Ault, Julie, ed. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Gottingen, Germany: Steidldangin, 2006, p. 5-37.

When This You See Remember Me

Robert Storr

The shimmering carpet stretches across the institutionally gray floor. It measures some twenty by thirty-six feet and is made of thousands of foil wrapped candies. Entering the room under the watchful eye of their mother, two young boys race toward the rectangular mirage and frantically fill their pockets. From beside the door through which they have come, a uniformed guard steps forward and admonishes them to behave. She does not reprimand them for taking the candy, though, but simply tells them to exercise restraint, suggesting that they take one piece each. Just as they are about to surrender their next to last treasures she winks, letting them know that it is all right to hold on to an extra few.

At this point the guard turns to the mother, who tensely awaits a reproving look or comment. Instead the federal employee delivers a detailed explanation of how the amount of candy spread out at their feet was arrived at. The roughly four hundred pounds of pineapple jaw breakers with soft centers represent the combined weight of the artist – about whom the guard speaks with familiarity – and his dead lover, a man.[1] The piece, she informs the mother, is called *"Untitled" (Placebo),* 1991, and refers to the AIDS epidemic and the lack of cure or even of care that so many suffering from the disease must face. And so, one morning in 1994 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, within walking distance of the House and Senate chambers where denunciations of "obscene" or homoerotic works of art were a staple of conservative politicians clamoring for hot button issues, while virtual silence about the 47,636 AIDS deaths nationwide that had already occurred by the date of the exhibition (the peak year of AIDS mortality) was standard for those in higher office, a black civil servant and a prosperous looking white mother of two preadolescent males entered comfortably into a conversation centered on art and sex and death and public policy.

This is the third time I have described the incident in my several attempts to come to terms with the artist in question. If I return to the scene, adding specifics from memory on each retelling, it is because the dynamics of the piece are emblematic of so many dimensions of what makes his achievement one of the signal events of late twentieth-century modernism. Needless to say, the person in front of whose work the discussion unfolded was Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Naturally, he was not physically there when this exchange occurred. Indeed absence was the primary text and conditional, temporal substance of the piece itself, insofar as the candy carpet commemorated the loss of his partner, Ross Laycock, and anticipated his own demise a year later at the age of thirty eight from the same illness. Yet to claim that he had anticipated the exchange in its essence is justified by knowing that before the exhibition opened Gonzalez-Torres was at pains to speak directly with the museum staff in general and the guards in particular, about the implicit as well as explicit meanings and strategies of his work. As it happened the guard in question mistook the measurements and corresponding symbolism of one piece for another – at an approximate starting point of 1,000 to 1,200 pounds of candy *"Untitled" (Placebo)* surpasses the "ideal" weight Gonzalez-Torres stipulated for pieces such as *"Untitled" (Lover Boys)* and *"Untitled" (Revenge)*, both 1991, meant to represent that of a male couple – but that error is less important than the nature of the conversation that ensued or the recognition that in all its sparkle *"Untitled" (Placebo)* is imbued with a terrible fatality, accented by the literal meaning of the title, which suggests that one is being offered a pill that does nothing but make false promises in place of one which might actually cure or alleviate disease.

Until recently, the practice of involving those who watch over art was fairly unusual, and within his generation Gonzalez-Torres was among the first who set a premium on making such contacts integral to his larger purpose. For the most part the task of interpreting art to the public is left to, if not jealously reserved for, professional curators and educators. In fact some museums forbid guards to say anything at all about the art they protect. However, Gonzalez-Torres grasped the subtleties of museological power, and in tacitly delegating to these usually mute sentinels the task of describing his intentions, he not only inverted institutional hierarchies, but shrewdly deployed a previously ignored force of average Americans as front-line troops in the so-called culture wars.[2]

It was left, therefore, to a federal employee to explain that as an exception to the conventional museum rule of "look don't touch," visitors were on the contrary encouraged to take a candy – or elsewhere in the exhibition one of the many sheets of paper printed with words or images that were arranged in stacks on the floor. So doing the guard

took on the role of catalyst, discreetly demonstrating the gift economy in a context otherwise devoted to the cult of scarcity. In this manner she became an official granter of permission where prohibitions habitually take precedence, a gracious social equalizer, an open rather than a secret sharer of knowledge, an agent-in-place operating on behalf of institutional critique, in short a tax paying, tax paid subversive.

Moreover it was this or another of the rotating guards who presided over the gradual shrinking of the silvery continent at their feet, as inroads on it were made by the visitors who accepted her invitation or intuitively took advantage of the license Gonzalez-Torres had given them. So doing they became collaborators in his vanishing act. It is important to stipulate here that although the certificates of authenticity issued by Gonzalez-Torres explicitly state that the installation of his candy pieces remains variable at the discretion of the owner, who may replenish the candies whenever they wish, in speaking with the author who first presented *"Untitled" (Placebo)* when it entered the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in 1991, he asked that no effort should be made to replenish the stock of the candies, or tidy up the shredded contours the carpet inevitably develops as the cycle of depletion ran its course. To restore what has been taken or formally correct the aleatory effects of multiple acts of removal would be to interrupt and administer a spontaneous social transaction, a process of aesthetic repossession, a minor, incremental but perpetual transfer of wealth.[3] Simultaneously, such interference would preempt the poetics of attrition which the piece enacts. And, although not wanting to overstep the boundaries that separate secular from spiritual practices in saying so, it would intrude upon a ritual of transubstantiation.

By design, *"Untitled" (Placebo)* thus began each of its MoMA incarnations as a metallic rectangle that loosely recalls and obliquely comments on the heavy-duty, steel, lead, and copper matrices of Carl Andre. (If, as he has himself suggested, Andre deconstructed the phallic monumentalism of Brancusi's Endless Column by bringing it low and laying his modular elements along the ground, then Gonzalez-Torres has effectively undone the industrial-strength ethic of minimalism by his choice of decorative, decidedly unbutch materials.) At MoMA, once spread out in this fashion the rectangle was eaten away down to the last cluster on the wide gallery floor it originally covers, and from there down to the last glittering nugget of its initial expanse – the last spark of its existence – before being reconstituted. In this continuum mouthing the candy is as essential to experiencing the work and making its meaning as reaching down to pick one up. It is no accident that one must actively suck the hard-shelled morsel to release its flavor, nor that the flavor is bittersweet, nor that the center is soft and clotted. All these performative requirements and sensations recall oral sex. Still more specifically in cases where the candies used in the artist's corner piles are lollipops, the act of sucking mimics fellatio. And so, in a public place under the gaze of authority as well as that of each member of the public present, "ordinary" people – young and old, rich and poor, believers and non-believers, male and female, gay and straight – take a new democratic form of communion by metaphorically ingesting the "other."

