

Authority Figure

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Since Felix Gonzalez-Torres's death at thirty-eight in 1996, his reputation has only continued to grow. Despite his art's direct engagement with many highly topical subjects of its own time, it has held its relevance for new audiences. His work is sought after by museums all over the world, and for many he is simply the most important artist of his generation. As he becomes indisputably part of the canon, therefore, Gonzalez-Torres is inevitably becoming a kind of authority figure. This process is not without irony. The question of authority – won or assumed, personal or institutional – is one of the central themes of his work. The very fact of Gonzalez-Torres's early death has itself contributed to the growth of his authority. Much as he might insist that "I'm not the voice of authority. I make mistakes. I might be wrong,"¹ the larger narrative of the brilliant career cut short tends to flatten out any actual missteps. As David Deitcher has pointed out: "In today's market culture, death is prized, like genius. In fact, the two can be closely related, the operable rule being: the sooner the better. As artists die young, they are positioned strategically within a narrative trajectory that can lead to the construction of mythic, and highly marketable genius."²

During his lifetime Gonzalez-Torres constantly strove to complicate the reception of his own work, especially through the importance he attached to his role as a teacher. He emphasized that "I want my students to learn the tools of critical thought and to always doubt, to learn how to doubt themselves and to be self-critical. . . . I also make very clear to them that they should not trust me."³ Even without those activities aimed at deliberately undercutting his own potential authority, however, his work itself contains an ongoing engagement with, and critique of, the idea of authority.

Authority is dependent upon a certain *distance*, which the institution of the art museum is perfectly positioned to supply. The viewer is held at arm's length from the work of art, not just physically but psychologically. The yawning white spaces of the contemporary art museum tend to establish an airless quality around the works that they present, a vacuum in which each object stakes its isolated claim to a place in history. Surrounded by uniformed guards, the didactic apparatus of labeling and wall text, as well as by a reverential hush, any work of art is pulled towards the status of a fetish object. Nevertheless, even as Gonzalez-Torres's art-historical status grows, his work continues to call into question the limiting frame that its museological stature tends to place around it.

Gonzalez-Torres himself liked to install some of his works in unexpected places, such as hallways, or even office areas, as a way of disturbing the museological aura. This happens much less frequently now, since curators are reluctant to place important pieces in such places. Respect for the work, and for the artist, can actually make it difficult to place his work in, say, a corridor, or next to an elevator, even if the artist himself might have done so. Curators are understandably wary of putting themselves in the position of directly emulating elements of Gonzalez-Torres's idiosyncratic practice. Even before his death, there was institutional resistance to this aspect of his work. Gonzalez-Torres made it clear that his light-string pieces could be installed in virtually any configuration: hanging from the ceiling or lying on the floor; stretched tight or casually looped. "When I send this stuff to museums," he said, "they keep faxing us back saying, 'What do we do with this thing?' and we keep faxing them back saying, 'Whatever you want!' and they just don't believe it."⁴

Perhaps the most consistent disruption is still effected by those pieces that invite the viewer to take the work away with them. The stack pieces and the candy pieces challenge the fundamental museum mission of pristine preservation. Before setting foot in a museum that displays his stack pieces, for example, one is likely to encounter the piece in the form of rolled-up sheets carried away by visitors. This simple, physical, escape from the museum is strikingly effective in disrupting the official aura and reestablishing connections to a broader and more inclusive context. Visitors to the museum are confronted with the sight of others not only touching the art, but actually taking it away with them. A personal, tactile, intimacy – and ownership – is counterposed to the custodial authority of the institution.

“An individual piece of paper from one of the stacks does not constitute the ‘piece’ itself,” Gonzalez-Torres explained, “but in fact it is a piece.” These fragments that are and are not “pieces” leave the institution and begin their own unpredictable circulation in the world. “Yet each piece of paper gathers new meaning,” he said, “from its final destination, which depends on the person who takes it.”⁵ The very ephemerality of these works can be subject to unpredictable reversal. I have repeatedly been surprised by coming across individual sheets from Gonzalez-Torres’s stacks carefully pinned up in offices and homes. The information-packed “*Untitled*” (*Death By Gun*), 1990, is perhaps the most popular in this context, although I have often seen the related but essentially monochrome “*Untitled*” (*NRA*), 1991, too. And far away from any museum, I have unexpectedly been offered candy taken from one of Gonzalez-Torres’s pieces. As I write this, I have a piece of silver-wrapped candy sitting on the desk, still waiting. The pleasant surprise of receiving one of these objects is like feeling a ripple from the other side of a lake.

