# A Formal Problem: On *"Untitled" (A Portrait)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

David Breslin

I love formal issues. Actually they have a very specific meaning. Forms gather meaning from their historical moment. The minimalist exercise of the object being very pure and very clean is only one way to deal with form. Carl Andre said, "My sculptures are masses and their subject is matter." But after twenty years of feminist discourse and feminist theory we have come to realize that "just looking" is not *just* looking but that *looking* is invested with identity: gender, socio-economic status, race, sexual orientation.... Looking is invested with lots of other texts.
— Felix Gonzalez-Torres[1]

The name of the disaster can only be spoken silently. Only in the terror of recent events is the terror of the whole ignited, but only there, not gazing upon "origins."
— Theodor Adorno[2]

I remember sitting on one of those two Jacobsen chairs, with no one to my right, thinking that I'd never heard Felix Gonzalez-Torres's voice. I have no idea if it was gravelly or light, hoarse or airy, language clipping quickly like a boat backed by endless wind, or considered and choppy, each sentence a collaged ransom note. The phrases that make up *"Untitled" (A Portrait)* (1991/1995; p. 67)—a conjuring of sensations, places, things, and events—don't read like spoken language, so I don't know why I began to think about Gonzalez-Torres's voice or even why, by indirection, I personalized this portrait to be his own. But there's a tendency—maybe you've noticed it—to personalize almost everything about Gonzalez-Torres's work.

Perhaps the most striking symptom of this is the almost ubiquitous embrace of his first name. Felix. I've heard students that I'm teaching disregard the title of one of his works and call it instead "the Felix." In discussions of his practice or writing, even among the most sensitive colleagues, the last name is almost always lost. Maybe I'm too formal, or a scold, but I get mildly angry when I hear people who, like me, never met him assume this familiarity. It's not that I begrudge them this intimacy, but, like my desire to know the tone and quality of his voice, this reflex to the first name becomes an impediment to reckoning with the complexity of Gonzalez-Torres's work—specifically the complexity that inheres in intimacy. One casualty of this informality is the specific attention paid to Gonzalez-Torres's particular formal choices. And since his works' elegant criticality is inseparable from their mundane materiality—the stacks of paper, piles of candy, strings of light, lists of words—there is a risk that blasé acceptance eclipses the true oddity, even perversity, of works that traffic in an almost oxymoronic limitless precariousness: candy and sheets that are taken but never run out; lights that dim and burn out but then are replaced; words whose historical specificity lends them to general accessibility. If we become inured to these paradoxes, the intimate but piercing distance that Gonzalez-Torres's work provides between a viewer and her lived experience disappears. We become estranged from our estrangement.

The 2017 exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's work at David Zwirner, New York, walked a tightrope between intimacy and formality. On the first floor, you were welcomed by the whisper of the double paper stacks ("Somewhere better than this place" and "Nowhere better than this place"), and then proceeded to encounter the mute response of the two circular mirrors, the inevitable touch of the beaded curtain,

the confrontation with the billboard-sized image of bird and sky, the revelation of the diptych sky prints, the pronouncement of the portrait, the offering of the candy, the witnessing of the clocks, and the silence of the black-bordered paper stack. All of this led to a room, significantly smaller than the ones preceding it, that held only a television monitor on a pedestal, two chairs, and two black-framed prints of white text on black ground. Comparatively domestic in scale, this gallery initially felt like an escape from the demands of what had come before it—the subtle but insistent modulation of address and tone that one experienced among strangers. But here, in a space that could have been a generous bedroom, one soon realized that the demands were only heightened by this expectation of intimacy, of privacy.[3]

Gonzalez-Torres made his first date pieces in 1987. Composed of two or three lines of white text on the bottom quarter of a black field, the works string together places, events, objects, and things with years that punctuate and separate them. For example, *"Untitled" (1988)* (1988; pp. 38, 69) reads: Center for Disease Control 1981 Streakers 1974 Go-Go Boots 1965 Barbie Doll 1960 Hula hoopla 1958 Disneyland 1955 3-D Movies 1952 Boo-Boo. The relationship between the proper noun and date is, in most cases, straightforward. Disneyland, for example, opened in Anaheim, California, in 1955, and the so-called "golden era" of 3-D cinema was initiated in 1952 with the release of *Bwana Devil*, the first color stereoscopic feature-length film.