Again qualified use of religious terminology is deliberate, but the qualifications are as important as the primary references. It would be a mistake to construe *"Untitled" (Placebo)* as a contemporary recreation of traditional sacraments. Nowhere in Gonzalez-Torres's comments on this or related pieces did he express any faith in or hope for resurrection, actual or symbolic. No mystical emanations are engendered by these emphatically material, and constantly dematerializing sculptures. The body is not reborn when the cycle recommences. Quite the opposite, instead of being reconfigured and brought back to life, from the outset the body has been abstractly atomized in order that it may die again, and again, ad infinitum, thus slowly, ceaselessly rehearsing not one death or two, not just Ross's death or Gonzalez-Torres's own, but many, many more.

Normally, given his age and the roughly eight-year span of his mature production the Gonzalez-Torres exhibition would have been a mid-career survey.[4] In the event, it became a retrospective summing up. When an artist dies young there is always a risk that the work will become a captive of biography and of the immediate circumstances of his or her death. Notoriously, this has happened to Vincent van Gogh and Jackson Pollock, who are now symbols of popular culture's obsession with angst as an index of creativity as well as of its tendency to foster cults of personality by means of which the Romantic nineteenth-century notion of the artist is revived and perpetuated. Among contemporaries something of the sort has also been the art historical fate of Eva Hesse, as it has of Jean-Michel Basquiat, though it might be argued that he courted such treatment by his public bravado as much as by his private excesses. In all these cases the overtly personal or expressive qualities of the work have fed directly into myths that obstruct our view of its broader aims and accomplishments. The danger is compounded when remarkable people perish in a generation-defining calamity, for which the precedents have for the most part been wars. Under such circumstances they are readily made over into icons of that widespread disaster.

Although Gonzalez-Torres often made himself or Ross the protagonist of his work, it was as evanescent rather than

substantial much less heroic subjects. Rather they were mirrors in which individual viewers standing and looking at the text or image or object before them might see a flicker of themselves, and, when it is actually a mirror, do in fact see their own reflections. But these mirrors are shadowed or touched by phantoms whose fleeting aspect reminds one both of unique beings not present – the artist and his lover – and of the essentially ephemeral nature of the physical being – the viewer – who is present. In sum it is a delicate game of existential last tag in which Gonzalez-Torres and his partner appear – and disappear – as unique but intangible personas, while simultaneously playing the role of floating signifiers of the viewer's desire and mortality.

Sickness and impending death made this game urgent in ways no one, including Gonzalez-Torres, initially expected. Yet, his art is not solely or even primarily dedicated to the AIDS epidemic. The elegiac qualities so central to his aesthetic are deeply embedded in a critical awareness and ambition that reaches past that crisis, even though in the end it became the lightning rod for all his concerns. Some of his later statements might seem to belie this assertion. Looking back on his career at the time of his 1994 exhibition his ambivalence about these issues is inescapable, as should be plain from this compressed version of his thoughts on the genesis of *"Untitled" (Placebo)*:

> When people ask me, "Who is your public?" I say honestly, without skipping a beat, "Ross." The public was Ross. . . . After doing all these shows, I've become burnt out trying to have some kind of personal presence in the work. Because I'm not my art. It's not the form and not the shape, not the way these things function that's being put into question. What is being put into question is me, I made *"Untitled" (Placebo)* because I needed to make it. . . . From the very beginning it was not even there – I made something that doesn't exist. I control that pain. That's really what it is. . . . Of course, it has to do with all the bullshit of seduction and the art of authenticity. I know that stuff, but on the other side, it has that personal level that is very real. . . . It's also about excess, about the excess of pleasure. . . . First and foremost it's about Ross. Then I wanted to please myself and then everybody.[5]

The sharpness of the artist's anguish in describing his intentions only serves to accentuate his exceptional clarity of mind in the search for paths that traversed his own desperate situation in order to open avenues of investigation beyond it.

If Gonzalez-Torres could be said to be typical of anything, it was of a generation that came of age in the aftermath of 1970s minimalism and conceptualism. Their entrance onto the scene also coincided with the second wave of critical theory that washed over the art world in the 1980s, having previously cut a swath through the universities in various branches of the humanities during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These combined factors gave him and his peers several advantages – and a number of problems. First, among the former was an expanding canon of work outside the traditional mediums of art production – painting, sculpture, and conventional photography; the latter having been the one with which Gonzalez-Torres started. Second was participation in the complex enterprise of thinking through, correlating, and reframing in terms appropriate to the times and the place (that is the United States in the late twentieth century) a vast and intricate corpus of philosophic, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and political discourses aimed at "deconstructing" the premises of mainstream Euro-American culture. The problems were, of course, linked to these advantages. Minimalism and conceptualism were already well into their academic phase – and the grist for academic criticism of a kind that tends to preempt fresh artistic insight – while the project of aligning the critical discourses just mentioned ran up against a variety of challenges, not excluding their own drift toward unselfcritical scholasticism. Among them were the now all-encompassing neoconservative upsurge of which Ronald Reagan represented the leading edge, the passionate confusion of "identity" politics and multiculturalism, an exponential growth and rapid consolidation of the art system, and the dawning awareness that the modernist apocalyptics that had driven radical theory from Walter Benjamin and Clement Greenberg on down were, finally, a mirage. The Revolution was not coming and the counter-Revolution, bad as it was, so far did not resemble the fascisms of record. Yet despite the widespread feeling that History had defaulted, depriving theory of the punctuation promised it by Hegel and Marx, everywhere – with AIDS being both reality and metaphor – there was a sense that horizons were narrowing, freedoms were in jeopardy, and time was running out. Under these circumstances old avant-garde faith in definitive rupture with the past and utopian hope for the future was untenable, if not implicitly retrograde by virtue of clinging to the myth of the uniquely unencumbered artist-rebel.

Across the board dystopianism was tempting to some, but conjuring up the worst in an awful situation is either a holding action invested with the barely concealed wish to be proven wrong, or a kind of intellectual rationalization of suicide, and in either case no option at all. Also inoperable was the escape hatch into formalism through which Greenberg and his followers had filed from the late 1930s on into the 1970s. Monolithic modernism as they preached it seemed to be crumbling, but, still strong in some artistic quarters and institutionally shored up in others,

it had not collapsed. At the same time the initially transfixing architecture of postmodernism was beginning to show premature stress fractures, aggravated in some cases – for instance the glib formula-spinning of Jean Baudrillard – by poor workmanship. All of which is to say that Gonzalez-Torres had tools and experience of unprecedented kinds to apply to the task of analyzing the crisis confronting him as well as ample warning not to apply them in direct imitation of their prior usage.

