

## THE EVERYDAY ART OF FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

by David Deitcher

The French geographer Henri Lefebvre once observed that in modern industrialized societies the “everyday” is dominated by two kinds of repetition: “linear” repetition, which adheres to the supposedly rational processes of commercial production; and “cyclical” repetition, which dominates in nature, and includes “nights and days, seasons and harvests, activity and rest, hunger and satisfaction, desire and its fulfillment, life and death”<sup>1</sup> Minimalists such as Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin made art from industrially manufactured commercial objects that they organized in serial configurations (akin to Judd’s familiar dictum: “one thing after another”). In this way they created a monumental art, remote from European-derived aesthetic traditions, that forcefully expressed the mechanical, linear structures that, according to Lefebvre, “mask and crush” the more differentiated, cyclical patterns of organic life. Felix Gonzalez-Torres — every bit as dependent as Minimalists on commercially manufactured units (i.e., clocks, mirrors, jigsaw puzzles, light fixtures, stacks of paper, candy, etc.) — has nonetheless used them to create works that communicate the greater complexity of everyday life as it is lived: at the intersection of both linear and cyclical structures.

Since the mid-1980s, Gonzalez-Torres has sustained a critical dialogue with Minimalist, as well as with Process and Conceptual art. In “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*) (1991), he arranged thousands of individually wrapped, identical black licorice candies into a square, carpet-like sculptural installation. Formally and conceptually, this work recalled the carpets of fire bricks and metal plates that Andre has created since the second half of the 1960s. Since 1989, Gonzalez-Torres has created variations on the theme of the “stack,” which consists of “unlimited” editions of offset prints. Exhibited directly on the floor where these works take on a low sculptural volume, their evocation of the most commonplace Minimalist form — the box — depends upon an additive, Minimalist gesture.

But while Minimalists used commercially manufactured units to emphasize their obdurate materiality, Gonzalez-Torres has used everyday objects in ways that can confound one’s understanding of their communicative potential. “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*) is therefore more than a 700-pound carpet of individually wrapped, black licorice candies. In the immensity of its numbers, and dark intimation of menace, it symbolizes how dangerous the angry, undereducated, and anything but “silent” majority is. Its seductiveness parallels

the appeal of public opinion polls, which in American society are less effective as a means of reflecting consensus than of constructing it. By equating candy with public opinion, this work brings to mind a concurrent, even larger (1000 pound) carpet of silver candy, "*Untitled*" (*Placebo*). Both sculptures identify fetishes — substitutes for democratic processes and for medicine — that advance decay and deterioration. With their promise of instant gratification and superabundance these works also call to mind the programmed choices and transformations that too often substitute for social change in consumer cultures.

Gonzalez-Torres has also made art from words. He has compiled lists of names, events, and dates that traverse the otherwise entirely black fields of modestly scaled, framed photostats, and one massive billboard. As the sole elements of portraits that are painted like friezes along the tops of walls in galleries and domestic interiors, the items by which individuals will be remembered are selected by them. Among the items that accumulate in Gonzalez-Torres's lists, some emphatically underscore the social dimension of his art since they are instantly recognizable as historically and/or culturally significant. But this artist also includes more enigmatic, seemingly unrelated, matters whose relevance depends upon little more than their having been recalled by someone's "free" association. Combined with the fact that the terms of each work are organized in an idiosyncratic order, and that the monochromatic backgrounds supply ample room for the imaginary projections of the viewer/reader, this ensures the evocation of a complex "everyday," one that weaves together public and private, political and personal, present and past, conscious and unconscious, intellectual and emotional, familiar and unknown, systematic and unpredictable.

That Gonzalez-Torres uses his art to oppose the continuous segmentation of the everyday was apparent in his first billboard design, "*Untitled*" 1989, which consists of two lines of white type that run horizontally across the base of an immense black field. Installed high above a busy intersection in the heart of Manhattan's West Village, this billboard commemorated the 20th anniversary of the final item on its list: "Stonewall Rebellion 1969" — the uprising that inaugurated the modern gay liberation movement less than one block away. Effectively deconstructing the mythic separation that this culture claims between "private" and "public," this work employed a characteristically inscrutable sequence to organize names and dates, all of which pertain to the historical struggle for lesbian and gay rights. In this way a "public" billboard became a screen for the projection of "private" thoughts and feelings about this struggle. To have seen this work in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, at a time of escalating, institutionally sanctioned homophobia, was to grasp for whose benefit the artificial separation between "public" and "private" is maintained; and for whom, in the eyes of the law, it does not exist at all. "Supreme Court 1986" — an item that bridged the end of the first line and the beginning of the second — refers to a decision by that august body (*Bowers v. Hardwick*) in which it was found

consistent with the Constitution of the United States to invade the “privacy” of a man’s bedroom and arrest him for loving another man.

The conjunction of linear and cyclical forms of repetition in everyday life finds an allegorical analogue in *“Untitled” (Perfect Lovers)* (1990), which consists of two commercial clocks of the kind that impassively quantify and regiment human life and labor in factories, schools, hospitals, shops, prisons, etc. Hung beside one another with no space between, their circular contours merge to form the familiar symbol for infinity. Set in lockstep to keep the same time, this precisely synchronized and utterly soulless couple count down the lives of less “perfect,” mortal lovers.

