

SELF-QUESTIONING MONUMENTS  
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*And try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a foreign tongue ... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day to the answer.*<sup>1</sup>

Rainer Maria Rilke *Letters to a Young Poet*

Perhaps it was Rilke's counsel to his young friend to yield to a process of questioning, especially self-questioning, that struck a chord in Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who once told the artist Teresita Fernández that he kept Rilke's book on his bedside table.<sup>2</sup> He was always far more interested in questions than in answers. Gonzalez-Torres's artistic career was devoted to creating deeply self-conscious and self-questioning monuments that challenge the structures and value systems that give objects their status, define their function, and provide a network of meaning that shapes who we are and how we relate to the world around us. The meanings of his works, he insisted, occupy the space of the 'in-between', the grey areas where questions are never fully possible to reconcile.<sup>3</sup> Gonzalez-Torres had unusually sensitive antennae for discovering these spaces; in the streets of New York, on the Home Shopping Network, by the sea in Miami, along the Seine. A fax sent to a friend in 1994, in which the artist quotes the writer Emily Bishop, suggests that one reason he repeatedly returned to the images of a bird in flight in his oeuvre was that the sky surrounding them was such a space:

*I watched closely the spaces between the birds. It was as if there were an invisible thread joining all the outside birds and within this fragile network they possessed the sky; it was down among them, of a paler color, moving with them. The interspaces moved in pulsation too, catching up and continuing the motion of the wings in wakes, carrying it on, as the rest in music does – not blankness but a space as musical as all the sound.*<sup>4</sup>

**"Untitled"**, 1994, captures a bird swallowed to the point of near-disappearance in an infinite

expanse of sky. The image becomes a succinct visual metaphor for the way meaning inhabits the interstices of time and space. It was in these charged, peripheral and parenthetical spaces that Gonzalez-Torres laid the cornerstone of his art. To him, they were paradoxical, irresolvable, yet eloquent slippages to navigate or, indeed, to infiltrate. But that infiltration had a purpose that was both poetic and subversive. He also viewed his work as an aesthetic 'virus' capable of infecting the structures of authority, 'to work within the contradictions of the system ... to try to create a better place.'<sup>5</sup> To work 'in between' meant to precipitate change. Above all, he believed that art had the power to alter personal consciousness and that change in oneself would lead, inevitably, to social change.

One space in which change could be catalysed, he was convinced, was the exhibition space. Gonzalez-Torres wanted his art to open up a space for culture in all its breadth to be considered critically. Thus he conceived of the museum or gallery as both a studio for the development and dissemination of ideas, and as a democratic arena – an active place for spectacle, for celebration, for dialogue, for engagement and for the transformation of public attitudes. Transformation in Gonzalez-Torres's art takes place through the act of questioning. He constantly places the viewer, the curator, the owner, as well as himself, in the position of confronting his or her fears, assumptions and expectations, forcing each to question his or her behaviour and to make decisions that directly affect the meaning of the work of art. In this way, Gonzalez-Torres spotlights the dance between the public, the institution and the marketplace, showing them to be entwined in a symbiotic, albeit uneasy, relationship. They are inseparable partners who must take responsibility for their collusion in defining one another's roles and actions.

**"Untitled" (Arena)**, 1993, inscribes a site for staging this dynamic. Hung from the gallery ceiling, garlands of light bulbs ideally create a square, although the presenter or owner has the option of distributing the electric strands in any way he or she chooses. Viewers may dance alone or with