More concretely, as a student of conceptualism and an admirer of the work of Joseph Kosuth, Gonzalez-Torres understood that the time had come to make the jump from its "pure" forms of the 1970s to impure varieties that could, in their realm, match in rigor those earlier models. In 1994 *Art & Design* published *A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Inference, Conditions of Possibility*, which included articles on the work of and correlations among all three artists and a conversation between Kosuth and Gonzalez-Torres. Specifically Gonzalez-Torres saw the necessity of departing from Kosuth's original Anglo- American positivism and moving toward a hybrid, more Continental European approach to theory. Along the way Gonzalez-Torres bypassed Kosuth's insistence on the categorical incompatibility between "analytic statements" that concern themselves exclusively with the cognates of thought and language – these being Kosuth's preoccupation in his three-part 1969 manifesto *Art After Philosophy* – and "synthetic" ones that adapt those philosophical absolutes to situations located in the social, political, and cultural spheres.[6] To Ludwig Wittgenstein and A.J. Ayer's strict logic of limitations, Gonzalez-Torres responded with a combination of subtle Benjaminian dialectics and subversive Brechtian "crude thinking," though rarely has the latter been handled with such conceptual and sensual finesse.

So far as the minimalists and their materials-and-process oriented contemporaries go, Gonzalez-Torres was aware of the precedents they set but remained largely indifferent to suggestions that their example precluded his independently arriving at similar formal options and quite different critical and poetic ones. In 1968, for instance, the Arte povera artist Giulio Paolini created a piece out of a stack of blank paper that was exhibited in an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1993. However, Gonzalez-Torres's first stack dates to 1988, so the Hayward's display of this little-known antecedent was unlikely to have been the inspiration for his work in this medium. Neither is it likely that inspiration came from the one Bruce Nauman created in 1974. Titled *Body Pressure*, it consists of a text printed on reams of roseate paper that instructs the viewer / user to press a sheet to their body and concentrate on the tensions of surface and sinew, concluding dryly, "This may become a very erotic exercise." Thus, intriguing as these relatively obscure precedents are, they hardly explain Gonzalez-Torres's own understanding of this interactive format, nor should one assume for merely chronological reasons that they are its source. Replying to a critic who seized on the rediscovery of the Paolini piece as evidence that Gonzalez-Torres had not invented the idea, Gonzalez-Torres readily conceded its prior existence, but questioned originality as an overriding aesthetic value, and then in a gently competitive aside that betrayed just a hint of previously dismissed anxiety of influence said: "I always thought that there was nothing new under the sun. Except that it is not about being new, but about who makes it better. I like that more."[7]

As a member of Group Material Gonzalez-Torres acquired a hands-on appreciation of possibilities and difficulties inherent in collective artistic practice. Looking at the agit-prop work being produced around him during the Reagan years he also became keenly aware of the shortcomings of avowedly political modes of public address, that is to say in terms of both the aesthetic restraints imposed by narrowly instrumental definitions of "content," and in terms of direct social impact, when diminished by the ways in which people learn to duck the thrust of radical critique if they can clearly see it coming. Furthermore, as a homosexual artist born in Cuba he nimbly evaded the trap laid for him by those who either sought to bring him into the fold or confine him to the categories of Gay Artist or Latino Artist. Regarding the second, all he would say was "No palm trees!"[8] Regarding the first, his critical interest was in desire as a universal but distinction-generating phenomenon, of which his desire for other men was one but only one expression.

Against this background, Gonzalez-Torres was also alert to the basic truth that the primary product of advanced capitalist societies is not the actual things manufactured by its industries – be these durable or consumer goods, entertainment, sex, or culture – but a craving for things that exceed any definable need or wish. In this regard the basic coordinates of Gonzalez-Torres's outlook were mapped by three critical models: Marxist theories of commodity-fetishism and the reification of desire – that is to say desire's economically alienated objectification and promotional transformation; Brecht's notion of "epic theater" – in short, a problem-creating as opposed to problem-solving engagement with drama's audience; and finally the analysis of the society of spectacle put forward by Guy Debord in his eponymous tract. That said, Gonzalez-Torres was not in any doctrinaire sense Marxist, which his exile from Cuba and his mixed feelings about the revolution of Fidel Castro may partially account for. Speaking of Louis Althusser, the knottily orthodox French Marxist (who in a late-life state of depression murdered his wife), Gonzalez-Torres said, "what I think he started pointing out were the contradictions within our critique of capitalism. For

people who have been reading too much hard-core Marxist theory, it is hard to deal with those contradictions; they cannot deal with the fact that they're not saints. And I say no, they're not. Everything is full of contradictions, there are only different degrees of contradiction."[9]

In a mordant but less serious tone Gonzalez-Torres then made light of the frequently opaque concepts over which the academic followers of Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukács, and the rest of the "critique-canon" argued. "Something that I tell my students is to read it [Althusser] once, then if you have problems with it read it a second time. Then if you still have problems, get drunk and read it a third time with a glass of wine next to you and you might get something out of it, but always think about practice. The theory in the book is to make you live better, and that's what, I think, all theory should do."[10] In his work meanwhile, Gonzalez-Torres's goal was never merely to service this elite community of professional readers and writers. Defending the strategically calculated popular appeal of his work in a Left-leaning art-world context where an "anti-aesthetic" stance was taken for granted, Gonzalez-Torres added, "I think certain elements of beauty used to attract the viewer are indispensable. I don't want to make art just for the people who can read Fredric Jameson sitting upright on a Mackintosh chair. I want to make art for people who watch *The Golden Girls* and sit in a big, brown, La-Z-Boy chair. They're part of my public too, I hope. In the same way that that woman and the guard are part of my public."[11]

Taken in the polemical but still matter-of-fact spirit in which they were expressed, such attitudes put Gonzalez-Torres closer to the anarchistic Debord than to any of the fastidiously academic Frankfurt school thinkers, with the qualified exception of Benjamin. Ironically, though, that wit was in greatest evidence when Gonzalez-Torres was at his most didactic. An example. It would be hard to think of a period closer in spirit to the Gilded Age that had prompted Thorsten Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, than the Reagan years during which Gonzalez-Torres matured. The conspicuous consumption in which elites of both eras luxuriated is nearly beyond parody, but it was not without its own forms of self-representation. Cognizant of this fact the artist tailored his public lectures to suit the times, and chose one such representation as his "logo." Thus, on the occasion of a public conversation with the author in Detroit, Gonzalez-Torres once spoke about his work without ever showing slides of what he did. Doubtless aware that he was surrounded in that city by the dismal ruins of the machine age and working-class dreams that were its casualty, he chose instead to project a single image over and over again at the rhythm typical of such presentations, an image paradigmatic of the next stage of capitalism, namely the information age. It was a publicity shot of the cast of the hit serial *Dynasty*, which afforded television viewers of the 1980s a weekly opportunity to eavesdrop on the lifestyles of the rich and famous that they, of course, could never enjoy first hand. Such vicarious indulgence on the part of have-nots and have-lesses is a prime feature of literally spectacular wealth. The "art" of Gonzalez-Torres's ploy was to shift the emphasis away from his interventions in the specialized zone of his main activity – the artworld – to that of the all embracing, phantasmagorical business of fostering and frustrating desire. His weapon of choice, however, was the not verbal protest or theoretical exegesis, but an at first wry then abysmal repetition of a single promotional photograph made for one of the media's most successful campaigns for selling the illusion of having it all. Those in attendance laughed then squirmed, then got it.

