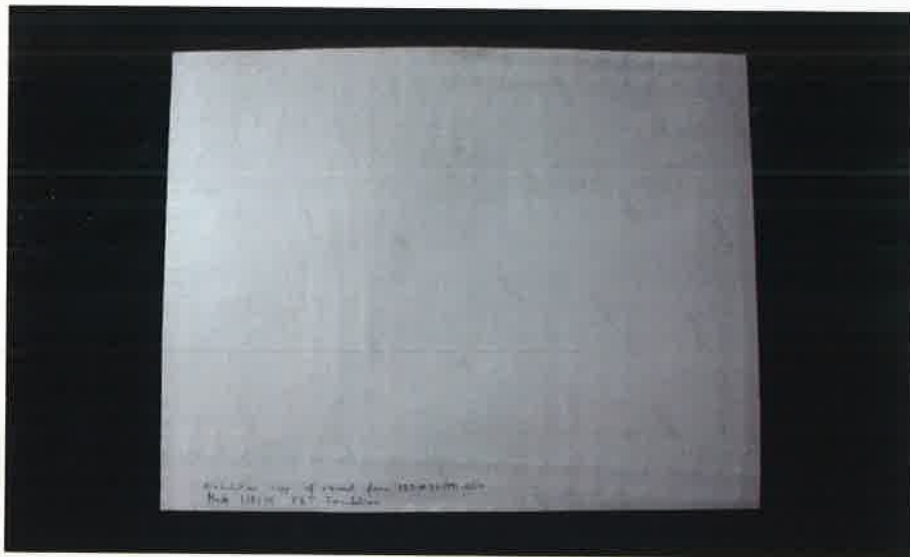


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This is a photo I took for a condition report on Felix Gonzalez-Torres' sculpture *Untitled (Welcome)*, 1991. I curated a show of his work in the summer of 2010, and then more or less babysat it, that is, I took an apartment near the museum and went in every day to check on it and make changes. The purpose of my continuous attention was to ensure that the give-away pieces didn't suffer any energy loss; my sense is that anxiety, fussing, and concern create a field around the work that helps contain its forms. Also, one gallery in the museum needed to be completely reinstalled every week (about this, more later).

The image shows the back of one of the photos that are hidden between the welcome mats that comprise the only visible aspect of the sculpture. There are a number of elements between the mats that the exhibitor is meant to hide during installation and that the viewer is never meant to see. On the checklist, they are listed as media in general terms only; for example, "metal" is listed as a material, but as viewers we are not told what form the metal takes; "photos" are listed as a material, but we don't know what type. My impression is that the artist always intended the caption information to be available so that you know a secret is being withheld, mirroring the ambivalence in his titling strategy, which always has it both ways.

On the photo, you can see the bumpy impression the mat left. You can also see text that reads "Exhibition copy of element from ARG #GF1991-024 Made 1/8/10 FGT Foundation".



About a year before I took these photos, I had my first meeting with Andrea Rosen, founder of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, to talk about the artist and begin the process of putting the exhibition together. In this early phase, I hadn't formed any ideas about what I might exhibit. That's not entirely true. The anger in his work gets lost in a lot of the posthumous interpretations, and I wanted to make sure this dimension was evident. But aside from this one preconception, I was open to anything.

We met at an exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres' work that was on view at the time. Andrea spent at least an hour with me at this first of many meetings leading up to the show. As I recall, she talked mostly about his "hard" and "soft" works: the ones that you need to borrow for an exhibition because the physical object is considered to be the artwork and the ones you need to fabricate for the exhibition because the work resides somewhere, if not everywhere, in the zone between the manifestation guidelines, the fabrication of the artwork, and the direct handling of the material by the exhibitor in the gallery.

We stopped at one of Gonzalez-Torres' beaded curtain pieces in the exhibition, and Andrea explained some of its parameters: it needs to span an active passageway and it should almost, but not quite, make contact with the ground, since contact prevents its free movement. She touched the piece and demonstrated how it should move. (By now, I've seen her critical appraisal of many FGT "soft" pieces. This one touched the ground a little, and I think the look on her face meant there would be a phone call to the exhibitor directly following our meeting.)

The same piece also hung in the show I curated. The length of the beads stretches over time, so I had to pay attention and make frequent adjustments. The previous picture shows beads I trimmed off during the course of routine maintenance. It represents two days' worth of accumulation.