If his works continue to circulate as gifts as well as resting in institutional tranquility, that is appropriate, because Felix Gonzalez-Torres was a constant gift-giver. His friends often received photographs in the mail. And he was as lavish with his time and energy as he was with material things. In gifts begin responsibility, however, and Gonzalez-Torres knew well that in giving a gift he was also placing a charge on the recipient, an implicit obligation to respond to it in an appropriate way. All gifts have this double-edged quality, imposing a debt at the same time as they enrich the receiver.

The generosity evident in his art makes demands on those who engage with it. Gonzalez-Torres was always distressed to see sheets from one of his stack pieces taken and discarded a few minutes later, as often happens at exhibition openings. Of course, we live in a culture of waste, but there is also a more direct issue. A viewer who takes a piece only to throw it away a few minutes later has clearly not made the connection the artist wanted, and I think Gonzalez-Torres’s frustration in such cases was as much with the work’s failure to connect as with the waste of a single sheet among thousands. As he said: “I need a viewer; I need a public for that work to exist. Without a viewer, without a public, this work has no meaning; it’s just another fucking boring sculpture sitting on the floor, and that is not what this work is all about.”⁶ The printed sheet of paper is worth nothing in material terms, but in other intangible ways it is invaluable. I mean invaluable literally. On one hand, what price can really be put on this gift that has to connect one intangible sensibility with another? On the other, since the stacks are theoretically endless, what monetary value could possibly be placed on one element of a potentially infinite series?

Gonzalez-Torres embraced excess, but not waste. He was never tempted by the pleasures of destruction for its own sake, and his generosity was not that of the potlatch, in which gifts are given only to be immediately destroyed. Instead, he was committed to the idea of unlimited production, unlimited availability. The specifications for a piece such as “*Untitled*” (*Lover Boys*), 1991, call for an “endless supply” of silver-wrapped candy. The owner of the work must accept the responsibility – imposed by the artist – of continuing to supply, forever, the candy that constitutes the piece. In due course the endlessly replenished candy will be taken away and consumed, piece by piece, by its audience. The work cannot be shown without being simultaneously given away.

The economy implied by Gonzalez-Torres’s work, then, is not the familiar one of scarcity and elitism, but rather a hypothetical regime of abundance, of enough for all, in which each individual takes only what he or she will use. Pleasure is not rationed; it is universally available. This economy might seem utopian, and in a way it is, but Gonzalez-Torres was always as much a materialist as an idealist. He was fully aware of harsher economies, too. The giving away of candy has a synechdochal, and opposed, relationship to the broader economy. It proposes another model, but does not deny the continuing existence of a dominant system predicated precisely on the artificial scarcity that “*Untitled*” (*Lover Boys*) resists.

In his understanding of the reciprocal nature of exchange Gonzalez-Torres echoed the fundamental analyses of Karl Marx:

Production, then, is also immediately consumption, consumption is also immediately production. Each is immediately its opposite. But at the same time a mediating movement takes place between the two. Production mediates consumption; it creates the latter’s material; without it, consumption would lack an object. But consumption also mediates production, in that it alone creates for the products the subject for whom they are products. The product only obtains its “last finish” in consumption. A railway on which no trains run, hence which is not used up, not consumed, is a railway only potentially, and not in reality. Without production, no consumption; but also, without consumption, no production; since production

would then be purposeless.⁷

Gonzalez-Torres recognized that the dialectic outlined by Marx here applied as much to art as to more conventional forms of economic activity, and in his work he sought its synthesis. He valued the consumption of his work as much as its production. He had no interest in making a railway on which no trains run.

And he wanted as many people in the trains as possible. As he put it: “I don’t want to make art just for 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.”⁸ Gonzalez-Torres’s choice of metaphor here deliberately echoes Matisse, of course, who notoriously wrote that he dreamed of an art “something like a good armchair.”⁹ His embrace of what is often – wrongly – characterized as a reactionary comment by Matisse, and his recasting it in an assertively demotic context of sit-coms and recliners, is emblematic of a practice that took seriously the possibility of a genuinely broad audience, and made the give and take with it central.