a partner beneath the illuminated space wearing two headsets plugged into a single Sony Walkman that plays a recorded waltz tune. However, the headsets are hung discreetly on a wall, unlabelled, so that 'performing' is never imposed. As in many of Gonzalez-Torres's installations, the viewer's participation is essential to the meaning of the work. Each viewer will make a different decision about his or her actions, but whatever he or she chooses will change its appearance and consequently its meaning. Indeed, how position frames the way we perceive the world around us is underscored at the Serpentine Gallery by the juxtaposition of **"Untitled"**, 1994, with **"Untitled" (Arena)**, the only other work displayed in the gallery. **"Untitled"**, 1994, comprises a pair of close-ups that suggest we are standing beneath a glittering crystal ballroom chandelier. We cannot be sure whether the image depicts two chandeliers or one fixture seen from two subtly different perspectives. Seen in proximity, **"Untitled" (Arena)** and **"Untitled"**, 1994, enunciate the role of subjectivity in the production of meaning as well as reflecting the open-ended spirit of Gonzalez-Torres's work. In the relative emptiness of the gallery, the light square becomes a focal point commanding full attention and encouraging the viewer to question its meaning. 'Entering into the artist's way of seeing things,' the critic Richard Dorment observed,

*we ask ourselves why in the world we aren't dancing. We preserve our dignity, certainly, but at the cost of not participating in life. By taking the risk of inviting a stranger to have a twirl, we engage not only with the work of art, but with life itself. It is by surrendering our pride, chancing humiliation, that we become fully human.*<sup>6</sup>

The title of the work also invites questioning. To what does it allude? What is an arena? Is it only a space for performances, sporting events or other competitions? Can an art gallery be an active place for engagement and debate rather than a passive space for viewing art at a respectful distance?

The participatory nature of a work like **"Untitled" (Arena)** proffers questions rather than definitive answers. Other works proffer souvenirs that continue the process of questioning beyond the space of the gallery. In the candy spills and paper stacks, for example, viewers may, if they wish, take away part of the piece in the form of a sweet or a sheet of paper respectively. Will we dare to violate the museum's usual protocols by touching and even disturbing the presentation of a work of art? Will we agree to 'own it' by taking it home? Thus the viewer is asked to take active responsibility for the making and unmaking of the work in challenging both the authoritative definition of 'art', and institutions such as the museum that determine its worth or attempt to dictate its meaning.

If Gonzalez-Torres's work disrupts the viewer's usual sense of his or her position with regard to a work of art, it is no less disruptive of the assumptions and standard practices of museums and galleries. Museums are in the business of presenting and preserving objects – stabilising, not dispersing them. Gonzalez-Torres conceived his works as constantly renewable and ever-changing. They may literally disappear during each presentation since the decision to replenish the works is left to the presenter. Although a certificate with the requirements of the works is provided to each owner, there is nothing to prevent anyone from making his or her own versions. The artist himself expressed surprise that more people did not just buy the materials and do so themselves.<sup>7</sup> The accessibility of his materials and the flexible specifications for the fabrication of his works make this entirely feasible. What, then, is the 'piece'? While he provided meticulous measurements, the artist allowed that these are all 'ideal' and, additionally, emphasised the element of choice inherent in the work. Once the materials have been obtained, a decision can be taken as to how the work will finally appear: a candy spill may be placed in a corner or laid out in a geometric shape. A stack may be made of the same paper used by Gonzalez-Torres, or may equally be modified in size or thickness depending on the type of paper available.

A choice as to the height of the stack may also be made. A light-string may form a spiral on the floor or dangle free in a cascade. Is the 'piece' the 'ideal' presentation suggested by the artist at the work's initial manifestation? Regarding the built-in conundrum of his paper stacks, he stated,

*an individual piece of paper from one of the stacks does not constitute the 'piece' itself, but in fact it is a piece. At the same time, the sum of many pieces of the identical paper is the 'piece'; but not really because there is no piece only an ideal height of endless copies ... Yet, each piece of paper gathers new meaning, to a certain extent, from its final destination, which depends on the person who takes it.*<sup>8</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres's works remind us that the meaning of the 'piece' is a product of cultural, historical, social and, especially in the case of the candy spills and paper stacks, economic forces. An art object is the currency of the art market, exchanged between artist, collectors and dealers. But if the work disappears, how can it be circulated? If it can appear in more than one place simultaneously, how can it lay claim to being an original? The value of a work of art is contingent upon it being 'authentic', that is to say 'original' and made by an individual artist. Yet each of his pieces is subject to changes based upon decisions made not only by the artist, but also by the curator, the viewer/participant and the collector. Who, then, is the author of the work? Gonzalez-Torres's undermining of the concept of singular authorship violates the marketplace and the museum, both of which heavily invest in the 'original' and 'unique' work of art made by a single author as their primary stock in trade.