Specificity leaks into generality with the addition of "Streakers." A so-called "epidemic" of streaking was reported by news outlets that year, the most famous instance being Robert Opel's nude sprint through the Forty-Sixth Academy Awards ceremony. Four years later Opel would open Fey-Way Studios in San Francisco, a gallery dedicated to the work of gay artists, and would show, among others, Robert Mapplethorpe and Tom of Finland. And the entry for the Center for Disease Control seems to be an outlier: it didn't come to exist in 1981. Rather, the year marks a turning point and a discovery that would alter everything that came after it. On June 5, 1981, the CDC published in its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report the first scientific account of what would come to be known as HIV/AIDS.

The conceptual beauty of the date pieces is their conscious rupturing both of narrative and temporal linearity. What do the places, objects, and events in *"Untitled" (1988)* have to do with one another? What do *any* places, objects, and events have to do with one another? How does the authoring of an order of unlikely things and events model a form of associative history where emotion, pleasure, accident, and predilection carry as much weight as fact? What does a history told by way of dissociated proper nouns look like—not a history conveyed by way of leaders and their wars or corporations but an alternative history largely composed of fads, of eruptive pleasures, of the popularly desired?

The word "fad" itself has an uncertain history. First used in 1834 to describe a hobby or pet project, the word, etymologists surmise, might come from shortening the second half of "fiddle-faddle" or from the French "fadaise" which means "trifle, nonsense" (and comes from the Latin "fatuus," meaning "stupid"). A history told by way of fads doesn't denigrate the passing trend; with his sly reconsideration of the line about the victors writing history, Gonzalez-Torres attempts to present a spectrum of historical "stickiness" that



allows us to remember the consumable and short-lived in different temporal and affective registers. How can the overlooked—or that which can be dismissed as trivial—suggest the passions (not to mention economics and sexual politics) of a time? How does it create new and radical forms of historicizing?

Moreover, how does Gonzalez-Torres's placement of the CDC and the year 1981 fit into this lineup? How does the evocation of a report that describes the earliest accounts of HIV/AIDS sit alongside the mention of streakers? In addition to posing an argument about equivalence and a flattening of distinctions, his inclusion of something that would become epochal suggests how difficult it is to predict what will last—or what the anchors of our time will be—at first reporting. Without access to what the future holds, the work suggests an abundance of care and attention to all manner of matter and information. Philosophers from Emmanuel Levinas to Jacques Derrida have considered the ethical obligations of caring for the other, the stranger, the exile, the refugee. From their distinct approaches to the concept emerges a shared idea of "radical hospitality," describing an ethical responsibility to the other that overcomes almost all barriers. Gonzalez-Torres's date piece could be seen as a materialization of (and metaphor for) this ethical imperative, a place where a lack of prioritization doesn't signal a lack of consideration, but an abundant sympathy for the rights, cares, and priorities of others.


Group Material
*Timeline: A Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America*, 1984
Installation view, P.S.1, New York, 1984; part of Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America

In November 1983 the collective Group Material—which Felix Gonzalez-Torres would join some years later—made a proposal for what would become its first timeline project. The collective's statement for *Timeline: A Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America*, an installation at P.S.1, New York—on view from January 22 to March 18, 1984—laid out its premise: "For this exhibition, we have designed an installation of many disparate objects, artworks, commodities, and historical documents. This myriad of things is collected into a unified purpose: to illustrate the crucial issues of the Central and Latin American US relationship."[4] In the same document, they continued: "Exhibited with equal status with the artworks, Group Material is curating a collection of commodities (large bags of coffee beans, tobacco leaves, Chiquita bananas from the United Fruit Co., sheets of copper, etc.). We do this because the desire and struggle to acquire these products remains the foundation for much of the oppression that Central and Latin America has suffered historically."[5] Doug Ashford and Julie Ault, two members of Group Material, were closely involved with Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America, a nationwide campaign that staged a series of cultural actions, exhibitions, and benefits to raise funds and consciousness to support popular movements in Latin America at a critical moment of US intervention in the region: Marines had invaded Grenada the year before, in 1983, and the US government continued its support of right-wing rebel groups such as the Contras in Nicaragua.