For Gonzalez-Torres to be able to give things away – whether those things were pieces of candy or the authority of the museum – he had first to lay claim to authority for himself. You can’t give anything away if you don’t have it in the first place. The most important step in that process was for Gonzalez-Torres to free himself from the expectations imposed on him from outside, expectations that would define him if he let them. Only by an initial act of refusal could he hope to win the authority he wanted, the authority to redefine the expectations of his audience.

At the point at which Gonzalez-Torres began his career – the late 1980s – a very serious cultural shift was underway. The institutions of the American art world were at long last beginning to recognize that artists of color existed, and to pay their work something more than lip service. Yet this movement also entailed for many artists an unwelcome sense that they were expected in everything they did to *represent* their particular racial or ethnic category, and to live up to the lingeringly stereotypical expectations concomitant with that category. This was unacceptable to Gonzalez-Torres. “As Hispanic artists we are supposed to be very crazy, and colorful – extremely colorful,” he told Tim Rollins.¹⁰ “We’re supposed to ‘feel,’ not think.”

Distinguishing himself sharply from this stereotype, Gonzalez-Torres was at pains to acknowledge his debt to analytical thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Bertolt Brecht. He felt the need to distance himself, not from his own cultural identity per se, but from the widely held expectations of what a “Hispanic” artist should be:

Some people want to promote multiculturalism as long as they are the promoters, the circus directors. We have an assigned role that’s very specific, very limited. As in a glass vitrine, “we” – the “other” – have to accomplish ritual, exotic performances to satisfy the needs of the majority. This parody is becoming boring very quickly. Who is going to define my culture? It is not just Borges and Garcia Marquez, but also Gertrude Stein and Freud and Guy Debord – they are all part of my formation.¹¹

As another artist who emerged in this period, Glenn Ligon, has said recently:

“Identity art” became a little Bantustan. On the one hand, it was an important movement because it opened up a space for the social, for the local, for the specific. On the other hand, it became a policing mechanism, a way to contain, and as such it was deployed very effectively against artists of color. Critics at the time could say, “Your work is about your identity,” as if that were all one could or needed to say about the work,¹² and as if that was all the work was supposed to be about.

Gonzalez-Torres’s disdain for such limits and the stereotypes that go along with them is evident in his first publication, an eight-page booklet produced in conjunction with his 1988 exhibition at the ethnically-specific Intar Latin American Gallery in New York. On the last page he reproduced a tiny, black-and-white photograph of a single, stunted palm tree growing in an otherwise unoccupied stretch of scrubland. As he explained sardonically at the time, he thought that he had better include an image of a palm tree to establish his credentials as a real Latin American artist. Similarly, he assured Tim Rollins that “the ‘maracas’ sculptures are next!”¹³ In taking such a stance, he was

not at all rejecting his heritage as a Cuban or a Latino, but he was certainly rejecting the idea that he should be obliged to play up to external (reductive, and hence diminished) expectations about what being a Cuban might mean, or about what Latino art might be.

The same is true for his relationship to his identity as a gay man. “The work is always extremely unstable,” he said.

But that is one thing that I enjoy very much. I enjoy that danger, that instability, that in-between-ness. If you want to relate that to a personal level, I think in that case that the work is pretty close to that real life situation that I am confronted with daily as a gay man: a way of being in which I am forced by culture and by language to always live a life of “in-between.”¹⁴

Gonzalez-Torres did not hesitate, of course, to acknowledge his identity as a gay man. Yet – as with his identity as a Latino – he was not at all interested in playing up to stereotypes and expectations. “I’m not afraid of power,” he said.¹⁵ “That’s why I don’t like the term ‘alternatives.’ Alternatives to what?”

Instead of self-categorizing himself and his work as “alternative,” he directed his attention to the form that carried the greatest authority in contemporary art at that time: minimalism. Minimalism was widely perceived to be the most rigorous, the most demanding, and the most serious of styles. Indeed, it was perhaps the last movement to achieve general recognition as *inescapable* for serious artists, even if they chose to position themselves in opposition to it. For artists of Gonzalez-Torres’s generation, it was minimalism that held the dominant position occupied for an earlier generation by abstract expressionist painting.

