in a current medical sense as in *Untitled (Bloodwork, Steady Decline)*, a series of graph drawings depicting a steady decline which perhaps references a waning T-Cell count.

Although his work is not without irony, Gonzalez-Torres' use of the immediate art historical past is anything but ironic. Minimal, process and conceptual art were not only a challenge to artworld conventions of the late sixties and early seventies, but they also served as a challenge to the next generation of artists. These movements critically addressed issues surrounding the nature of the art object, its context and its relationship to the viewer. Rather than ignore the findings, and reject the challenge put forth by these movements, Gonzalez-Torres responds with a critical integrity.

Given that time is at the heart of Gonzalez-Torres' work, minimalism and process art are the perfect vehicles for his practice. Duration, or the artwork as it is experienced over time is one of minimalism's hallmark features. Minimalism was predicated on a viewing subject who perceptually consumed the work and in doing so was made aware of their own physical presence in relation to the artwork. Through the isolation and articulation of subtle perceptual phenomena, minimalism forced the viewer to arrive at an unmediated present or a here and now with little if any reference outside of itself. The self-contained

drama of the minimal artwork, its promise of an eventual present led critic Michael Fried, in a now famous essay entitled *Art and Objecthood*, to compare minimalism to theater. As if affirming Fried's charges, Gonzalez-Torres has used two of his works, *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* and *Untitled (Arena)* as stage sets for performances. More to the point however are Gonzalez-Torres' paper stacks and candy piles in which viewers are invited to help themselves to a print or to enjoy a piece of candy. The instability and impermanence of the work are immediately exposed as the work is literally consumed. With the disappearance of the artwork looming, the concept of presence is radicalized as it is brought face to face with its opposite, absence. For Gonzalez-Torres,



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, 1991, wood lightbulbs, wire acrylic paint. Photo courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery. Photo by Peter Muscato

calling attention to the mortality of the work, the possibility of its absence as it is consumed over time is crucial for an understanding of presence.

Art historical references aside, Gonzalez-Torres has a profound respect and consideration for his audience and is extremely concerned with beauty, pleasure, and poetry. Members of the audience who accept Gonzalez-Torres' gifts as in the paper stacks and candy piles, are no longer viewers but participants in a cycle of accumulating, depleting and replenishing, a cycle which is none other than life itself. When receiving a gift, the recipient is likely to be asked, What did you



get? Gonzalez-Torres knows that the real question is, What did you give? Was it like a piece of candy, a brief but discreet moment, enjoyable from beginning to end, or were the moments of exchange more intangible, ephemeral, and far too many to count? And if one is unable to somehow mark the instance of exchange, then what constitutes a moment? Such is the possible flow of thoughts when standing before a beckoning pile of candy or while observing the gentle billowing of white curtains.

From moment to moment, here and now, there and then; for an exhibit of work which evokes these thoughts, what more appropriate title than *Traveling*? Besides, how could a discussion of time not involve space? Far less grandiose



*Felix Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform), 1991, Installation view: Every Week There is Something Different, May 2 - June 1, 1991. Week Two. Photo Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery. Photo by Peter Muscato*

than the notion of a voyage is the metaphysical sense of the word traveling which is simply movement through space. Even at that, its most mundane definition, traveling is still laden with metaphors about the nature of life, particularly life as a perpetually transitory state of being. Gonzalez-Torres has in fact used the title *TRAVEL* for a pair of simultaneous gallery exhibits in Paris entitled *Travel #1* and *Travel #2*. *Travel #1* contained two billboards both installed inside the gallery, one featuring a view of a turbulent and

brooding sky, the other an image of lone bird, photographed from below, floating effortlessly beneath an overcast sky. One of several works in *Travel #2* was *Untitled (Passport #II)*, a stack of passport sized booklets featuring the same imagery as the billboards in *Travel #1*. Like his other stack pieces, viewers were invited to help themselves. As the artist has stated, "they are passports without name, gender, address, or ethnicity." Clearly not meant to verify our identity, these existential passports are more a testament to simply being. As bell hooks has written:

Gonzalez-Torres gives us a passport with no place for irrelevant details, where we were born, in what country, dates, numbers. A passport of dark clouds, of birds in flight, moves us to a space beyond history, a space of mystery where there is no record, no documentation, nothing to recall. What is captured here is a moment of utter oneness where the experience of union, of perfect love, transcends the realm of the senses. No boundaries exist. There are no limits.

In addition to exhibiting *Untitled (Passport #II)* at The Renaissance Society, Gonzalez-Torres has arranged to have 5,000 of these poetic passports mailed out as invitations for this show.