Performance as such is a rarity in Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre. *"Untitled" (Go- Go Dancing Platform)*, 1991, is one of only two works that depends on the actions of a designated individual; *"Untitled" (Arena),* 1993, with the two male dancers, is the other – though it is more likely a picture of the muscular dancer in skin-tight trunks than direct memory of him that animates the vacant platform in the viewer's imagination. Here, as in the bait and switch of TV and the marketplace, the naked or almost naked display of "the desirable" is inextricably linked to the withholding of that thing or being. Desire consists a priori of that which we lack. Possession exhausts wanting and redirects the insatiable subject's attention to other objects. Hence the endless pursuit of love or sex, not to mention virtually anything that bedazzles us. Gonzalez-Torres's recourse to runway lights and shiny fabric for the dancer's outfit demonstrates the power of display at what one could only call its most minimal level, with the visual pun on Robert Morris's gray boxes as an inevitable second thought in this same chain of associations. Whether one actually hungers for the discoing male body is subordinate to the fascination these rudimentary techniques create, a fascination that highlights the ways in which lust for material goods is charged by the subliminal metamorphosis and displacement of erotic energy.

As previously noted, Gonzalez-Torres paper stack sculptures and his candy and cookie pieces (many of which travesty cornucopia spills and with that childish dreams of plenty) extend this examination of wanting and having into the realm of art where the tensions between covetousness and ownership, cash value and use value are exacerbated by mythologies of uniqueness and ideologies of transcendentally useless and intangible worth. His strategy was simple enough: create editions or ensembles composed of elements that were infinitely reproducible and readily consumable. Destabilizing the normal operations of the art trade was step one. Buying such a work

legally committed the purchaser to passing along the very thing he or she had just acquired. In the 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Ed Kienholz, Hans Haacke, and others had explored the idea of contracts that obliged collectors to share the proceeds of subsequent resale of their works, thereby imposing limits on proprietary rights previously unheard of in this domain. During much the same time, Sol LeWitt along with a number of minimal and conceptual artists pioneered various formats involving ephemeral materials and temporary installation. In addition LeWitt and his colleagues helped expand the definition of the artist's book beyond that of traditional, and traditionally pricey "livre d'artiste," establishing the legitimacy of inexpensive production in this new, diversified medium that virtually anybody could make and anybody could own. Gonzalez-Torres pushed the potential inherent in these precedents several steps further by pursuing the potential of the unlimited edition and by insisting that having meant giving away. And not on a voluntary or conditional basis, or just for show or once in a while, but for as long as one claimed "possession" of the work and it was physically on view.

Destabilizing the museum in ways indicated at the beginning of this essay came second. Inasmuch as this challenged the custodians of culture to reverse almost all of their usual assumptions about their relation to the things in their trust and the audience they ostensibly served, the comparatively restrained social and economic demands on private collectors took on an explicitly political dimension, especially, as noted above, when the institution in question was publicly funded or managed. Beyond this was the vastly increased magnitude of the redistribution of art value Gonzalez-Torres effected through the agency of well-attended museums, though approached from another angle in the publicly funded variety the viewer had in essence already paid for the "freebie" they carried away or popped in their mouth. In all such settings the unrestricted availability of one thing tacitly underscores the unavailability of all the rest that surround it. But Gonzalez-Torres was not a crude materialist; the contrast he created by inserting his take-out art into the gallery of anchored objects was never intended to suggest that one must actually lay a hand on a painting or a sculpture to grasp its significance. Yet with jarring simplicity, he did set out to show how hemmed in the aura of the conventional fine art object had become, and how portable such aura could be when invested in cheaper, inexhaustible forms.

Had Gonzalez-Torres's work merely been about such economies of exchange it would be an elegant, though still radical footnote in the already heavily amended history of the Duchampian ready-made. Philosopher Richard Wollheim has argued that the fundamental shift in aesthetic paradigms for which Duchamp is responsible is predicated on choosing a urinal as his contribution to an exhibition rather than creating a sculpture.[12] It short, it was a shift from making to decisionmaking. But as Duchamp's example suggests and Warhol's, among many others, verifies, the specific preference for image or material within a range of otherwise similar possibilities deployed in an otherwise repetitive manner is as rich in content or feeling as the differences between closely valued hues on a painter's palette or a traditional sculptor's stock of woods or metals. Correspondingly, the viewer's decision about which of a variety of things proposed he or she will finally walk away with or leave alone becomes a Rorschach test of their appetites and tolerances. Going Duchamp one better by exploiting the impulse-buying, samplegrabbing reflexes of the well-trained consumer, it is this opportunity to decide that Gonzalez-Torres conferred on the art public at large.

Approached exclusively from a perceptual vantage point, the visual impact of blue-striped sheets of *"Untitled"* , 1990, the black-rimmed sheets of *"Untitled" (The End),* 1990, the azure sheets framed by white margins in *"Untitled" (Blue Mirror)*, 1990, the fire-engine red sheets of *"Untitled"*, 1990, the silver and white sheets of "Untitled" (Silver Beach), 1990, the doubly black-banded sheets of *"Untitled" (Republican Years),* 1992, are as strikingly different and as aesthetically self-sufficient as the various brass, steel, Plexiglas, or common plywood boxes of Donald Judd, with the red one explicitly making allusion to Judd's early painted floor structures, just as the blue-striped piece recalls the "zips" of Barnett Newman, a figure from the Abstract Expressionist generation that Judd and many other minimalists looked to. In short, Gonzalez-Torres's stacks conflate the contingent and contrarian qualities of Dada with the absolute presence of high formalist painting and sculpture. Of course, the dynamic nature of Gonzalez-Torres's work aggravates the provocation Michael Fried found in minimal, or, as he called it, "literalist" art in its first 1960s incarnations, since the presence of the stacks is gradually eroded by the interaction their Dada component mandates. For Fried, the true modernist work of art was self-contained, immutable, indifferent to its surroundings, and as such always already "present." And, as Fried memorably declared in concluding "Art and Objecthood," his idea-rich polemic against literalist art, "presentness is grace."[13] Yet, despite anticipated philosophical objections from Fried, it is hard to think of an adjective that better fits one's initial impression of the stacks than "graceful." Moreover, the reductive and constantly reduced beauty of the Gonzalez-Torres stacks is not undercut by either the compound literalism of their modular compilation or the here-again-gone-again logic of their participatory undoing. Rather, that beauty is disseminated.