It was precisely this sense of centrality that Gonzalez-Torres sought in making his stack pieces. “This type of work has this image of authority,” he argued. “They look so powerful, they look so clean, they look so historical already.”¹⁶ But in my case, when you get close to them you realize that they have been ‘contaminated’ with something social.” He compared his strategy here to that of a “straight-acting” gay man who could infiltrate the centers of power without being too-easily defined and dismissed as merely oppositional. “I want to be the one that looks like something else,” he said, “in order to function as a virus. I mean, the virus is our worst enemy, but should also be our model in terms of not being the opposition anymore, not being very easily defined, so that we can attach ourselves to institutions which are always going to be there.”¹⁷

Gonzalez-Torres refused, however, to accept minimalism’s rhetorical attraction to the tabula rasa. He rejected the presumed autonomy that rhetorically adhered to the style. No matter how austere his work sometimes is, it is never disengaged from the culture that surrounds it; that, in the most direct sense, produced it. Approaches to art that denied its imbrication in society were anathema to Gonzalez-Torres, as evidenced by his infuriated account of the teaching he experienced at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn:

Pratt Institute is the kind of place where a teacher can look you straight in the eyes and easily tell you to be “honest and truthful to the space,” as if that had some kind of meaning. Pratt is a place where people preserve their jobs by fucking up and confusing young people’s minds. They have wasteful courses such as “Space, Form, and Shapes” – Bauhaus theories without the social commitments or interest. From radical forms to empty styles in four easy steps.¹⁸

While Frank Stella was perhaps the closest to the purely formalist position in his famous remark, “What you see is what you see,”¹⁹ some early practitioners of minimalism were far more conscious of the social context of their work, and indeed embraced it. Richard Serra, notably, has specifically acknowledged that “every context or frame has its ideological overtones,”²⁰ and he has always been explicitly aligned politically with the Left. This has not prevented critics such as Anna Chave, however, from characterizing minimalism in general as “domineering, sometimes brutal,” and drawing comparisons between it and fascist architecture. For Chave, minimalism is “society’s blankest, steeliest, face; the impersonal face of technology, industry, and commerce; the unyielding face of the father.”²¹

In Gonzalez-Torres’s relationship to minimalism, both elements are in play. He recognized that the work could invoke the authoritarian, yet at the same time he wanted to preserve the progressive challenges inherent in it. It

would be quite wrong to imagine that he was hostile to minimalism or minimalist artists. “I don’t like this idea of having to undermine your ancestors, of ridiculing them, undermining them, and making less out of them,” he said.

I think we’re... part of a historical process and I think that this attitude that you have to murder your father in order to start something new is bullshit. We are part of this culture, we don’t come from outer space, so whatever I do is already something that has entered my brain from some other sources and is then

synthesized into something new. I respect my elders and I learn from them.

One thing Gonzalez-Torres learned from minimalism was the possibility of using the most mundane and readily available materials, and that this choice did not preclude a potential richness of associations.

The industrial materials associated with minimalism have often been linked to a kind of hard-boiled materialism. As early as 1968, however, Robert Smithson had postulated instead a hybrid form of the “romanticism of surfaces.” Beginning with a citation from Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas* (“Materialism: Utter the word with horror, stressing each syllable”), Smithson argued: “The reality of materialism is no more real than that of romanticism. In a sense, it becomes evident that today’s materialism and romanticism share similar ‘surfaces.’ The romanticism of the 1960s is a concern for the surfaces of materialism.”²³ Gonzalez-Torres articulated this latently romantic strain within minimalism in part by the introduction of potentially emotional text onto the surfaces of apparently pure minimal cubes, and in part by broadening the kinds of everyday materials employed. Instead of steel, plastic, and lacquer, Gonzalez-Torres made use of paper, sheer fabric, and candy.

This generous and historically informed sense of art making retains for the artist the widest possible array of options. Instead of individualism and the privileging of originality, it emphasizes synthesis and recombination. In addition, it denies the superficially progressive idea that socially committed art needs to be propagandistic and didactic. Instead, Gonzalez-Torres’s work implicitly proposed another model: that of mutual exchange. The artist makes a proposal that is completed only when a member of the audience acts in response to it. He appeals to the public to do nothing less than accept a certain responsibility for the work itself, to become part of it.