By disrupting such laws of the marketplace, Gonzalez-Torres's work struggles to establish its autonomy, and creates its own terms for its circulation and value, in what Lewis Hyde has termed a 'gift sphere' for the exchange of his gift – his art.<sup>9</sup> His 'take-away' work is, literally, a gift exchanged between the artist and the viewer which tells us that its value resides not simply

in the marketplace, but also in its investment in dialogue. As he stated,

*I need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without a public these works are nothing, nothing. I need the public to complete the work.*<sup>10</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres's statement acknowledges that his artistic gifts bring with them the 'obligations of reciprocity'.<sup>11</sup> He must give his gift but he also reminds us that the work of art is an exchange between artist and viewer in which he or she must give in return. His art is a generous provocation that values this dialogue above all else. This provocation is, in an odd way, also a contract between the artist and anyone involved in viewing the work. We become not only complicit in, but also accountable for, its status and its fate. **"Untitled" (Album)**, 1992, a limited-edition work, is an empty album awaiting a decision by the owner on whether and how to fill it. A collector who was extremely close to the artist filled her edition with letters, postcards and snapshots she received from Gonzalez-Torres. Another owner, who never met the artist, filled it with personal photographs of his family. In comparing the two books (on display at the Print Room of the Victoria and Albert Museum during the Serpentine Gallery exhibition), visitors can turn the pages of each album and experience how the work has been given two distinct destinies in the hands of different individuals.

Thus the structure of Gonzalez-Torres's work has a built-in, two-way transparency. The artist exposes the terms of his works, and those who present and participate in them reveal their positions through their choices. Gonzalez-Torres's vision of the gallery space as an arena for challenging authority and provoking the self-exploration necessary for broader social transformation, in many ways parallels the model for democracy. In a democracy, the actions of those elected to power must be transparent. Obligated to reveal their plans and policies, they must also participate in a healthy ongoing debate surrounding their mandate to rule. Citizens must, for their part, also be accountable. They keep those in power 'honest' by participating in the decision-

making processes, debating the appropriateness of decisions for the individual and the group and, critically, constantly examining the nature of their relationship to those in power. The citizens must be capable of a detachment that will enable them to not only examine their leaders, but to question how they themselves have colluded in conferring legitimacy upon those in power. Such an ethic of self-questioning, when applied to a social system, has, according to Hegel, the capacity to precipitate a productive 'crisis of authority' – those in power and those who are ruled may perpetually renew and renegotiate their dynamic relationship to one another by examining its essence. Forcing a 'crisis of authority' ensures that authority remains legitimate and can evolve. Thus heightened self-awareness leads to self-metamorphosis and, consequently, to social shifts that affect the entire populace.<sup>12</sup>

To characterise Gonzalez-Torres's art as 'democratic' is to remember that the basis of democratic freedom is the responsibility to question, even if it means disrupting order at the deepest level. In its spirit of constructive disruptiveness, his work invokes democracy as it was conceived by the authors of the Constitution of his adopted country, the United States. But unlike them, Gonzalez-Torres believed revolutions to be somewhat arcane in the technological age, 'they were a nice idea in the nineteenth century and in the early part of this century'.<sup>13</sup> He preferred to work subversively from within the system.

*Art always serves a function – it either furthers and helps the master narrative or it tries to disrupt it.*<sup>14</sup>

His art, 'by the people and for the people', as the Constitution describes the United States government, is committed to precipitating creative chaos to preserve the most cherished ideal of a democracy – to be a system capable of perpetual regeneration through the direct and active participation of its citizenry. This ideal is embodied in **"Untitled" (America)**, 1994/1995, Gonzalez-Torres's only outdoor light-string piece, installed across Lymington Road during the London presentation of the artist's

work. Accessible to anyone, and without any indication, such as a label, that it is a work of art, the work creates the impression of a spontaneous act of unscheduled festivity in the midst of the residential neighbourhood. The 'purpose' of the work – its status as art and its meaning – is left up to those passing by who may or may not be aware of who is responsible for deciding to hang the lights. The work is at once a political protest, an ironic comment and a 'call to arms' regarding the obligations of the citizens that live in a democracy.