The installation at P.S.1 was oriented around a thick, horizontal, bisecting red line that wrapped around the space. Black vertical lines and dates—stops along the wend of time—interrupt the progress of red. Artworks—some I recognize like Faith Ringgold's *United States of Attica* (1972), a map of "American violence" named for the infamous prison, and Mike Glier's *Clubs of Virtue* (1979)—appear below the red

line. But their placement doesn't appear to relate directly to the nearest date, nor does the point appear to be formulating a hierarchical relationship as to what's above and below the line. What is immediately clear is that our customary relationship to displayed artworks and artifacts—arranged chronologically, approximately at eye level—has been displaced by a mode of presentation that privileges the associative qualities of objects and that foregrounds time (the density of events at a moment) over chronology (an editorial selection that promotes a narrative). Along the timeline there are no texts specifically attached to the date. There is no way to know immediately, when looking at the year 1973—with Ringgold's work just below it—that it was the year of Salvador Allende's murder and the US-sponsored coup in Chile. We simply know that each date accords to a particular US intervention in Central and Latin America. But the lack of specificity—or immediate access to points of data—makes this installation less about the distribution of information than a physical evocation of the preponderance of such occasions. Instead of simply presenting a chronology of events—a model that fails to account for the counterdiscourses, arguments, and people who worked for and wanted something else—Group Material's porous timeline opens the moment to something beyond the narratives of violence and defeat frequently attached to Central and Latin America at the time. In this situation where information is spatialized, the viewer also becomes an actor responsible for the framing of other histories and modes of telling.

Visitors to Gonzalez-Torres's MFA thesis exhibition at New York University in 1987—including Julie Ault, who invited him to join Group Material later that year—encountered an installation consisting of date works and photographs of crowds printed as puzzles. They would have seen his first date photostat with a text that read: Bitburg Cemetery 1985 Walkman 1979 Cape Town 1985 Water-proof mascara 1971 Personal computer 1981 TLC. For someone looking at these white words on black ground in 1987, only two years after the dates appended to Bitburg Cemetery and Cape Town, the conjunctions of proper noun and date would have been immediate triggers. The first would have called to mind Ronald Reagan's bungled visit, for the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II, to a military cemetery in West Germany that contains many SS graves; the second, police using shotguns, whips, rubber bullets, and tear gas against anti-Apartheid protesters in that South African city.

In addition to triggers, the work contained something else: a mirror. Looking in the glass of the framed photostats and the slick plastic holding the crowd puzzles, viewers also saw their own reflection. Some of the earliest installation views of these works look harried, even clumsy. In one, taken from a slight angle, the photographer's arm and camera-covered face are clearly visible on the right side of the image (this page, top). More ghostly, but equally present, is the photographer's outline in the very center of a shot of a 1988 crowd puzzle (this page, middle). Even when the photographer escapes from the image, as with a photograph of the date piece that begins with "Center for Disease Control 1981," the room is present (this page, bottom). Two lights hover; a corner of the gallery is articulated where black breaks to gray. In these photographs, works that could appear hermetic and timeless, foreclosed to their own logic, become


Felix Gonzalez-Torres
*"Untitled"*, 1988
Framed photostat
10½ × 13 inches
Edition of 1, 1 AP

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
*"Untitled"*, 1988
C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag
7½ × 9½ inches
Edition of 3, 2 AP with 1 additional AP


Felix Gonzalez-Torres
*"Untitled" (1988)*, 1988
Framed photostat
10¼ × 13 inches
Edition of 1, 1 AP



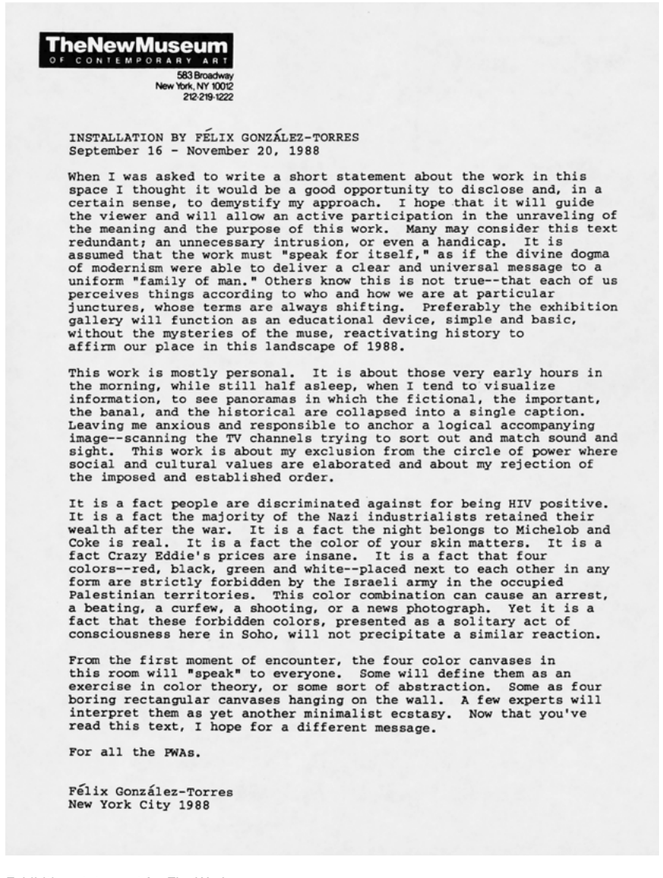
entirely contingent objects. They demonstrate, through the reflective logic of glass and plastic, that the work depends on a viewer claiming these events, objects, and occasions—distant though they may be—as they would their own likeness and presence, as somehow their own. Or, perhaps more acutely, the implication is that disclaiming these events, objects, and occasions is an impossibility or a willful delusion.