His commitment to an engaged but anti-didactic art recalls the famous remark of one of the forerunners of minimalism proper, Barnett Newman, who said that “if my work were properly understood it would mean the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism.”²⁴ If that can be true of one of Barnett Newman’s abstract, almost monochromatic, paintings, then it can also be true of a pair of pale blue curtains, caught by the breeze, seen once, and remembered. Gonzalez-Torres, like Newman, did not want to preach to his audience. Instead, he wanted to open up possibilities for them simultaneously as individuals and as members of society. That made it necessary for him to reject any premature categorization of his work, either in its style or its content. If his work does not always seem obviously “political,” it is never “apolitical.” “Aesthetics are politics,” he said. “They’re not even about politics, they are politics.”²⁵ The “contamination” that he brought to minimalism’s authority was not an assault upon it; rather it was an attempt to re-harness its authority and to divert its power into unexpected directions, to unite its uncompromising force with an equal emotional weight.

Reaching back further into the history of classification, one might say that Gonzalez-Torres was a classicist in form, but a romantic in temperament. Running just beneath the cool elegance of his work’s outward appearance is the passion of a Shelley, who wrote that:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.²⁶

Like Shelley, Gonzalez-Torres did not shy away from love as the driving force of his work. And, like Shelley, he saw the link between “another” and “many others” – between individual passion and the whole of society. One of his most affecting stack pieces is a double one from 1989 / 1990. On the first stack is printed “Somewhere better than this place.” On the other is “Nowhere better than this place.” On the one hand there is the longing to transcend everyday life in favor of some higher calling. On the other there is the understanding that it is only in everyday life that we can actually live.

In the late 1980s, I invited Gonzalez-Torres to contribute illustrations for an anthology of critical writings, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*.²⁷ This book, edited by myself, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, was an anthology of critical essays that dealt with the question of cultural marginalization: the process through which certain groups are excluded from participation in the dominant culture. It juxtaposed diverse points of view on issues of gender, race, sexual orientation, and class. Among the authors of the book's twenty-eight essays were Homi Babha, James Clifford, Richard Dyer, Kobena Mercer, Toni Morrison, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak. The anthology became a widely read survey of an issue that was of rapidly growing importance.

Important as all the texts were, the invitation to an artist to contribute alongside these essays seemed like a way of making the book as a whole simultaneously more unified and more complex. The approach that Gonzalez-Torres took to the project is paradigmatic of his thinking, and it responded directly to the overall theme of the book. Understanding that any book, and especially a substantial anthology of writings by well-known figures, carries with it a certain aura of authority, even if the texts themselves are devoted to challenging such authority, he began by breaking the project down into a number of interrelated parts. This fragmentation related directly to the question of the book's own potential authority.

The first of these parts was a series of photographs that he made at the Museum of Natural History in New York. The photographs show a series of monumental inscriptions that memorialize Teddy Roosevelt. On one level these photographs are serial and austere, like minimalism. On another they echo the deadpan conceptual photography that overlapped minimalism, such as Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967), or the typological studies by Bernd and Hilla Becher of mineheads and gas storage tanks. And at the same time they give evidence of an engagement with contemporary critical theory, in this case Donna Haraway's important essay "Teddy Bear Patriarchy."²⁸

Proceeding steadily around the public space in front of the museum, the photographs record the words author, statesman, scholar, humanitarian, historian, patriot, ranchman, explorer, naturalist, scientist, and soldier. The most salient aspect of this litany was of course the enunciation of power and authority expressed through the emblematic figure of Roosevelt, his commanding identity literally carved in stone. This was the emblematic identity against which most of the contributors to the book – including Gonzalez-Torres – explicitly ranged themselves. Yet the photographs show not only the inscription of power, they also demonstrate its erosion: the stains, bird shit, and garbage that constantly wear away at the stonework. And even the inscriptions themselves do in the end contain their own sense of doubt about any unitary identity: even as they glorify Teddy Roosevelt as a man of many qualities, they also reveal a more fragmented sense of him as different people at different times. Gonzalez-Torres's refusal to accept *himself* as a marginalized or stereotypical figure also enabled him to see the extent to which even a figure from the very center of patriarchal power could be re-identified as merely an unstable bundle of labels. The photographs were spread throughout the book, metaphorically opening up even bigger gaps between the various elements of dominance, gaps in which other, alternative, identities could be inserted. Gonzalez-Torres called the piece "*Untitled*" (*I Think I Know Who You Are*), a title that exemplifies his confidence in refusing to accept power on its own terms, his consistent willingness to insist on his own knowledge as of equal value.