Nor are these the only standardized commercial objects that Gonzalez-Torres has been able to endow with intellectual and emotional resonance through the simple act of doubling. In 1991, he took a pair of identical full-length mirrors and sunk them into a white wall a few inches apart from one another so that, from floor level up, they were “flush” with the wall like doors. These mirrors invoked the possibility of passage by implying that space actually extended beyond the wall. This work — *“Untitled” (Orpheus, Twice)* — recalls the youthful artist-son of Apollo and the muse Calliope who, heartbroken after losing his beloved Eurydice, resolves to rescue her from the Stygian realm or else to join her there in death. As such, it describes the yearnings of tens of thousands of young men who, like this artist, have been left behind by the love of their lives.

In the face of so much loss and suffering — as the cycle of days and nights, activity and rest, hunger and satisfaction, desire and fulfillment is disrupted by untimely deaths from AIDS — already treasured souvenirs take on that much more significance. For some time, Gonzalez-Torres has made art from snapshots. His second billboard design, *“Untitled” 1991*, consisted solely of one enlarged snapshot that shows a gossamer, unmade bed whose two occupants have disappeared. On 24 billboards at locations in and around Manhattan, and on one long wall inside the Projects gallery of the Museum of Modern Art, this comforting, melancholy image insinuated intimacy, sexuality and luxury, as well as absence, love and loss, into urban spaces that are otherwise dominated by extravagant commercialism, and the crowded clash of races, classes, and genders.

Lefebvre has observed that it is no simple matter to transform the changing, yet unchanging, “everyday.” Its seamless instrumentalities can, however, be unsettled, if only temporarily, through irruptions of the unexpected; or through equally transitory suspensions of the law, which have been referred to by the term “carnavalesque.” Gonzalez-Torres’s approach to making art has centered on just such possibilities of disruption, and unaccountable pleasure.

His candy pieces and “stacks” have subtly modified the conventional relationship between spectators and works of art. By inviting viewers to take parts of works home with them, these works induce them to take part *in* the

work as well. In their capacity to stage their own disappearance, the stacks and candy pieces do more than imply the dematerialization of the art object; they ritualize some of the ways in which people “manage” loss and the fear of immanent loss, according to Freud: by rehearsing these traumatic events and by replaying them in dreams.

These works have also exerted a subtle pressure to adjust the way the business of art is conducted. Gonzalez-Torres has stipulated that stacks and candy pieces can be replenished whenever they threaten to disappear, thereby adding to the challenge that artists since Duchamp have posed to conventional, proprietary attitudes about art collection and conservation. A paradox therefore occupies the center of Gonzalez-Torres’s art, which depends upon the survival of the economic system that its gesture continuously undermines. Only the survival of that imperfect system can ensure that, amidst everything and everyone that disappears in life, at least some things stand a chance of reappearing.

Gonzalez-Torres recently held an “unannounced” exhibition for one week in his New York gallery, in which he showed nothing but three long strings of regularly spaced white light bulbs. One string was scalloped across the threshold to the space; another hung, unilluminated and somewhat dejected, from a nail in a corner, while the third spanned the entire length of the gallery in a single attenuated arc, creating about as sober an effect as an illuminated string of lights can. Consistent with his tendency to introduce change within the conventions of the system that his project depends on, Gonzalez-Torres decided that people who take possession of these strings of light will complete the works by installing them however they like.

Strings of light are modular products of 19th-century industry, and their original purpose was plain: to signify festivity, and attract customers to sites of popular, commercial diversion. Yet these objects also communicate more intimate thoughts and feelings, which can be traced to the tidal rhythms of the cyclical everyday: to seasonal celebrations, to the vertiginous pleasures of unsettled and mistaken identity in masquerade, to joy among throngs of people, to the memory of unforeseen erotic adventures; in short, to a sense of inhibited and unimpaired possibility without which it is difficult, if not impossible, to persevere in the face of everyday hardship.

Minimalists developed their art at a time of revolutionary social transformation. Crucial to the radicality and scale of their endeavour was the fact that, in the midst of postcolonial upheaval, these artists maintained confidence in some of the central belief systems of modernity: the dialectical materialism of Marx; the seemingly “natural” patriarchal prejudice in the works of Freud; the ability of science and technology to find answers, inspire change, and realize progress.

The intervening two decades have witnessed the rise of profound skepticism regarding these and other “masternarratives” of modernity. This loss of secular faith explains, in part, the global resurgence of fundamentalist creeds. On a



more positive note, uncertainty has inspired artists like Gonzalez-Torres to explore the possibilities of a more modest art, one that tends toward the form of questions rather than answers. Immersing the serial products of industrial systems within the social matrix of individual association and memory, this healing art attempts to restore wholeness to the everyday. Crucial to the realization of this effect is the fact that Gonzalez-Torres has promoted reflection, stimulated pleasure, sadness and desire by working with ephemeral, even ethereal, objects. In this way he implicitly reclaims the importance of things that — like art and love — can neither change the world nor last forever, but help in many subtle ways to diminish estrangement and enhance life.

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NOTES:

1. Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," Christine Levich, trans., *Yale French Studies*, No. 73 (1987), p. 10.