So too, the stacks in which photographic images of clouds, the sea, and highflying birds appear evoke romantic pictorial antecedents of the abstract sublime. Once more sheer loveliness suffuses and, in the imagination, levitates formats firmly grounded in critical discourse, briefly allowing the viewer to surrender to the pathetic fallacy that nature mirrors the innermost aspirations of the soul. But only briefly. The very name given to one such cloudscape, *"Untitled" (Aparición),* 1991, puts the viewers on guard that the "apparition" in the sky is indeed a projection of their yearning rather than the manifestation of extra human power. Never far from his mind both as a function of the theoretical disposition of his generation and of the constant social confrontations illness dictated, the dialectic between nature and culture was basic to everything Gonzalez-Torres did. If, in these cases as in several of his billboards, the artist leaned gently to the side of nature, most of the rest of his work tilted, and in many instances abruptly jerked the viewer's attention to the side of culture. The semiotics of his most abstract works are consistent in this regard. For example the black-bordered stacks directly quote the stationery used for funeral announcements. The fact that one of the two is subtitled *(Republican Years)* renders the message explicitly political. A similar one is designated *NRA* – National Rifle Association – and a third is printed with the faces of the people killed by handguns in the United States in one week. Three more take remembrance as their theme, *"Untitled" (Monument), "Untitled" (Memorial Day Weekend),* both 1989, and the all black *"Untitled"*, 1991, which reprises the arrestingly disjointed timelines Gonzalez-Torres started to compose in 1987, in this instance key dates in the history of the repression and gradual emancipation of homosexuals. Meanwhile other texts discreetly lettered on white sheets introduce hermetic and more subtly disturbing thoughts, including quasi-surrealistic news clippings that evince the nineteenthcentury anarchist and art critic Felix Feneon's compendium of faits divers (incidental news items) and haunted musings such as the paired inscription on two stacks, "Nowhere better than this place." and "Somewhere better than this place."

At every turn of the body and mind, the viewer is required to deal with seemingly incommensurable factors. The appealing brightness or softness of a color is thus set in tension with the somberness of a reality conveyed in words or pictures, the rightness of physical proportions contrasts with the cultural imbalances a text alludes to. Yet, as noted above, instead of resorting to the "anti-aesthetic" tactics that had long been a staple of political conceptualism but which by the early 1980s had become a pietistic and altogether predictable reflex response to Neo-Expressionism, Gonzalez-Torres actively seduced the audience. So doing his close affinities with Louise Lawler with whom he once collaborated, and their nuanced appreciation of how one can use visual delight to catch the wary viewer off guard, put them both in the forefront of artists who contested the rote denial of artistic sensuality. Thus, as an alternative to denying pleasure or pitting it against thought he assigns it an ever changing but always specific price. Rather than favor conceptual faculties at the expense of the perceptual ones as was common in circles focused on cultural criticism, in theory but above all in practice he never failed to give the vital, mortal body its due.

Within the realm of commodities then, Gonzalez-Torres's materials range from dime-a-dozen fortune cookies – "fate" in a brittle shell – to dollar-a-piece Baci chocolates – moist "kisses" in fancy foil. Formerly the property of a private collector, the latter now to belongs to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, making that institution one of the largest dispensers of carriage trade sweets to the general populace. Assuming for the sake of argument that one had access to both, choosing one or the other entails different kinds of expense to the owner but also sets off different psychological reverberations in the person who reaches out. Meanwhile, within the domain of public affairs, the choice one can make at the Museum of Modern Art between the candies of *"Untitled" (Placebo)* – a selection whose social ramifications are meant to dawn slowly on the visitor – and that of taking a copy of *"Untitled" (Death By Gun),* 1990 – a selection that compels immediate recognition of its equally terrible subject by requiring that one stare 460 victims of violence squarely in the face – brackets the extremes of Gonzalez-Torres's more declarative offerings, with the sea or the birds or the sheet with the blue strip representing quieter, more contemplative but never unquestioning alternatives within the scope of his inherently political poetics. In counterpoint to the austerity and aloofness of historical minimalism, Gonzalez-Torres deploys geometric shapes (the stacks) and modular amalgams (the piles and carpets) that invite or induce direct physical and emotional engagement. However, in the way of any thoroughgoing critique his work goes beyond simple contradiction or negation of its object, and subsumes the attributes and attitudes of the very things it supersedes.

Using strands of wire, porcelain sockets, and naked low wattage white bulbs in combinations of two, twenty-four, and forty-two, Gonzalez-Torres took up the aesthetically leveling approach of Dan Flavin's often richly chromatic, sometimes painterly installations of fluorescent tubes and pressed his advantage against the traditional craft of sculpture, while creating luminous markers or spaces whose calm, hypnotic effect – much like that of votive candles – is enhanced rather than diminished by the realization that the source of such radiance is the most common of fixtures. That the bulbs are phallic harkens back to Jasper Johns sculptures and prints of similar fixtures. Thus Gonzalez-Torres cross-references minimalism with Neo Dada yet again, while rooting both in sexual consciousness

– a subject about which Johns, a child of a closeted place and time, has habitually been reticent, but about which Gonzalez-Torres, several generations younger, was matter-of-fact. Seen in profusion however, they metaphorically morph into other guises. Spanning a street in rows like carnival decorations, hanging in strands or garlands from the ceiling, running down a wall or the corner of a room, pooled or puddled on the ground, they are warm, incandescent tears.

Minimalist referents are no less obvious, but, without Dada playfulness, still more ironic in Gonzalez-Torres's numerous "bloodwork" drawings that align medical tracking techniques with the gridded, virtually monochrome works on paper of Robert Ryman, Sol LeWitt, and Agnes Martin. The point is not to mock these elders, but to entangle the concept of "purity" ascribed to all three in the corporeal "impurities" of his own compromised immune system. Creating a chillingly contemporary vanitas, Gonzalez-Torres accents the second half of the old saying "ars longa, vita brevis" while simultaneously calling into question the notion that art can ever slip the bonds that attach it to life. Even more striking in this respect are Gonzalez-Torres's bead curtain pieces, in particular *"Untitled" (Blood),* 1992. Sparkling to the eye, caressing to the skin, delicately musical to the ear, these oversized "jalousies" beckon from a distance and envelope the viewer on contact. But in a period when an hysterical fear of bodily fluids was pervasive, the attraction of and subsequent exposure to a shower of crystallized liquids symbolic of sex and death epitomized Gonzalez-Torres's singular knack for using the least expected enticements to circumvent unexamined anxieties and taboos, thereby literally drawing people into the matrix of his own precarious condition.