Alongside this insistence on the value of his own knowledge, however, went another desire: to abdicate a certain amount of authorship, and to invite other artists to participate in the project alongside himself. This move was in fact characteristic of all his practice. Gonzalez-Torres never had a studio in which to sequester himself in the romantic stereotype of the artist. He never became associated with any particular medium. His work was always shaped by dialogue, most notably perhaps in his participation from 1987 on in the artists' collective Group Material. Thus *Out There* also contains works by Julie Ault, Brian Buczak, Jeanne Dunning, Robert Gober, Alfredo Jaar, Michael Jenkins, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Lorna Simpson, Nancy Spero, Jon Tower, Sokhi Wagner, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Martin Wong. This assemblage can also be interpreted as a kind of portrait of a certain moment, a certain group of artists whose work when brought together took on a cumulative identity. In this sense it can be related to Gonzalez-Torres's later portrait pieces, which are lists of people, events, objects, dates, and places that derive from a single specific sensibility, yet take on a greater meaning when juxtaposed.

Alongside the images provided by these artists, Gonzalez-Torres placed a number of found images, ranging from the Manual Alphabet of American Sign Language to vintage postcards, from a portrait of Eartha Kitt to an advertisement for Club Med. This was a diverse and anti-hierarchical approach that worked to further destabilize the authority of identity represented by the carved inscriptions.

Once again, however, this destabilization did not preclude an equal *claim* to authority, including even the most traditional symbols of its centrality. The cover of the book was a painting – *Flags* (1987) – by the relatively little-known artist Brian Buczak. It depicts a field of American flags blowing in the wind. Buczak himself died of AIDS on the fourth of July, 1987. Gonzalez-Torres's choice of this image shows again how ready he was to lay claim to a symbol of authority and to transform it. Unlike many on the Left, he was profoundly unwilling to accept marginalization without pushing back towards the heart of representational authority.

The final element of Gonzalez-Torres's illustrative program, however, was in a way the most simple and the most radical. It has certainly been the most imitated. He asked each person who worked on the book, in whatever capacity, to provide a photograph of themselves as a child. The results were illuminating. It emerged that the cowboy outfit was a worldwide phenomenon. It demonstrated that Cornel West's Sacramento grade school was almost as segregated as Linda Peckham's apartheid-era class in South Africa. And also that some people – often refugees – did not possess a childhood photograph of themselves at all. On a metaphorical level, the photographs articulated one of the themes of the entire anthology: the process that all children go through of finding a voice in which to speak prefigures the efforts of the adult writers to find *their* own authentic voices, and to make them heard in a culture whose dominant powers might prefer not to hear them.

The variety of strategies applied by Gonzalez-Torres to the *Out There* project simultaneously embraced a multiplicity of voices and claimed at least a potentially equal authority for them all. Overall, the illustrations were an accumulation of powerful images, in many registers. Gonzalez-Torres's refusal in this case to use any single body of work, his decision to embrace instead the multiplicity of voices that the book itself argued for, made his contribution in the end all the more authoritative. He demonstrated what such a multiplicity of points of view could actually look like.

This flood of images represented a contrast to the work for which Gonzalez-Torres was at that time best known: the series of text pieces, usually white text at the bottom of a black field, that mixed historical events, landmarks in mass culture, and personal memories with dates. The earliest of these was “*Untitled*”, 1987: *Bitburg Cemetery 1985 Walkman 1979 Cape Town 1985 Water-proof mascara 1971 Personal computer 1981 TLC*. The empty black field that rises above this evocative list of cultural markers represents an explicit elision of the visual correlatives of the

text. For Walter Benjamin, the photograph was fundamentally unintelligible without its caption.²⁹ Gonzalez-Torres reverses the terms of this proposition, and gives us captions without illustrations. Without *visible* illustrations, that is. At the heart of his practice was a genuinely interactive relationship of exchange with the viewers of his work. We, the viewers, must supply the images that – in our heads – will accompany the free-floating captions of Gonzalez-Torres's timeline. While, in his titles, Gonzalez-Torres formally rejected captions – in the end, everything was “untitled” – this vacancy was less a clear rejection than the opening up of a space for the viewer to contribute. Around the officially “untitled” there increasingly were parenthetical subtitles, and, of course, within the works themselves, there were countless *potential* titles, clues for and suggestions to the viewers, handles for their participation. Images command an authority that can often elide the question of who has chosen or produced these particular images. The authority of images is an issue that recurs in Gonzalez-Torres's work, and it can manifest itself in a variety of forms. On occasion he would invite the direct collaboration of other image-makers in a project, or he would mix together his own imagery with found materials. And sometimes he would simply withdraw the image from its expected place. Most evident in the early text pieces, Gonzalez-Torres's withdrawal of the image is actually an invitation to the viewer to *provide* images drawn from his or her own memories and experiences.

