

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

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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<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>

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,