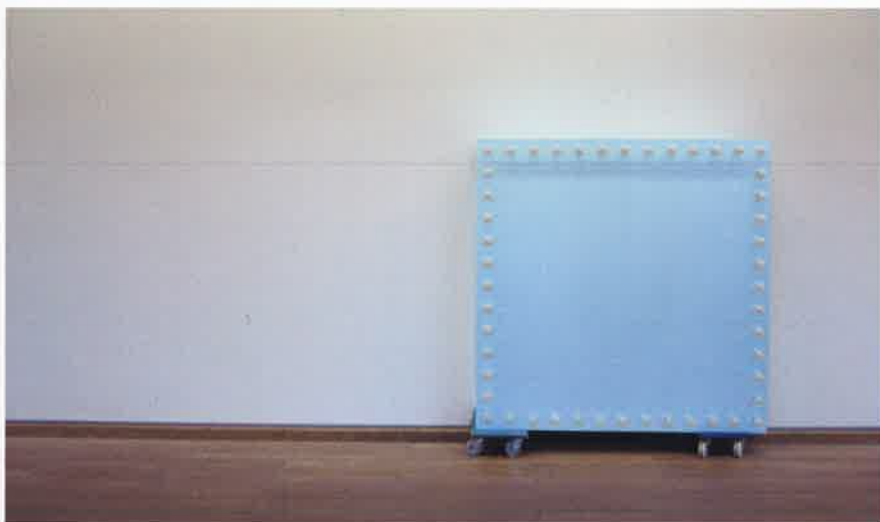


I remember Andrea quoting someone (Jim Hodges?) as saying that you didn't really know the work until you had exhibited it. I thought this was a provocative idea. I wondered if it were true, and if so, what I would know once I had been initiated. I also wondered if I could share my findings as part of a curatorial strategy. These were two of my earliest thoughts shaping the exhibition.

Soon after the meeting, I asked about showing some of the manifestation guidelines, but the Felix Torres-Gonzalez Foundation wouldn't allow it. It seems to be one of the hard-and-fast rules of the guardians of his legacy that the guidelines are not part of the work and therefore cannot be exhibited. Here's something I hadn't realized: even though the artist is deceased, his manifestation guidelines and even the materials listed in the captions continue to change. Take, for example, the "go-go" piece *Untitled (Go-go Dancing Platform)*, 1991. When the artwork was first presented, the guidelines required a Sony Walkman, along with a dancer in silver lamé bikini and sneakers. If you see the work exhibited now, the caption will read "personal listening device" instead of "Sony Walkman". The official understanding of the artist's intention is that he did not want to fetishize technology, so the language has been generalized to allow (or possibly even require) whatever device is most readily available.

This logic is used in many pieces; for example, if a once-ubiquitous and cheap printing technique is no longer in use, it will be replaced with the closest approximation.

I also asked about showing the work in its "raw" state, that is, boxes of candies and pallets of posters, or whatever else, that had not yet been configured as sculptures. This idea was met with reluctant approval: I think it's fair to say that Andrea hated it (at least initially), but she trusted me and supported my efforts in every conceivable way. Pictured above is an installation view at the Beyeler Foundation showing works being prepared for exhibition in an adjacent gallery. The boxes on the table contain lengths of beads, and, as you can see, we're in the process of stringing them on the hanging device.



When the artist Sturtevant exhibited the go-go piece in her Gonzalez-Torres survey show at MIT's List Visual Arts Center in 2005, using vintage sneakers and a Walkman from 1991, she was going against the rules as they were then prescribed. There's a space between the artwork as it was at its inception and the artwork as it becomes over time; because of the dictates of Sturtevant's project, it was necessary for her as an artist to close the gap between these two positions.

I had a similar objective. For my contribution to the retrospective, I made a full-scale, full-length facsimile of Gonzales-Torres' 1991 exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery called *Every Week There Is Something Different*. As the title suggests, the show changed every week. Each current version of the exhibition was installed in a full-scaled architectural model of the space as it was in 1991, and in a nearby room we staged all the material that was removed from one week to another.

Restaging the historical exhibition restored some of the original conditions of display and erased the evolution of the works over the intervening 18 years. I think the reason Andrea didn't like the idea was that she thought I was neglecting my responsibility to allow the work to grow and change. In the same way the candy pieces need to be restocked during the exhibition to give them their life, on another level the exhibitors need to animate the work through their participation with it and through their willingness to accept a creative, generative role in its making. Gonzalez-Torres meant to share responsibility with the exhibitor, whom he considered a co-author. I think Andrea believes the exhibitor should accept the invitation of the artist in good faith and contribute his or her own intelligence to the process, and felt that I wasn't doing either.

Pictured above is the go-go platform in transit between the exhibition space and the staging area.



More than anything, I wanted to show how the sculptures work. The miracle is that by simply moving readily available, industrially produced material a few feet, from the staging area into the exhibition context, you transform it into sculpture. Seeing the trick revealed made me even more awed by its mystery.



I had another objective, apart from removing the artworks from the stream of time and disclosing the sculptures' workings. I also wanted to see what kind of exhibitions Gonzalez-Torres made. Because he didn't have a studio, I have to imagine that the physical space of the gallery and the occasion of the exhibition played a significant role in the development of the artworks. I think he must have had the image of Andrea's Prince Street space in mind when he made a lot (most?) of his work.

The reason I wanted to see these hangings precisely as they were originally configured has something to do with thinking about installation art. Felix Gonzalez-Torres wasn't an installation artist, but his was a related practice. I think he considered each of his exhibitions to be a complete statement, even though the installations would ultimately be taken apart, the pieces sold separately, and whatever it was that united them not enduring as an artwork in its own right.

The strategy of placing artworks in relation to the structures and forces of the exhibition context—visible and invisible, ideological, historical, social, commercial, architectural—this kind of activity defies objectification. When it's not classified as an instance of "installation art", it's hard to talk about. Our habit is to consider the dominance of the total statement (installation art) or the dominance of the individual works (elegant arrangement of sculpture), and maybe we think it's too gluttonous to want to have it both ways.

I curated one of the six parts comprising the retrospective exhibition Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects Without Specific Form, organized by Elena Filipovic for WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, which traveled between 2009 and 2011 to the MNK Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt am Main and the Fondation Beyeler in Basel. All images courtesy the author.