This stepping back from the image in order to provide a space for his viewers to project their own needs, memories, and desires is paradigmatic of Gonzalez-Torres's relationship to his own implied authority as an artist. For him this authority was more than anything else a lever with which to open up a form of dialogue with his interlocutors: the audience that would see his work. It was not enough for this audience to simply observe what he had done. For Gonzalez-Torres it was also necessary that they respond. Only in the form of an authentic emotional and intellectual response would the work be complete. The completion of the work, however, can happen in different forms over and over again. For Gonzalez-Torres this question of the possibility of an individual series of relationships with a relatively mass audience was of the greatest importance. Like many artists, there was a part of him that could not think about a wide audience at all. “At times my only public has been my boyfriend Ross,” he said. Yet at the same time, he wanted to carry the intimacy of making works for a single viewer into a wider world. “The stacks came from an idea of establishing a closer relationship with the public and allowing the work to be re-contextualized

many times. Every time someone takes a piece of paper it takes on a completely different meaning and context.”³⁰ He was willing to give up a great deal of control over his work in exchange for this potentially infinite series of individual connections.

Good examples of Gonzalez-Torres's understanding of the power held both by images and by the withholding of images can be found in two monographic publications from 1993 and 1994. The 1993 book, part of a series published by A.R.T. Press, was illustrated with a large number of color reproductions of Gonzalez-Torres's work,

and the primary text was an interview with the artist by Tim Rollins.³¹ The 1994 book was published on the occasion of an exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC, and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

Gonzalez-Torres was adamant that this publication take a completely different approach from the one of the year before, and he was closely involved in both its content and its design. Largely ignoring the actual content of the traveling exhibition, the book instead consists of six critical essays devoted to various aspects of his work, by Amada Cruz, myself, Ann Goldstein, bell hooks, Joseph Kosuth, and Charles Merewether. Each of these essays was accompanied by small, black-and-white reproductions of the works discussed. Gonzalez-Torres himself provided a visual project: a set of twenty-one drawings that were reproduced on full pages throughout the book. This series, "*Untitled*" (*21 Days of Bloodwork – Steady Decline*), 1994, consisted of virtually identical drawings on graph paper, each with a line drawn neatly from the upper left corner to the lower right.

This publication demonstrated Gonzalez-Torres's highly sophisticated understanding of institutional authority. Rather than make a larger, more elaborate and expensively-produced version of the A.R.T. Press book from the year before, he chose instead to produce a volume of the utmost restraint. The cover had no lettering at all on either the front or the back, and the spine carried only his name. The photograph that was reproduced on the cover – a large detail of "*Untitled*" (*Jorge*), 1992, that shows lights sparkling in the water off Miami – was the only color image. The interior was simply the texts, printed on a matte paper, set in a classically elegant serif typeface, and punctuated by the relentlessly falling cadence of the bloodwork drawings.

On one level this book demonstrated a reticence evident in much of Gonzalez-Torres's work. He provides just enough to trigger a set of associations in the viewer, and leaves the rest to him or her. On another level, however, the book is a subtle donning of the apparatus of institutional authority, which Gonzalez-Torres understood was not always best expressed through any form of excess, but rather through a confident austerity. The extensive texts, with their small black-and-white illustrations, evoke the authority of an art history book from the era before color could be taken for granted. The bloodwork drawings are the essence of institutional simplicity, evoking both the seriality of high minimalism and the formality of corporate profit graphs, even as this rhetoric is infused with the melancholy of the artist's own failing health. The cover's image of green water reflecting light also suggests the authority of a luxurious marble surface. Shimmering water or institutional marble: the work evokes both evanescence and time-defying stability.

This sense of exchange between the artist and the viewer led Gonzalez-Torres to a degree of openness in his work that has presented obstacles to his absorption into the canon. Despite the best efforts of Dietmar Elger's *Catalogue*

Raisonné,³² it is extraordinarily difficult to pin down the corpus of his work. As Gonzalez-Torres himself put it, his pieces "are indestructible because they can be endlessly duplicated. They will always exist because they don't really

exist or because they don't have to exist all the time."³³ Sheets from the stack pieces circulate independently of their source. Piles of candy grow and shrink. In his portraits, Gonzalez-Torres made it clear that the owner of the work should feel free to change or add to its content. Titles themselves were protean under the all-encompassing "untitled" rubric. The photographs he made for the *Out There* book under the title "*Untitled*" (*I Think I Know Who You Are*) reappeared later that year in a slightly different configuration as "*Untitled*" (*Natural History*), 1990.

