

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

American, born Cuba, 1957–1996

On the 16th of May 1992 an image turned up on twenty-four billboards around Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. The blowup of a light, grainy photograph, it showed the upper half of a bed covered with wrinkled white sheets, and topped by two pillows still bearing the imprint of the heads that had laid upon them. Startling by its reticence and delicacy amidst the usual run of advertising, the enlarged picture was also surprising because, as time passed, it became evident that it was not advertising at all. When it first appeared, the transfixing bareness of the layout seemed to be waiting for some text to be dropped in, as is now customary in suspense-based campaigns where a brand's logo – the Folger's mountain, say, or the piratical captain of Morgan's rum – is emblazoned across cities before its name or slogan is revealed. But while people on their way around town waited for some label or pitch to be added to the image of the bed, nothing happened.

Or, rather, something did happen, but it depended on them rather than on the billboard's unidentified source. As interviews with passersby attested, once the picture had taken hold in their minds they began to supply their own explanations for it, or at least their own questions: "Whose bed is that?" "What kind of couple has shared it?" "What made them leave?" "What's this private scene doing in a public place?" So doing, viewers supplied their own content for the anomalous but oddly familiar vignette. Where nothing was said, they were free to project their own experiences or fantasies on this unspecified and vastly enlarged domestic situation, and the nature of those experiences and fantasies varied as greatly as did the considerable portion of the huge metropolitan population that stopped for a second, or longer, to wonder at the sight above them.

Those questions and that sort of speculative response were exactly what the artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, had wanted to provoke; they were the content of the piece as much as his motives for making it were. Organized by Anne Umland for the "Projects" series at The Museum of Modern Art, this landmark outdoor exhibition was typical of Gonzalez-Torres's quiet infiltrations of homes, galleries, museums, and public spaces. Politically oriented and politically adroit, he tackled the thorniest issues of public policy and socially committed aesthetics with an imaginativeness, intellectual rigor, and rhetorical self-restraint unmatched in

his generation. Personally implicated in many of the issues he raised – especially that of AIDS, from which he was to die – Gonzalez-Torres never indulged in special pleading but, rather, fashioned the subtlest, most seductive links between those intimately aware of the inequities, threats, and desires toward which he pointed and those untouched by or as yet unconscious of them. While much of the activist art made in the 1980s and '90s aggressively challenged the ideas and habits of its audience (too often by overly obvious means), that of Gonzalez-Torres sought involvement before argument – not because the artist wished to soften the bitter truths he had to tell, or hoped to create a false sense of community where none existed, but rather in order to get past the public's defenses, deeper under their skins, and closer to the contradictory attitudes and aspirations that shape American consciousness.

Gonzalez-Torres's career spanned a brief but extraordinarily focused and productive eleven years between his inaugural one-person exhibition in 1985 and his death in 1996, one year after a retrospective at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Born in Cuba in 1957, he emigrated to the United States in 1968. In college he studied literature, especially poetry; in art school he majored in photography. These two concentrations established the poles around which his work would develop: text and image, original or appropriated, together or separately, as with the wordless "Projects" billboard and the all-black, all-text chronological billboard of 1989 commemorating important events in gay history, the first such public work by the artist. Between these two extremes – which encompassed the critical use of verbal and visual representation as well as their sensual, pleasurable powers of evocation – Gonzalez-Torres explored sculpture, installation, printmaking, and other mediums and formats.

The work in this collection includes examples of virtually all aspects of his activity, including the 1992 "Projects" billboard. Blatant sexual imagery and subliminal erotic hints are staples of advertising, but the advertising format has rarely if ever been used to allude to the tender, mundane intimacies of people's lives in so open a manner as in this enlarged picture of a bed. The most disturbing aspect of the photograph is its lack of sensationalism, its completely matter-of-fact recognition of all the possible relations that go

on behind closed doors. Gonzalez-Torres's discretion is anything but that of the closet, however. Quite the contrary: by leaving the bed empty, he invites any and all couples to see themselves nestled in its comforting hollows. By the same token, however, everyone who imagines themselves and a lover in that setting implicitly admits that others with other lovers in mind — gay or straight, of different classes and different backgrounds — have equal claim to imagining the same thing.

The bed's beckoning neutrality is crucial to its democratically erotic attraction. This said, as a member of a minority within a minority — that is, as an openly gay man of Hispanic heritage — Gonzalez-Torres had no illusions about the unstated costs of crudely adhering to the principal of the greatest good for the greatest number. "*Untitled*" (*Supreme Majority*) (1991) is an oblique rebuke to simple-minded populism of the kind that has flourished in recent years, especially on the far right. The seven slender cones that

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. "*Untitled*" (*USA Today*). (1990.)
Red-, silver-, and blue-cellophane-wrapped candies,
endlessly replenished supply, ideal weight 300 lbs.,
dimensions variable. Gift of Werner and
Elaine Dannheisser



make up the piece may at first glance strike one as perfectly abstract, but with or without the aid of the title they soon enough reveal their identity as comically pointy-headed dunce caps, while, seen against a blank wall, also doubling for the spiked peaks and valleys of opinion-poll charts or business-cycle graphs. More specifically, the caps allude to the seven Supreme Court justices appointed by the Republican administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

The references to Minimalism in this piece are intentional: in many respects, Gonzalez-Torres's work is as much a comment on the purity and permanence of Minimal art as it is on political or social realities. In the turmoil of the 1960s, Carl Andre, Richard Serra (see pp. 20 and 118), and others saw their work as explicitly antibourgeois in scale, methods, and materials and as implicitly in accord with the revolutionary ferment of the time, as well as with the heroic strain in early modernism. Gonzalez-Torres, coming into his own in the conservative 1990s, looked back on such claims sympathetically but without sentimental indulgence. Big, expensively fabricated abstractions in industrial metals no longer conveyed the liberating jolt they once had; taste had caught up with them, as had the economic realities of their production, not to mention the polemical excesses committed on their behalf. Gonzalez-Torres's choices of paper over steel, candy over machined modules, and subversive charm over righteous confrontation or solemn protest are reflections of this difference in generational perspective.