But in Gonzalez-Torres' work, politics are in no way forsaken for poetry. Throughout the 1980's Gonzalez-Torres was a member of Group Material, an artist collaborative devoted to political activism. Gonzalez-Torres has stated, "aesthetics is political", and in viewing the body of his work there is a seamless transition from the poignant to the political. His practice allows for both elements to exist in a complimentary manner within the same work and at the same time re-emerge from work to work regardless of form. This is the case in one of his untitled billboard projects and *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, both of which are deceptively simple and direct in examining the relation between public and private. As an object displayed in a gallery space, *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, simply consisted of a pale blue platform, big enough for a



lone dancer, with a string of bare bulbs running around its top surface. At unspecified times throughout the exhibition, a dancer would perform atop the platform to music only he could hear via walkman, creating a spectacle in which the audience, severed from the performer was reduced to strictly a viewing public. In one of his untitled billboards, Gonzalez-Torres chose the soft inviting image of a bed with two pillows, both fresh with the imprints of their users' heads. Placed in several locations at once, this work unabashedly signified public recognition of private acts. As the artist commented in an interview, "Someone's agenda has been enacted to define 'public' and 'private'. We're really talking about private property because there is no private space anymore. Our intimate desires, fantasies, dreams are ruled and intercepted by the public sphere."

It almost goes without saying that the current issue for which not only the theme of public and private but all of Gonzalez-Torres' themes achieve their greatest significance is AIDS. Gonzalez-Torres is frank in admitting that his work is driven by and derived from personal experience. As a gay man whose work is suffused with time and the nature of being, AIDS is an unavoidable specter. But the references are not direct. If they were, Gonzalez-Torres would not achieve his goal. In bringing the viewer to an awareness of what constitutes being, whether through a reflection on death or through joy wrought from the simplest thing, Gonzalez-Torres' works are ultimately an affirmation of life.

The exhibit is accompanied by a handsome 79-page catalogue with essays by Amada Cruz, Russell Ferguson, Ann Goldstein, bell hooks, Joseph Kosuth, and Charles Merewether. The Renaissance Society is located at 5811 S. Ellis Ave., Room 418 in Cobb Hall on the University of Chicago Campus. The gallery is closed Mondays and gallery hours are Tuesday through Friday 10:00 am. to 4:00 pm., Saturday and Sunday Noon to 4:00 pm.

The exhibition and publication *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* is supported, in part, by a generous grant from the Lannan Foundation. Their support has allowed three institutions the freedom to pursue separate exhibitions while collaborat-

ing on a single publication. This exhibition is also sponsored in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, The CityArts Program of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency, and by our membership. Program support has been received from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Indirect support has been received from the Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency offering general operating support to the nation's museums. The production of *Untitled, 1989-1994*, is made possible by a collaboration with The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

This exhibition, which inaugurates The Society's 79th season and its 15th in the Bergman Gallery, is dedicated to the memory of Edwin Bergman. Through his commitment to new and provocative art, Ed championed all that The Society stands for. We remain grateful for his outstanding example, friendship, service and support.

*Swedish saxophonist Mats Gustafsson will do a solo performance at the Gallery Wednesday, October 12, at 7:30 p.m.*

At age of 30, Stockholm based free improviser Mats Gustafsson has achieved critical acclaim for his powerful yet graceful musicianship with the entire saxophone family. His credits include dates with some of Europe's finest musicians, including, Barry Guy, Paul Lovens and Derek Bailey. As a composer he has written and performed music for Lotta Melin and Vindhaxor, two of Swedens leading contemporary dance ensembles. In addition to leading the cooperative trio *GUSH*, he has recorded with the incredible vocalist Sainkho Namtchylak. For his date at The Renaissance Society, Gustafsson will perform solo on the soprano, baritone and tenor saxophones. Tickets for this event are \$6, and \$5 for members. For more information, please contact The Renaissance Society at 312-702-8670. Gustafsson will also perform at Hot House, 1565 N. Milwaukee, Sunday, October 9. For more information, call 312-235-2334.