In a statement for his 1988 New Museum exhibition (p. 40), Gonzalez-Torres described these works as "mostly personal." He wrote: "It is about those very early hours in the morning, while still half asleep, when I tend to visualize information, to see panoramas in which the fictional, the important, the banal, and the historical are collapsed into a single caption. Leaving me anxious and responsible to anchor a logical accompanying image—scanning the TV channels trying to sort out and match sound and sight. This work is about my exclusion from the circle of power where social and cultural values are elaborated and about my rejection of the imposed and established order." As telling and thickly descriptive as this statement is, its strength is in its tacit admission of a willful abdication of responsibility. We know that whatever has made him "responsible to anchor a logical accompanying image" has been ignored in these works. Only a blank field resides above the panoramic caption. By refusing to privilege any one image, akin to Group Material's truly democratic embrace of disparate objects and images in their timeline, Gonzalez-Torres is also rejecting the authority that comes with selecting for others, standing in for others, closing down the options of others. But this openness and inclusiveness should not be mistaken for a refusal of individual agency.

At some point in the editorial process for an essay I was commissioned to write on Jenny Holzer, I received a draft with the artist's comments. I don't think it was intended for my eyes, but the editor felt I needed to see one pithy command in particular—and without his mediation—to determine where and how to go from there.

After a brief discussion of the electronic signs, stone sarcophagi, and texts that constitute Holzer's *Laments* series, and its installation at the Dia Art Foundation in 1989, I made a parenthetical aside that Holzer was never diagnosed with AIDS, the prominent and ostensible subject of the work. Her admonition couldn't have been clearer or more direct in its red text: "don't go there." Though time has buffeted the blow of what I now clearly recognize as a deserved reproach, I was initially at a loss for why I'd been upbraided without elaboration. Isn't it part of my function as a historian to untangle and specify the constituent factors that wittingly—or not—contribute to the artwork's reception? If so, isn't serostatus as valid a frame as gender, race, and sexuality when it comes to considering identity and identity's problematic role in artistic formation? Or was my transgression presuming a status based on speculation? Or could it be construed that "outing" a status I assumed to be negative was an outrageous affront to solidarity—specifically with people with AIDS (PWAS)—premised not on diagnosis but upon total and undifferentiated equality? These—and others—were the questions and thoughts I attempted to flesh out when decoding Holzer's terse injunction.

But none, after much consideration, was apposite. For that particular essay, I dealt with the problem by ignoring it, or at least tabling it for later. I simply removed the aside, but the question still kicked around. I've since realized that



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INSTALLATION BY FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES
September 16 - November 20, 1988

When I was asked to write a short statement about the work in this space I thought it would be a good opportunity to disclose and, in a certain sense, to demystify my approach. I hope that it will guide the viewer and will allow an active participation in the unraveling of the meaning and the purpose of this work. Many may consider this text redundant; an unnecessary intrusion, or even a handicap. It is assumed that the work must "speak for itself," as if the divine dogma of modernism were able to deliver a clear and universal message to a uniform "family of man." Others know this is not true--that each of us perceives things according to who and how we are at particular junctures, whose terms are always shifting. Preferably the exhibition gallery will function as an educational device, simple and basic, without the mysteries of the muse, reactivating history to affirm our place in this landscape of 1988.