Such calculations are both disarming and disconcerting. One has the feeling when stumbling upon a work by Gonzalez-Torres that he has anticipated every move one will make in response. That certainly was his aim, just as it had been a prime characteristic of much of the art he assimilated in order to arrive at his own approach. Here again it is useful to refer back to the leading detractor of the tendency from which Gonzalez-Torres learned how to effect his conceptual and transactional mise-en-scène. The use of the latter term is deliberate, and its significance is elaborated upon by the critic in question, Michael Fried. His complaint against minimalist or literalist art follows:

> For theater *has* an audience – it exists for one in a way the other arts do not. . . . That the beholder is confronted by literalist work within a situation that he experiences as *his* means that there is an important sense in which the work in question exists for him *alone*, even if he is not exactly alone with the work at the time. . . . Someone has merely to enter the room in which the literalist work has been placed to *become* the beholder, that audience of one almost as though the work in question had been *waiting* for him. And inasmuch as the literalist work *depends* on the beholder, is *incomplete* without him, it *has* been waiting for him it has been waiting for him.[14]

Or, as Fried states earlier in the same essay, "But the things that are literalist works of art must somehow *confront* the beholder – they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his *way*. "[15]

For Fried, of course, "theatricality" was anathema, but his hatred of it extracted from him one of the most astute descriptions we have of how this quality operates in the sphere of environmental or installational art. For artists such as Gonzalez-Torres theatricality was essential, but as a means not an end. If Brecht's notion of presenting spectators with a dilemma they must contend with by themselves was one inspiration for Gonzalez-Torres, and Debord's strategy of creating "situations" that bring the contradictions of one's existence to the surface was another, then Fried may be considered an unsympathetic third source. The crucial distinction to make in his case is that the individual who is thus put on the spot is obliged to deal with this provocation in a context defined by the presence of others similar or dissimilar to the spectator as much as it is by the intractable work which lies in ambush for them all. Contra Fried, the viewer who comes upon a work by Gonzalez-Torres does not sense that it "exists for him alone," but only that he or she must somehow reckon with their private experience of it in public space and in the company of others.

Gonzalez-Torres's billboards are the most overt example of how this problem could be posed. In 1989, the first such work to be temporarily installed featured pivotal events in the history of Gay Liberation. Set in small white type at the bottom of a black field, it read: "*People with AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1991 Supreme Court 1996 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1967 Stonewall Rebellion 1969.*" Located on Sheridan Square at the crossroads of the predominantly gay section of New York's Greenwich Village and just a block from where the Stonewall Rebellion had been
ignited by police brutality, this untitled work was a rallying point for a community once again under siege as a result of AIDS and the animus it stirred in the society at large. In its shadow, people who shared a painful past as well as an uncertain future could come together. By contrast the untitled billboard which cropped up three years later in

twenty-four places spread out across all five boroughs of New York City carried no text and was anything but selfdeclarative with relation to its intended audience. Commissioned by the Projects series at MoMA under the curatorial supervision of Anne Umland, this work consisted instead of a blown-up image of a bed, covered with white sheets and topped by two pillows bearing the side by side impressions of two heads.

Such pairings were frequent in Gonzalez-Torres's work. Two chairs placed next to each other thus "figure" in a jigsaw puzzle piece of 1989, *"Untitled" (Paris, Last Time, 1989)*. Abstract variants of this motif take the form of two rings that touch at the edge but do not link; one is printed on sheets of paper composing a stack while another set were cast in silvered-brass to be hung on a wall. Most poignant of all these emblems of intimacy and incomplete mutuality are the several versions of twin electric clocks that touch like the rings but like them also remain separate and self-contained. That separateness is emphasized by their temporal function; initially set to the identical hour, minute, and second, these low-tech, battery-powered time pieces gradually fall out of synch as they wind down, with one inevitably stopping before the other. The sting of this existential metaphor lies in the ordinariness of the devices that embody it and in the understated but inescapable implications of the growing discrepancy between the two animated surrogates the artist all too knowingly called "perfect lovers." On the billboards there are no surrogates. Nor does the man or woman on the street have any basis for guessing who shared the bed before taking their leave, or what kind of bond brought them there, or whether either will return to occupy their former place. Here the perfect lovers could be anyone in any kind of relationship; gay or straight, male or female, married or single. They could be at home or in a motel. It could be the scene of routine sex between an established couple or a one night stand between strangers. Or it could be a tender but sexless companionship. Any and all possibilities are conceivable, and therein lies the work's profound provocativeness, especially in a period of the coercive reassertion of traditional social and sexual norms like ours. The meaning of the image hinges on the projected fantasy of the person who stands below and looks up at an enlargement of the most eroticized zone of their everyday lives, the psychological site of their greatest longing, insecurity and discomfort, the nearly neutral screen on which memories or expectations of happiness, frustration, or deprivation can be played out in the mind's eye. To the extent that such emotions register on the face of the viewer, or the effort to suppress them dictates his or her expression, the social dimension of the piece is like watching a libidinous movie of one's own making in a crowded cinema with the lights on. Inasmuch as the actual, physical site would normally be devoted to advertising – that is to the stimulation, displacement, and exploitation of commodity lust for which graphic sexuality is the conventional bait – Gonzalez-Torres has in effect expropriated the means deployed by capital for producing desire in alienated consumers, and handed it over to them under conditions that accentuate the tension between what is hidden by the blatant images habitually found in such places – desire that has not been regimented, or repackaged – and the untapped capacity that pictures which refuse to declare their intentions have to reveal the hidden attitudes and feelings of the public. At the dawn of the twentieth century the Cubist poet Guillaume Apollinaire sang the praises of modern billboards, which he, like his friend Picasso "read" as if they were poetry.[16] At the close of the same century Gonzalez-Torres replaced that ready-made prosody with his own enigmatic metaphors of late modernity.

Thus, Gonzalez-Torres broke into one of the many media outlets at the disposal of those who deliver information they or higher authorities deem valuable, and substituted his content for theirs, the user's imagination for the programmatic fantasies of market propagandists. Elsewhere in same signage system there is a name for this activity: hacking. In a clever synthesis of Debord, Marx, Marshall McLuhan, and William Gibson, which its author calls a *Hacker Manifesto*, McKenzie Wark concedes that practitioners of such high-tech anarchism are dependent on networks they cannot control outright, but he holds out for the potential inherent in the fact that they can navigate them more adroitly and with greater swiftness than those who do control them.[17] Hackers create and provide information as more or less generous parasites of amalgamated vectors of communication that ordinarily limit its diffusion to maximize profit. Without recourse to Cyber Punk utopianism, but in a similar spirit conditioned by a common generational awareness that there was no place "outside" that system from which to launch classic avant-garde assaults on the powers that be, Gonzalez-Torres arrived at many of the same conclusions. In conversation, he marveled at the ingenuity of the far Right's strategies of hiding in plain sight and pretending to be average American when they were in actuality disciplined agents of extremist ideologies. Claiming the prerogatives of infiltration for the Left, he said, "I want to be a spy, too. I want to be the one who resembles something else."[18] In sum that is what he did by infiltrating or hacking into the cultural matrix at every juncture where he could find the sort of uncircumscribed access – to galleries, museums, publications, the street – that would give him a running start on those dedicated to restricting his one-man freedom of information acts.