# *Great Doings A Great Show*



*Beth Rochette poses proudly before her work.  
photo by Bill Lieberman*

From the 14th through the 26th of August, The Society was proud to host an exhibit of works produced by 24 artists from the Little City Foundation, a national organization that provides services for children and adults with mental retardation and other developmental challenges such as Down Syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, visual and hearing challenges and emotional disturbances. The works in the exhibition represented the culmination of a four month long series of workshops in creative self-expression. Under the direction of Terry Amidei and through funding from the Illinois Arts Council and the Dr. Scholl Foundation, Little City invited artists Laurie Palmer, Michael Piazza and John Ploof to act as teachers, facilitators, and collaborators in this project. The works ranged from drawings to multi-media installations and addressed such topics as the body, autobiography, an exploration



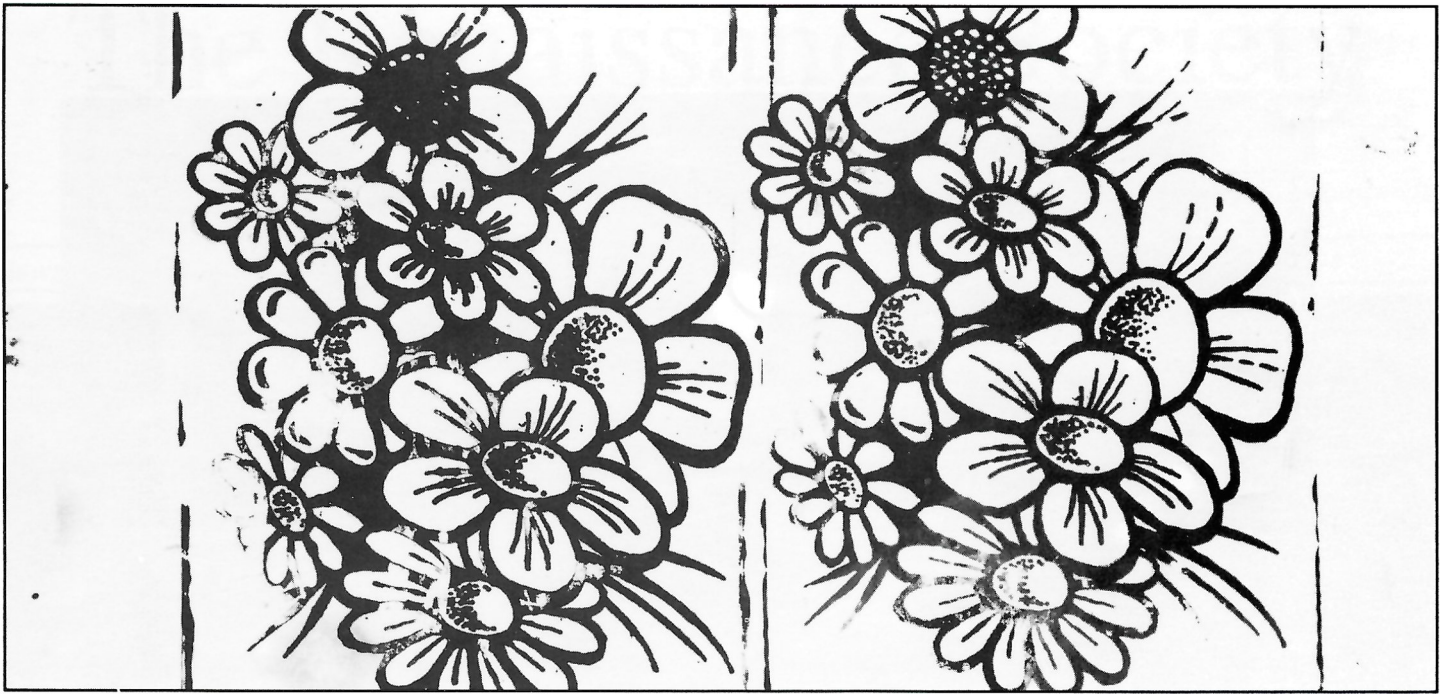
*Laurie Palmer congratulates artist Marilyn Davis opening day.  
photo by Bill Lieberman*



*Artist Virginia Martin receives flowers at opening celebration.*

of the natural world, and community politics. This exhibition, the first in a series, will hopefully initiate a much needed dialogue about the role played by artists with developmental challenges within the cultural community. Congratulations to all the artists. We look forward to more.





*CHRISTOPHER WOOL, UNTITLED, 1994, enamel on paper, 72 x 36 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York.*