For Gonzalez-Torres to produce creative chaos also meant returning abstract philosophical insights to the everyday world of his time – the volatile years of Ronald Reagan's Republican administration – where they might take on wholly unanticipated meanings. The gallery may have been his studio, but his raw materials were the stuff of the world found in the *New York Times*, on CNN and MTV. 'I'm a person who lives in this society and I'm the product of this society and this culture,' he insisted. 'I'm not only a reflection, I'm that culture itself ...'<sup>15</sup> Throughout his career he was a committed and outspoken activist and considered this activity just one more facet of an art inextricably bound up with his life. In his self-portrait **"Untitled"**, 1989/1995, the artist's identity is represented by an accumulation of political events converging with memories that shaped his life. In his text-based portraits, Gonzalez-Torres did not limit an individual's life to the time between his or her birth and death. The owner of the portrait is entrusted with the responsibility of continuing to amend the piece, adding or subtracting events, including those which occur pre- or posthumously. The name of Élian, the Cuban boy whose Miami relatives recently sought asylum in the United States on his behalf, was subsequently added to Gonzalez-Torres's self-portrait by the owner of the work for the Serpentine Gallery exhibition along with selected dates of exhibitions in which the artist's work had been presented since his death. Photostats like **"Untitled"**, 1988, similarly use lists of disconnected historic events and allusions to popular culture itemised without any hierarchy of significance. Lacking

chronological order, time in these works encompasses the past, present and future in simultaneity. The effect of compressed time and information parallels the way in which we are saturated with information through television and the internet. In fact, the photostats are glazed so that their black surfaces resemble both a blank television screen and a mirror; we read the texts through the reflections of our faces in the glass.

Gonzalez-Torres specifically chose the photostat as a distant relative of the medium of photography to comment on the effect of mechanical reproduction techniques on the dissemination of information. The medium of photography became an important vehicle through which he and his contemporaries inflected insights derived from Postmodern theory, in particular the writings of Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, and began to create works of art that effectively merged their ideas with studio practice. The most profound contribution of the Postmodernist debate was its critique of representation – how images function as conveyors of cultural values, reinforcing social hierarchies that construct our attitudes and identities, and how we think about class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Postmodernism provided the critical tools by which the artists Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherry Levine, Cindy Sherman and the collaborative activist artist-team Group Material (in which Gonzalez-Torres participated as a member) examined contemporary culture, addressing social issues including consumerism, censorship, AIDS, US foreign policy, homophobia, racism and sexism.<sup>16</sup> One of their most productive aesthetic strategies was appropriation – borrowing, or re-presenting – endlessly reproduced mass-media images, sometimes combining them with texts, in order to articulate visually the complex agendas behind images circulating in contemporary culture. Gonzalez-Torres frequently borrowed images from the *New York Times* to reproduce on paper stacks such as **"Untitled" (Death by Gun)**, 1990, or to make jigsaws such as **"Untitled" (Fainted)** and **"Untitled" (Chief Justice's Hands)**. Appropriation gave him

another means by which to subvert the notion of the artist as sole author of the work of art, asserting the pivotal role of the viewer/ reader as a generator of meaning and dismantling the idea of the work of art as an 'original'.<sup>17</sup>

Appropriation also undermined the notion of artistic activity, and indeed the artist's life, as separate from the social and political realms. Throughout his career, Gonzalez-Torres stressed that the personal is political and he wanted his work to seamlessly unite these realms visually and thematically. In the image of the crowd he found an expressive symbol to embody the many and the one. It appears as a continuing thread throughout his work, from the earliest collages using appropriated photographs such as **"Double Fear"**, 1986, expressing a fear of being lost in a crowd but also a fear of being ostracised. Crowd behaviour is also the subject of the appropriated news cutting that forms the basis of **"Untitled" (Fainted)**. Conversely, Gonzalez-Torres used his own life in his work to make concrete shared feelings and experiences that effectively merged his existence with that of the viewer. These autobiographical references are usually expressed parenthetically and were intended to serve as a diary, as a personal *aide-mémoire*, or as a message to someone he knew or someone who might inadvertently discover its significance.