"Untitled" (1990), for example, combines the basic vocabulary of Minimalist box constructions with the art-for-everybody logic of Sol LeWitt's cheapest multiples and the mournful ephemerality of much post-Minimalist process and environmental art. Arranged in tiers, reams of paper with a wide blue band printed on them constitute three differently proportioned geometric stacks of arresting sculptural authority. Given Gonzalez-Torres's instruction that viewers be allowed to take a sheet of paper away with them if they wish, this classic Minimalist presence rapidly gives way to an unpredictably piecemeal disappearing act, followed by a total aesthetic absence that lasts until the stacks have been reconstituted with new paper. "Untitled" (*USA Today*) (1990) waxes and wanes under the same stipulation. Like "Untitled" (*Supreme Majority*), it questions thoughtless patriotism — the candies of which it is composed are wrapped in flag-waving red, silver (like white on a sugar high), and blue, while its title puns on the name of a heavily edited and packaged national newspaper — and like the perennially renewed "unlimited edition" stack, it is there for the taking. In the vicinity of works by other artists, these pieces not only stand apart in their barbed user-friendliness, they upset the normal "look-but-don't-touch" rules of the museum or gallery and tacitly

criticize the high value that the market attaches to unique, collectible objects or images.

For Gonzalez-Torres, personal life was always a political matter, and vice versa. He did not mean this in any vague or theoretical way, nor did he aim to reduce the one to the other; instead he recognized, and wanted others to recognize, the degree to which private reality is affected by political contingencies. The timeline pieces he made therefore intermingle dates, names, and buzzwords signifying major world or national events with whimsical references to decidedly minor (but not culturally insignificant) TV shows, music styles, media personalities, fashions, and other "factoids" of a similar order. "Untitled" (*Portrait of Elaine Dannheisser*) (1993), the text that appears on the cover of this book, is one among several word portraits he conceived in the same spirit. Usually painted in a band and in a specified typeface — Trump Medieval bold italic — at the top of the walls around a room, these fragmentary synopses of the "life and times" of their subjects resonate with memories for anyone who sees them while also making guesswork out of altogether private details, leading to the sort of self-substitution that occurred with the billboard bed. "I remember that," is the reaction to the public information; "I wonder what that's about, but I recall where I was," might be the response to the more obscure chronological notations.

The realization that history is measured in finite existences becomes intensely poignant to the viewer of the twin clocks of "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*) (1991). If absolute parity governed the affections and determined life's duration, then lovers would live and die on the same schedule. They do not. For a generation of gay men decimated by AIDS, the premature separation of partners has been a daily occurrence. It happened to Gonzalez-Torres, whose companion, Ross Laycock, was stricken with the disease not long before this piece was made. Against this background, the temporal symmetry of the two clocks is both wrenching — we know that time is running faster on one side than on the other — and elegiac: mechanically synchronized, the clocks will carry on for a provisional eternity after the deaths of both the lovers, as indeed they have since the artist's own death, in 1996.

Imagine that these two clocks were over the bed in the billboard, and then imagine once again putting oneself in the picture. Creating situations that encouraged perfect strangers to occupy the place of his "perfect lovers" was the essential gambit of Gonzalez-Torres's art. He played it many ways, but the purpose was always the same: to help people to think calmly for themselves about things that matter in a world increasingly geared toward cajoling or frightening them into obsessing about things that don't.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *"Untitled"*. 1990. Three stacks of photolithographs, endlessly replenished copies, printed in color, at ideal heights of 17", 12", and 8". Sheets: each 29 x 23" (73.7 x 58.4 cm). Installation overall: 17 x 23 x 87" (43.2 x 58.4 x 221 cm). Fractional gift of Werner and Elaine Dannheisser





Elaine 1923 right eye 1948 Poland 1939 New York City apartment 1951 left eye 1949 Watergate 1974 married Werner 1953 travels in Europe 1954 Interior Design School 1960 Sputnik 1957 President Kennedy 1963 Pearl Harbor 1941 bought space on Duane Street 1981 cancer 1981 Black Monday 1987 CNN 1980 Anaïs Nin Diary 1962 started collecting emerging artists 1981 streakers 1974 Bridge games 1991 Werner 1992 Elizabeth and Victoria 1973 La Escuelita 1993

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *"Untitled" (Supreme Majority)*. (1991.) Paper, dimensions variable, overall: c. 61 x 40 x 36" (154.9 x 100.6 x 91.4 cm). Fractional gift of Werner and Elaine Dannheisser

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *"Untitled" (Portrait of Elaine Dannheisser)*. 1993. Paint on wall, dimensions variable. Fractional gift of Werner and Elaine Dannheisser. Shown here in the form of a birthday-party invitation printed on card, 5 x 7" (12.7 x 17.7 cm), produced by the artist



Felix Gonzalez-Torres. "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*). (1991.)
Two white-framed clocks, each clock 14" in diameter,
overall: 14 x 28 x 2³/₄" (35.6 x 71.1 x 6.9 cm). Gift of
Werner and Elaine Dannheisser

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. "Untitled". (1992.) Printed
billboard, dimensions variable. Gift of Werner
and Elaine Dannheisser



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