## After and Before

*A benefit for The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago*

*Honoring the 20th Anniversary of Susanne Ghez as Director*

*Saturday, September 24, 1994 6:00 pm.*

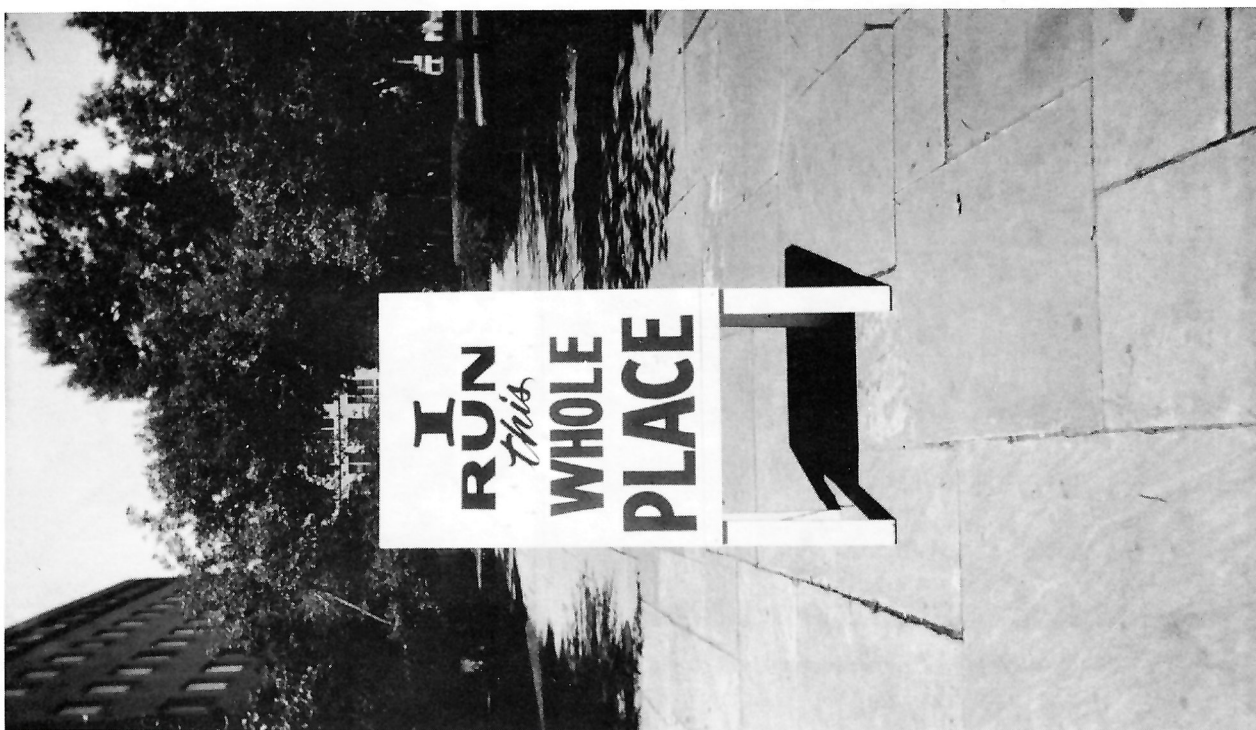
*Hotel Nikko, 320 N. Dearborn*

The Renaissance Society's 1994 annual benefit dinner and art auction will be a celebration of the 20th anniversary of Susanne Ghez's Directorship of The Renaissance Society. Over the last two decades, The Renaissance Society has become synonymous with the vanguard art of our century, gaining international acclaim as one of the leading institutions pioneering the research and exhibition of cutting-edge developments in the contemporary visual arts. This accomplishment is due, in large part, to the work of its Director, Susanne Ghez. Throughout her tenure, she has provided Chicago with over 100 exhibitions representing the most innovative contemporary art from around the world. Her efforts have enriched the cultural life of Chicago, and have contributed to our city being recognized as one of the strongest cultural centers in the country.

The benefit will be a spectacular gala featuring a live auction of 20 pieces of art by prominent national and international artists

whose work has been exhibited during Susanne's tenure. Artists include Dennis Adams, Mirosław Balka, Jack Beal, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Enzo Cucchi, Robert Gober, Dan Graham, Miyoko Ito, Sherrie Levine, Jim Lutes, Cindy Sherman, Buzz Spector, Christopher Wool, and others. There will also be a silent auction of jewelry, vintage wines, designer clothing, and art by local and international artists including Adam Brooks, Tom Czarnecki, Jno Cook, Ed Paschke, Tony Tasset, Juan Munos, Robert Rauschenberg, Chema Cobo, Margaret Wharton, and others. There will be a preview exhibition of the art at Sotheby's Chicago, 325 W. Huron St., from September 9 - 21, with an opening champagne reception on the 9th. The ticket price for the entire evening will be \$250 per person, and \$125 per person 40 years old and under. All proceeds from the evening will benefit The Renaissance Society's exhibition, education and publication programs. For more information, contact Randy Alexander, 312.702.8670





An untitled work by Chick Loehr was placed on the University's campus as part of *Great Doings*.

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# The Renaissance Society