The use of **"Untitled"** is particularly generous in that it implies openness to multiple readings. It was important to the artist that his work provide a receptacle large enough to be filled with the associations of the viewer, associations that might gain new meaning from the specific context in which the work was experienced. **"Untitled" (Rossmore II)**, 1991, the candy spill made from seventy-five pounds of green sweets wrapped in cellophane, refers to a street of the same name in Los Angeles, the only place where the artist and his life partner Ross Laycock lived together during their relationship, although only someone who knew the artist, or someone who is very familiar with LA, might recognise this reference. In the context of London, a number of visitors perhaps presumed that the

grassy-green pyramid inside the Gallery was intended to suggest a continuity with Kensington Gardens outside the Serpentine. The titles in Gonzalez-Torres's work also on occasion allude to historic events, social or political issues. The aggressive stack **"Untitled" (NRA)**, 1991, made from endless copies of printed paper piled, ideally, eight inches high, is named for the National Rifle Association: the artist was an outspoken opponent of violence and the mechanisms that promoted it. Other titles, such as that of the blue bead-curtain, **"Untitled" (Water)**, and of **"Untitled" (Album)**, both a limited-edition photograph album and a jigsaw puzzle, are more literal and are especially suggestive of the commonality of certain experiences.

The artist was aware that although his parenthetical titles were subjective, their original meaning would inevitably be lost or altered, which is why the references appear in parentheses. Thus in **"Untitled" (31 Days of Bloodworks)**, 1991, fragile, whisper-thin lines rise and fall against the pink-tinted ground of thirty-one immaculate canvases that are sometimes installed in the conventional grid of a calendar month. The group suggests both studies in minimal abstraction and the abstraction of the medical graphs that chart the progress of a disease. Grids may separate the body from the scrutiny of the laboratory, but such scrutiny retrieves its humanity through a different kind of analysis. Humanity is literally implanted in the work through the addition of personal snapshots and other souvenirs secured on the reverse of some of the canvases in this series. In the Serpentine Gallery's installation, the candy spill **"Untitled" (Placebo)**, 1991, flowing beneath these diagrams, serves as a reminder of how Gonzalez-Torres's constantly renewable and empathetic art holds out the promise of healing and the hope of regeneration. However, the artist liked the idea that by showing **"Untitled" (31 Days of Bloodworks)** in a different context, it would come to appear like any series of graphs that charts the rise and fall of our expectations. Amusingly, Gonzalez-Torres once said he wished a bank would purchase it because it would appear to investors like an economic index.<sup>18</sup>

To focus solely on the autobiographical details in Gonzalez-Torres's work is to reduce it to content alone. The sensuous, physical presence of the materials, their colours, shapes and textures, forms the connective tissue binding personal, poetic and aesthetic revelations. The artist was candid regarding his love of the materials and their ability to convey meaning. No one who installed **"Untitled" (Placebo)** at the Serpentine Gallery will ever forget the overpowering smell of chocolate wafting from a carpet of one (imperial) ton of silver-wrapped confectionery – delightful or deathly sweet depending upon one's experience – or the almost liquid blue of the shimmering bead-curtain **"Untitled" (Water)**, 1995, which evokes the Gallery's namesake, the manmade lake visible from the east gallery doors. Blue is an especially potent conveyor of personal and poetic meaning in Gonzalez-Torres's work. It can evoke the artist's memories – summer by the sea with his life partner Ross, or Giotto's blue – or allude to shared human desires, to the sense of time as infinite, and, unavoidably, to gender. It is through the material presence of the work that Gonzalez-Torres has taken to the limit the Postmodernist conviction that the personal is inscribed not only in the experiencing of art, but also in its production and presentation.