This work is mostly personal. It is about those very early hours in the morning, while still half asleep, when I tend to visualize information, to see panoramas in which the fictional, the important, the banal, and the historical are collapsed into a single caption. Leaving me anxious and responsible to anchor a logical accompanying image--scanning the TV channels trying to sort out and match sound and sight. This work is about my exclusion from the circle of power where social and cultural values are elaborated and about my rejection of the imposed and established order.

It is a fact people are discriminated against for being HIV positive. It is a fact the majority of the Nazi industrialists retained their wealth after the war. It is a fact the night belongs to Michelob and Coke is real. It is a fact the color of your skin matters. It is a fact Crazy Eddie's prices are insane. It is a fact that four colors--red, black, green and white--placed next to each other in any form are strictly forbidden by the Israeli army in the occupied Palestinian territories. This color combination can cause an arrest, a beating, a curfew, a shooting, or a news photograph. Yet it is a fact that these forbidden colors, presented as a solitary act of consciousness here in Soho, will not precipitate a similar reaction.

From the first moment of encounter, the four color canvases in this room will "speak" to everyone. Some will define them as an exercise in color theory, or some sort of abstraction. Some as four boring rectangular canvases hanging on the wall. A few experts will interpret them as yet another minimalist ecstasy. Now that you've read this text, I hope for a different message.

For all the PWAs.

Félix González-Torres
New York City 1988

Exhibition statement for *The Workspace: Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1988



my failure hinged on my anemic historical imagination and mistaken prioritization of the present. When Holzer first showed what would later be named *Laments* at Documenta 8 in June 1987—the year of Gonzalez-Torres's first date works—ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was barely two months old and AZT had only been approved for marketing by the FDA in late March of that same year. Though officially reported cases of AIDS in the United States had reached thirty-two thousand, the epidemic and crisis were still nascent. Given the virus's prolonged incubation period, testing wasn't immediately conclusive. One lived between and witnessed horrid and incommensurate temporal poles—the finality of the deaths of those around you; the prolonged, inexorable, yet hasty acts of dying; the determinate periods between tests or dosages; the elasticity of dread; the immediacy of certain results.

For me to assess and simply ascribe diagnosis in the past tense was to ignore the terror of living in the presence of a new disease in the city it most ravaged. My declarative aside presumed something known, overwriting and dismissing the particularity of a historical, cultural, and social context conspicuously burdened by the unknown. Writing from a current historical moment when the virus is manageable (if not yet curable) and new prophylactic drug therapies are available, I neglected the very real state of emergency one lived in at a time when the virus was ignored by political figures (recall President Reagan's infamous six-year failure to make a statement about AIDS); when the first rudimentary drug cocktails were prohibitively expensive, especially given insurers' tendency to deny coverage to PWAs; and when there was no positive prognosis if one tested positive.

Gonzalez-Torres's pronounced turn to addressing time also needs to be seen in this context of uncertainty. If one doesn't know how much time she or he has, it can become a preoccupation, a resource whose potential material scarcity would go unnoticed in nonemergency times. While the inclusions in his date works can be seen to formulate alternative narratives of nonlinear contiguities and associations, they also need to be evaluated as objects that signify—in that field of black—how much is left unsaid and unwritten. That is, the date work effectively projects a history of what has been excluded from history and also, given the uncertainty of what future is conceivable, what might never have a chance to occur. But it's also vitally important to conceive of the field of black in the positive—of futures that might be possible, of others who might encounter the work and see themselves in it, of that quiet time that one hopes is to come, a future between crises.

In an uncomfortable portion of an otherwise revealing and generous 1995 interview conducted on the occasion of their forthcoming, contemporaneous exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum, Ross Bleckner asked Gonzalez-Torres, "How long do you think you're going to live?" Obviously abashed, even angry, Gonzalez-Torres responded, "That's a very rude question. I want to live until I do all the things that I want to do." Bleckner continued, "So you don't know the answer to the question?" Gonzalez-Torres flatly countered, "It's not about time. It's about how life is lived."[6] If we consider the field of black as a place of possibility, it becomes a marker of presence, not of what *has* passed, but what *is* passing. It's not, then, about time but concerns our responsibility to the present. Crucially, the present becomes more potent, even palpable, due to this responsibility.