But how does the invisible man leave his trace? How do those who are already shunned or denied make their presence felt? How do we first learn and then retain what an entire society would prefer to ignore or blot out? Gonzalez-Torres's preoccupation with the major events and minutae of history was his partial answer to these

questions. Usually he stated the problem in the declarative rather than the interrogative. “We do not remember” reads the inscription on one of the stacks. Explaining his difficulties in completing his self-portrait – such text and date portraits being an extension of his public timeline works into the domain of the personal – the artist explained, “Because people just don’t remember, especially in our culture, we have an explosion of information, but an implosion of meaning. It is like *Casablanca* where Humphrey Bogart said, ‘A long time ago, last night.’ People don’t remember last night.”[19]

The reasons for such forgetfulness are many. The sheer superfluity of sensations and the apparent inconsequence of so much that occurs to us are chief among them. But from these unpromising or perishable materials, Gonzalez-Torres composed much of what might be called his “anachronologies”– timelines in which temporal sequence and supposed order of importance are deliberately scrambled – placing a special post-Pop emphasis on contemporary fads such as movies, toys, and songs, while incidentally reminding one of the mainstream radio slogan “this is the soundtrack of your life.” Such mundane things, Gonzalez-Torres understood, are the Proustian *madeleines* of our era, tokens of innocent enthusiasm that trigger spontaneous recollection precisely by flying above or below the radar of repression. Their abrupt juxtaposition to things or events generally understood to be significant creates a gap across which sparks of memory are thrown, sparks that light the intervals darkened by the official amnesia. Trivia thus emancipates the viewer from standard narratives and chains of causality, and inserts personal points of reference into the scrambled, and potentially recombinant historical record.

Thus, in 1987, the first of his datelines includes “Walkman 1979,” “Waterproof mascara 1971,” and “Personal computer.” However, it begins with “Bitburg Cemetery 1985,” signifying the infamous ceremony in which Ronald Reagan in the company of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl placed a wreath at a military burying ground for German soldiers where members of the SS were interred – in short a case of remembering as forgetting. No better illustration of Hannah Arendt’s theory of the “banality of evil” could be conceived. Taken as a group, Gonzalez-Torres’s puzzle pieces compose a similarly textured tableau of private reminiscence and public obliviousness.

On the public side two examples stand out: *“Untitled” (Klaus Barbie as a Family Man)*, 1988, and *“Untitled” (Waldheim to the Pope),* 1989. In the first the World War Two SS officer known as the Butcher of Lyon is seen in Latin American exile posed beside his wife and two children. In the second the former Secretary General of the United Nations and, at the time the photograph was taken, recently exposed Nazi officer, Kurt Waldheim, accepts the Host from the Pontiff. Each image is printed on a cheap puzzle board and hermetically sealed in plastic. Clearly the conundrum is not how to assemble the pieces, which are locked in place. Instead the puzzle is how to fit this image into the larger image of the past and present that we carry in our heads, even as each is a piece of the puzzle grid of the artist’s life. And where are the tabs
and notches that dictate their relative locations: Barbie is the very picture of patriarchal virtue; Waldheim and the Pope have engaged in an exchange of pieties amounting to the medieval sale of indulgences. The historical coupling for both is National Socialism; the contemporary coupling is the Republican “New World Order” based on the nuclear “family values” and the coordinated governance of Church and State.

However, Gonzalez-Torres’s private “album” of images – that word is emblazoned on the fake leather cover of a book that is the subject of one of his puzzle pieces – consists of cryptic but moving excerpts of text – one of which is identified as “lover’s letters” – as well as natural views of situations bound to be altered by time and the elements, waves, marshes, snow banks, and snapshots of Ross with a dog, Ross with a cat, and of a man behind a curtain – is he Ross too and are we then to see him as the specter behind all the other curtain pieces the artist made? There are more, and their modesty as photographs contributes much to the feeling of intimacy they exude. But two in particular – or rather one picture and a set of pictures – stick in mind. Together they suggest an answer to the question concerning the trace that can be left by an invisible man in culture hardening into authoritarian “normality.”

The series portrays footprints in the sand. They could be anywhere; on the beaches of Cuba or Miami, of Long Island, or, more ominously, in a vacant lot like the one where Pier Paolo Pasolini – Leftist filmmaker, sardonic visionary of the brutal social comedy of sex and power, and one of the artist’s favorite writers was left to die by a young pick-up. In this zone people come and go, men cruise, no one remains. The marks they leave are erotically charged, perennially repeated, cumulative but evanescent and forever anonymous. Within the “Family of Man” recognized by mainstream society is a community of men of which the artist was a member, but at the edges of which he chose to stand at a slight tangent when seeking to register their collective presence and their individual passing. The single image is a color photograph of flowers, *“Untitled” (Alice B. Toklas’ and Gertrude Stein’s Grave, Paris),* 1992. The hues are saturated and the overall effect is anything but lugubrious. It is an homage to love made in a time of death, to a same-sex couple in a time when the right to be that was – as it still is – under continuous

assault, to a writer whose work charmed straitlaced society and undermined its defenses in a time when, despite all odds, such subversive charm seemed a surprisingly radical option. As such it remains an emblem of the wager Gonzalez-Torres himself made, and a promise of his own permanent resting place in our beleaguered but still vital culture.

For Alina Pellicer, who knew Felix and who understood.