His choice of readily available materials avoids the preciousness, coolness and emotional distance associated with modern art. 'I don't attach sentiment to mass-produced materials or objects, they already have it. I just make them obvious,' he stated.<sup>19</sup> Such materials, together with the intimate scale of his works, make his spare forms appear more approachable than those of many Minimalist sculptures. It is true to say that Gonzalez-Torres's pared-down installations share many qualities with those of the Minimalist artists Carl Andre, Sol Lewitt, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin, such as an emphasis on bodily experience, the use of seriality and grids or industrially fabricated materials. Like other Postmodern artists, however, he reacted against Minimalism's claim to be neutral and free of content outside the formal language and processes of artmaking; that is,

to be free of the artist's – and the viewer's – subjective experience.

Gonzalez-Torres 'contaminated', to use his own words, the 'clean', 'historical' appearance of his abstract works with 'something special'.<sup>20</sup> That something special is his own life as well as 'the world', both of which he refers to in his titles and texts, and in the snapshots used to make his jigsaw. He asserted his identity as a New York-based artist, as a Cuban-born American, as a gay man, as a political activist, teacher, lover and friend. It is also true to say that his work fully embraced multiculturalism – the aspect of the Postmodern debate which challenges dominant Western assumptions about identity from the position of 'other' voices that had been marginalised by the West's claim to cultural authority. Indeed, issues of inclusivity pervade his work, as a way of 'opening up the terms of the discourse so that everybody can participate with equal footing'.<sup>21</sup> However, Gonzalez-Torres was insistent that he would not be ghettoised or 'wear the grass skirt' to paraphrase his objection to being used as a token symbol serving the agenda of any group, even those to which he belonged.<sup>22</sup> 'Labels are very useful when you want to be in control,' he told the curator Nancy Spector in response to the question whether his 'vision' was 'coded as "homosexual"':

*Actually, more than anything I think the work is about form. I'm a sucker for formalism and yes, it does include certain interpretations because everything we see in culture we ascribe to the language. We ascribe to it a narrative. That's the way we function intellectually... In order for us to understand something that we see, we have to make it part of our own narrative.*<sup>23</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres's work is coded by his identity, but it is at its most radical when the lines between the personal and the political are impossible to delineate and meaning eddies around the two. One of the seductions of his work is that the formal beauty seems so apparently benign. However, as the artist stated, 'Beauty is a power we invest with its own purpose'.<sup>24</sup> In the fathomless blue mirror **"Untitled"**

**(Fear)**, 1991, and the diaphanous, baby-blue curtain piece **"Untitled" (Lover Boy)**, homophobia and homoeroticism respectively are embodied by the works through the acuity with which he manipulates colours, forms and materials. 'Images' of couples abound in his oeuvre. Two clocks nudge one another and tick side by side in unison (**"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)**, 1988-1990) and two silver-plated brass rings etch perfect circles high up on a wall (**"Untitled"**, 1995). As the critic Adrian Searle recognised,

*Gonzalez-Torres entertained the notion that these simple forms, at once resonant of the reserve and simplicity of the minimal gesture, could also be taken as deeply sexualised images, but ones that apoplectic congressmen could not condemn, unlike, say, images of two men having sex.*<sup>25</sup>

This furtive use of form and material ensured that the artist would never have to sacrifice form to content or vice versa. As for us, the viewers, we may indulge in the intellectual pleasure of his sweets and eat them too.