The artist's acceptance of such mutability is not so much inconsistent as it is integral to his practice and to his work's relationship to its own authority. Gonzalez-Torres consistently aligned himself against any sense of expectations that might limit his own freedom of action. While this position might have its roots in his resistance to those who would categorize him by race or ethnicity, it eventually became even broader than that. When Tim Rollins asked him which tradition he was from, he replied:

It depends on the day of the week. I choose from many different positions. I think I woke up on Monday in a political mood and on Tuesday in a very nostalgic mood and Wednesday in a realist mood. I don't think I'll limit myself to one choice. I'm shameless when it comes to that, I just take any position that will help me best express the way I think or feel about a particular issue. Formal strategies are there for your use.³⁴

This emphasis here on the pragmatic use-value of any particular strategy at a given moment echoes Gilles Deleuze's definition of theory as "exactly like a box of tools It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it . . . then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate."³⁵

Take a piece of candy from the pile on the floor. Put it in your mouth. The "piece" disappears, absorbed into your body. But the work remains. The authority that Gonzalez-Torres won for it, and for himself, comes in part from his refusal to accept any authority other than that drawn from authentic exchange between the artist and the audience. He won his authority by giving it away. Once again, with Shelley, he "put himself in the place of another and of many others."

¹ Interview with Tim Rollins, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 23. Excerpted in this volume, pp. 68–76.

² David Deitcher, "Death and the Marketplace," *Frieze* 29 (June 1996): 43.

³ Interview with Rollins, 23.

⁴ Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist (1994), in Obrist, *Interviews*, vol. 1 (Milan: Charta, 2003), 313.

⁵ Interview with Rollins, 23.

⁶ Interview with Obrist, 308.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1857–58), trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1974), 91.

⁸ Interview with Robert Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," *Art Press* 198 (January 1995): 28. In this volume, pp. 229–39. Gonzalez-Torres was himself a big fan of *The Golden Girls* TV show.

⁰⁹ Henri Matisse, "Notes d'un peintre" (1908), in *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack Flam (New York: Phaidon, 1973), 38.

¹⁰ Interview with Rollins, 10.

¹¹ Interview with Rollins, 17.

¹² Interview with Glenn Ligon by Malik Gaines, in *Glenn Ligon* (Los Angeles: Regen Projects, 2004), unpaginated.

¹³ Interview with Rollins, 17.

¹⁴ Interview with Obrist, 311.

¹⁵ Interview with Robert Nickas, *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November–December 1991): 87. In this volume, pp. 39–51.

¹⁶ Interview with Rollins, 21.

¹⁷ Interview with Obrist, 315.

¹⁸ Interview with Rollins, 9.

¹⁹ Stella in Bruce Glaser's interview with Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Frank Stella, "New Nihilism or New Art?" (1964), in *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer (London: Phaidon, 2000), 199.

- 20 Lynne Cooke and Mark Francis, "A Conversation with Richard Serra and Alan Colquhoun," in Richard Serra, *Writings, Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 234.
- 21 Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts* 64, no. 1 (January 1990): 44–63.
- 22 Interview with Storr, 24.
- 23 Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" (1968), in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 71.
- 24 Newman, interview with Emile de Antonio (1970), in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John O'Neill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 307.
- 25 Interview with Storr, 28.
- 26 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry" (1821), in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, eds. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 750.
- 27 Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).
- 28 Donna J. Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–36," *Social Text* 11 (winter 1984 / 85): 19–64.
- 29 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217–51.
- 30 Interview with Nickas, 86.
- 31 The book also contained a number of other short texts: stories by Jan Avgikos and Virgilio Piñera (in this volume, pp. 152–53); an account of visitor behavior in museums by Susan Cahan; an extract from Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (in this volume, pp. 141–44); and poems by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Wallace Stevens (in this volume, p. 247).
- 32 Dietmar Elger, ed. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz, 1997).
- 33 Interview with Rollins, 22.
- 34 Interview with Rollins, 6.
- 35 Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power," in Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 209.