1913 **Born, New York, Christmas Eve, nine months after Armory Show. (Father leaves "old country" for America in 1907 after serving in Tsar Nicholas' army. Mother leaves Germany in 1909.)**

1913 *Malevich paints first geometric-abstract painting.*

1914 *Matisse paints "Porte-Fenêtre, Collioure."*

1914 *Mondrian begins "plus-minus" paintings.*

1915 **Gets crayons for birthday, copies "funnies," Moon Mullins, Krazy Kat and Barney Google.**

1916 *Juan Gris paints "Dish of Fruit."*

1916 *Dada in Zurich.*

1917 **Cuts up newspapers. Tears pictures out of books.**

1917 *October Revolution in Russia. Lenin replaces Kerensky.*

1918 *Malevich paints "White on White."*

1918 *Peace. World War I ends.*

1919 **Enters Public Grade School No. 88, Fresh Pond Road, Ridgewood, Queens.**

1919 *Léger paints "The City."*

1919 *Monet paints "Water Lilies."*

1920 **Wins water color flower painting contest.**

1921 *Abstract painters have trouble in Russia.*

1922 *Mexican painters issue anti-"art for art's sake" manifesto.*

1922 *Joyce completes "Ulysses."*

1923 *Marcel Duchamp gives up painting.*

1924 **Copies Old English and German Black-Letter printing.**

1925 *Arp makes "Mountain, Table, Anchors, Navel."*

1926 *Picasso paints "The Studio."*

1927 **Wins medal for pencil-portraits of Jack Dempsey, Abraham Lincoln, Babe Ruth and Charles Lindbergh.**

1928 **Enters Newtown High School, Elmhurst, Queens.**

1928 **Wins prizes and medals for art and citizenship.**

1929 *Museum of Modern Art opens.*

1929 *Stock Market crashes.*

1929 *Georgia O'Keefe paints "Black Cross, New Mexico."*

1930 **Makes drawings of knights, heraldry, shields, stars, battle-flags.**

First page of "Chronology by Ad Reinhardt," in *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966)



Beginning in 1989 Gonzalez-Torres began working on his portraits, modifications of the date works. He described the method behind them in a 1993 conversation with the artist Joseph Kosuth: "Some of the works I've been doing for the last few years have been portraits in which I asked a person to give me a list of events in their lives, private events, and then mix those up with public events, more or less relating the public to these so-called private events. At this point in history, how can we talk about private events? Or private moments? When we have television and phones inside our home, when our bodies have been legislated by the state? We can perhaps only talk about private property."[7] Earlier in the conversation, he and Kosuth had been discussing Ad Reinhardt, in particular the chronology that he penned for inclusion in his 1966 Jewish Museum retrospective catalogue. There, Reinhardt not only included a typical chronology of personal facts and milestones—born here, exhibited there, etc.—but punctuated those moments of individual history with art-historical and sociopolitical events. The year 1929 is telling here for its three entries: Museum of Modern Art opens; Stock Market crashes; Georgia O'Keeffe paints *Black Cross, New Mexico*. Gonzalez-Torres, after his line about "private property," returned to Reinhardt. He said, "It was very revealing for me to see how Reinhardt included the independence of India in his biography. Because such things affect who we are in private—our most private practices and desires are ruled by, affected by the public, by history."[8]

The power of the portraits—usually painted as a frieze so events and dates surround a room—is the combination of familiarity and alienation it produces in the "non-sitter." A portion of *"Untitled" (Portrait of Julie Ault)* (1991), as it was installed at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in 2004, read: "AIDS 1987 Power Up 1997 Death 1996 Tier 3 1980 National Endowment for the Arts 1989."[9] Even as one is almost lulled into comfort and complicity by names and dates somehow held in common, the introduction of "the private" elicits the profound realization that I know almost nothing about this person or even what those common events mean—or came to mean—for her. This distance promotes an understanding of the significance that intimacy and privacy play in dismantling the concepts of history and the public as shared. Or, perhaps more directly stated, there is no public without privacy. Gonzalez-Torres's often-repeated quotation that his was a public of one—his partner, Ross Laycock—isn't some greeting-card version of devotion.[10] Theoretically akin to him contradicting Tim Rollins's assessment that *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) is "a great movie about love" by saying, "No, it's about meaning and how meaning is dependent on context,"[11] his statement about who constitutes his public suggests a reluctance to defer to generalities or totalities. Intimacy and privacy become correlates to specificity and particularity.