1. In actuality the piece weighs between 1,000 and 1,200 pounds. Other candy pieces are determined by the combined weight of the artist and his lover, calculated at 355 pounds. Nevertheless, exercising poetic license, Gonzalez-Torres offered this explanation to the author when he acquired *"Untitled" (Placebo)* for the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. By the evidence of this exchange witnessed by the author, Gonzalez-Torres provided the same rationale to the guards at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.
2. Gonzalez-Torres did not officially recruit collaborators but his habit of explaining himself to the museum staff members informally empowered them to assume a responsibility not normally entrusted to them.
3. Here again there is a discrepancy between what the artist said and the final terms of the certificates of authenticity and ownership governing ownership of the pieces. Part of this discrepancy is no doubt due to changes in his own evolving thinking in response to installational situations that developed during his lifetime. For example, when Gonzalez-Torres noticed that visitors to the Museum of Modern Art were discarding wrappers back on to the piece, with the result that the white paper insides created a kind of visual "foam" over the sheet of still-wrapped silver candies, he requested that these used wrappers be collected at the end of the day. In the end the certificate of authenticity and ownership states that the piece be routinely neatened up and straightened out, but the degree of latitude remains open to interpretation. Based on my conversations with the artist and my own experience installing and maintaining the work I believe that the degree of tidying up should be kept to a minimum. That is to say enough should be done to avoid the work becoming an eyesore (rather than an eye-catcher) and to prevent any form of institutional neglect from impinging on the respect owed those the work commemorates. Taking those contingencies into consideration, a sense of organic depletion is essential to the work's meaning. Excessive fastidiousness of the kind to which four-square, by-the-book curators, technicians, and housekeeping staff may be prone is equally at odds with its intrinsic character insofar as such an approach regards the piece as just another fixed entity within a treasure house of things to be preserved against time and its entropic effects.
4. The exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Traveling*, was organized by Amada Cruz, in collaboration with the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. A year later, Nancy Spector mounted a retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Spector's selection and installation were exemplary, but there in the harsh white light of Frank Lloyd Wright's inverted ziggurat set apart from the even harsher social, political realities of the twentieth-century's fin de siècle, an ill-starred pairing of Gonzalez-Torres's work with the fifteen-year overview of another artist, Ross Bleckner, whose generally dark, sometimes woozy paintings conjured memories of late nineteenth-century Symbolist art, took place. Thus, for example, the cover of Bleckner's catalogue featured fluttering legs of someone rising toward the heavens through anthracite murkiness faintly illuminated by spectral flowers and a scintillating loving cup. The title of the picture is Eulogy.
   After more than a decade of organization and agitation in response to the spread of HIV-AIDS that had, among other things, prompted the creation and observance of a commemorative Day Without Art in cultural institutions throughout America, the main spaces of a major New York museum had thus been given over to two openly gay artists. Moreover both were active in fighting the plague and the perennial hostility, discrimination, and neglect it so cruelly brought to the surface. Yet the differences in their approach to sexual identity and artistic practice – differences within difference – could hardly be more pronounced.
   The most obvious, of course, was that of the mediums they chose. Yet predictable emphasis on the supposedly inherent historical antagonism between painting and all other forms of conceptually based art is a red herring. To be sure, Gonzalez-Torres took ironic pride in saying that he did not have a studio, opting instead to work out of his apartment – which is really to say out of his head. Nevertheless he translated his ideas into images or objects with the assistance of those who did have studios or the equivalent. Having acknowledged the artist's practicality in this respect, dwelling at any length on the intramural art world squabbles of the 1980s seems anachronistic and distracting.
   The opposing factions of that period consisted of those critical tendencies that celebrated painting's "triumphant" return to prominence after having been pushed aside during the 1970s by video, performance, installation, text and photo genres, and other experimental modes – tendencies which viewed Bleckner as one of many standard bearers – and their adversaries among the second- and third-generation practitioners of the new mediums. True, those debates conditioned the genesis of many of Gonzalez-Torres's ideas and their initial reception, but they cannot fully explain the "rightness" of his work today when radicality no longer resides – if it ever did – primarily in such formal innovation.
   Despite the heated polemics of the second phase of the AIDS crisis – polemics rightly directed against collective fatalism and political acquiescence – neither should rigid lines be drawn between the sepulchral tone of Bleckner's imagery and titles, and Gonzalez-Torres's own elliptical memento moris. In the face of such a catastrophe mourning assumes many guises. Drawing invidious comparisons among them too easily leads to indecent disdain for the manner in which one's neighbors suffer death's deprivations or observe memorial rituals.
   Rather, the abiding contrast between Gonzalez-Torres's approach and Bleckner's rests upon the multiple levels of engagement that Gonzalez-Torres's work both facilitates and requires as distinguished from the primarily emotional and aesthetic involvement for which Bleckner sets the stage. As detailed above, *"Untitled" (Placebo)* provides just one example of how economically and densely Gonzalez-Torres layered both information and affect in his art. Likewise it is just one example of how he anticipated the viewer and enlisted their participation. But as this instance makes manifest and the necessity of gendered pronouns tacitly reaffirms, it never was or is a question of one viewer alone, much less the disembodied, disinterested, and universalized spectator hypothesized by traditional Kantian aesthetics. Gonzalez-Torres's ideal audience was not an audience at all, but a random cross section of a heterogeneous population transformed by the work into a community of interlocutors focused on the world around them and on their disparate but intertwined relations to it. For him art per se was not the subject. Instead his preoccupation was the convergence of subjectivities and social realities that art occasioned and the ways in which art made such diversity and such contingency visible, palpable, poignant, and

galvanizing.

5. "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion. Interview par Robert Storr," *Art Press* 198 (January 1995): 28 and 32. In this volume, pp. 229–39.
6. Speaking of Kosuth and their joint exhibition documented in *A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility*, *Art & Design* no. 34 (1994), Gonzalez- Torres said, "But I respect Joseph's work a lot. I think we, in the new generation, the one that used some of the same ideas for the advancement of social issues, owe a lot to the artists of the past like Lawrence Weiner and Kosuth. In the essay in the show's catalogue Joseph said it very well, 'The failure of conceptual art is actually its success.'" "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," 25.
7. In conversation with the author, Gonzalez-Torres suggested that his stacks effectively prompted the rediscovery of the Paolini work in the Hayward show: "It was so funny. There's a piece by Giulio Paolini that no one has ever seen before. I said to myself, 'Here I am influencing Paolini. . . . I'm creating history for that stack that that curator in London found somewhere and put on the cover of the book. I always thought that there was nothing new under the sun. Except that it is not about being new, but about who makes it better. I like that more." From a 1994 interview by the author, "Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Part II – 13 December 1994," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Roni Horn* (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1995), 32.
8. In conversation with the author.
9. "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," 26.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 29.
12. Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co, 1968), 386–99.
13. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, 147.
14. Ibid., 140.
15. Ibid., 127.
16. Thus Apollinaire's poem "Zone" declares; "Tu lis les prospectus les catalogues les affiches qui chantent tout haut / Voilà la poésie ce matin et pour prose il y a les journaux." (You read the brochures the catalogues the signs that sing aloud / There is the poetry of the morning and for prose there are the newspapers. Translation by the author.) Guillaume Apollinaire, Oeuvres Poetiques (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 39.
17. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
18. The model for much of Gonzalez-Torres's tactics was close observation of those of the neoconservative Right rather than that of those of the traditional Left, though the rise of the Right in the 1980s and after was often based on their study of the organizing procedures of the Left in the 1960s. Thus Gonzalez-Torres said: "There's a great quote by the director of the Christian Coalition, who said he wanted to be a spy. 'I want to be invisible,' he said, 'I do guerilla warfare, I paint my face and travel at night. You don't know it's over until you are in the body bag. You don't know until election night.' This is good! This is brilliant! Here in the Left we should stop wearing the fucked-up T-shirts that say 'Vegetarian Now.' No, go to a meeting and infiltrate and then once you are inside, try to have effect. I want to be a spy, too." "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," 32.
19. Robert Storr, "Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Part II – 13 December 1994," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Roni Horn,* 34.