In *"Untitled" (A Portrait)*, each event, occasion, or thing that appears on screen as a handful of words comes and goes like a deep breath. The monotonous rhythm is inflected only by infrequent displacements of the text from its customary caption position to an appearance dead center in the screen or, in other instances, floating in the upper left corner. I found myself, as I sat on the Jacobsen chair, watching the video and wondering about Gonzalez-Torres's voice, unconsciously breathing in sync with the appearance of the texts on screen. My normal, slightly shallow breath slowed and deepened. It's a type of breathing I associate with being

awake next to a partner whose sleep you envy, whose breath you imitate partially because you desire that person's sleep and partially because the imitation allows you to inhabit that beloved person in a way unthinkable when awake. You watch, body turned to sleeping body, and mirror a movement that is now shared, but whose commonality only you are conscious of. Intimacy permits an occasion that is purely—sometimes heartbreakingly—*yours*.

With one exception, the texts aren't capitalized. Most begin with the indefinite article "a." Even those events that could have a known signifier—"a new supreme court ruling" or "a merciless cardinal" or "an environmental disaster"—also could be, particularly years away from the work's origin, one of many. The so-called private events or occasions—"a room with light curtains" or "a wet lick on his face" or "an irregular palpitation" or "a perfect bed"—are specific yet relatable. With the absence of punctuating dates between events, the portrait slips not only outside of a history of proper names but outside of a history where events need to be mapped, positioned, or related for general consumption or even understanding. Whoever is the subject of this portrait stands as the author of her or his own history. There are many indications that this might be a self-portrait. For those who know the work of Gonzalez-Torres, it is hard to read "a room with light curtains" and not conjure the photograph of opened windows and pale-blue cloth blowing or to read "a perfect bed" and not imagine the billboards showing rumpled linens and pillows still impressed with the shape of heads. But it's finally an injustice—and a formal problem—to see this work as just about Gonzalez-Torres. Rather, what if we saw it as a model of discrete privacies, a continent by way of an archipelago of the private?

Some of the most hard-won—and bitterly and constantly opposed—civil and human rights in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have hinged on privacy. Supreme Court cases that legalized birth control and abortion, reversed anti-sodomy laws, and made marriage the domain of all were argued in terms of an implicit constitutional right to privacy. One could posit that this right—to articulate wants and desires outside of the traffic of others that you do not choose—is the very condition that permits, or the laboratory that models, any public to emerge. When looking at the words pulsing on the screen of Gonzalez-Torres's work, I realize what a disservice I do to his theoretical and formal project by attempting to imagine *his* voice. It is the silence that returns me to myself, a sleepless night, a shared bed, and another's imitated breath. The silence returns me to the place I always want to come back to, where no one sees me, and where I become what I am.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
*"Untitled"*, 1991
Billboard
Dimensions vary with installation
Installation view, *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1992



Notes

1
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, interview by Tim Rollins, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993), p. 21.

2
Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," in *Samuel Beckett*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1985), p. 58.

3
*"Untitled" (A Portrait)* (1991/1995) can be viewed in two different forms. In addition to appearing the way it was at David Zwirner, and with permission from the owner of the work, the video can also be screened as a one-time event, specified for "educational purposes."

4
Reproduced in Julie Ault, ed., *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners, 2010), p. 83. The members of Group Material at this time were Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins. According to Ault, Rollins had a primary role conceptualizing the project and writing the proposal.

5
Ault, *Show and Tell*, p. 83.

6
Ross Bleckner, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Bomb* (April 1, 1995), accessed online.

7
"A Conversation: Joseph Kosuth and Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), p. 358. The conversation was recorded in Kosuth's New York studio on October 10, 1993, and first published in *A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), pp. 76–81.

8
"A Conversation," p. 358.

9
It is important to note that the artist gave the present owner and/or exhibitor of the work the license to modify the portrait as she, he, it, they see fit. This encompasses adding and deleting inclusions.

10
In response to a question posed by Robert Storr ("What's your agenda? Who are you trying to reach?"), Gonzalez-Torres responded: "When people ask me, 'Who is your public?' I say honestly, without skipping a beat, 'Ross.' The public was Ross. The rest of the people just come to the work." It is also important to note that this statement has deeper ramifications. In addition to being about Laycock, it professes a broader constellation of trust: that each viewer has a capacity to be trusted with the responsibility that the work insists upon. The public of one begins with Laycock, but it can also potentially be extended to each of us. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, interview by Robert Storr, *Art Press* (January 1995), pp. 24–32. Reproduced in Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 233.

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Gonzalez-Torres, interview by Rollins, p. 10.