Materiality in Gonzalez-Torres's works often creates thresholds to be crossed, sometimes literally, as in the curtain pieces, at other times, figuratively, when we must face the possibility of crossing over the threshold of some private fear embedded deep within us. Confronting where we stand in relation to who and where we are is also enacted when we choose whether or not to engage actively with his participatory works. **"Untitled" (Passport)**, 1991, a blank stack of white paper, is like a *tabula rasa*; when we take a sheet we express the freedom provided by a passport and defy the limitations imposed when our identities are reduced to a series of numbers. Who we are and where we can go is dependent on how we act. His double paper stack **"Untitled"**, 1989/1990, with its printed text 'Somewhere better than this place/Nowhere better than this place', is positioned at the threshold of the gallery like a barrier that is gradually eroded by the viewers as they remove sheets throughout the exhibition. Gonzalez-Torres's work demonstrates that the

walls of institutions are porous membranes which public and private, inside and outside, interpenetrate. 'Beauty' can be a powerful weapon for helping us to cross the artificial and divisive borders we construct or to convert them into vehicles to transport us to other spaces, other places.

Travel in its broadest sense – migration, displacement, dispersal, moving in and out, through and between spaces, but also interior places, was a major theme in his work and a number of his puzzles and other photographic works are based upon snapshots of the places he visited. When viewers take away a sheet or piece of paper, they are, in part, collecting 'souvenirs', records of their experience of visiting a gallery or visiting some unexplored part of their selves.<sup>26</sup> 'Any site,' the artist stated, 'is a social site, as well as a physical site.'<sup>27</sup> Gonzalez-Torres conceptually separated the words 'space' and 'place' to mark this distinction between what is geographically and physically specific, and what functions as a container of collective and personal memories and associations.

This distinction has been described succinctly by the historian of philosophy Edward Casey, in *The Fate of Place*:

*Place brings with it the very elements sheared off in the planiformity of site: identity, character, nuance, history.*<sup>28</sup>

More emphatically, place, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger conceived it, signified 'being-in-the-world'.<sup>29</sup> And that is as it should be since, as Casey reminds us,

*Both "politics" and "ethics" go back to Greek words that signify place: polis and thea, "city-state" and "habitats", respectively. The very word "society" stems from socius, signifying "sharing" – and sharing is done in a common place.*<sup>30</sup>

Concealed in this simple word is a repository of beliefs, customs, contestations. We can never be 'no place', we can only be 'some place'. Place is within us, embedded in who we are. This is what Gonzalez-Torres understood as 'the social landscape',<sup>31</sup>

'a panorama of shifting cultural concerns, political realities, civic issues. His gallery and museum installations are thus often seen as microcosms of, or reactions to, these contemporary social environs.'<sup>32</sup> As Spector points out, it was the artist's usual practice to include in exhibitions works with references that had special meaning in a particular site, perhaps related to the history of an institution or its context. His exhibition *Traveling* changed its contents as it migrated from Washington, DC, to Chicago and Los Angeles. In this way, even works that allude to the artist's own life became joined to the life of the museum or the collector presenting the piece.<sup>33</sup>

When the Serpentine Gallery developed its approach to the substance and concept of its exhibition of the work of Gonzalez-Torres, it made a conscious decision that, following the artist's usual practice, the constellation of works and their juxtapositions should play off the institution's history, its setting in a public park and its distinct architectural spaces. The lip of the great dome in the north gallery, for example, became the site of the artist's text-based self-portrait sign-painted against a powder-blue field. In the east gallery facing the Serpentine Gallery lawn, works such as **"Untitled" (Alice B. Toklas' and Gertrude Stein's Grave, Paris)**, 1992, a photograph depicting the graves of the lovers, were selected to emphasise the landscape as a palimpsest of culture. But the exhibition was also conceived to reflect the Serpentine Gallery's sense of identity – its place – that is to say, its context in the community. Thus, it was decided that the exhibition would also be presented at a series of satellite sites: Camden Arts Centre, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, the Royal College of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum. The works exhibited at the satellite sites have been chosen and their installations determined by the staff of each respective institution. At the Royal College of Art, the choices were made by the first-year MA students on the Visual Arts Administration: Curating and Commissioning Contemporary Art course, who not only selected a stack, but also further extended the concept of the satellite site, collaborating with their

peers to place ten jigsaws in studios around the College and arranging for a weekly public viewing.

Presented outside the space of the art gallery, these interventions not only make his work accessible to a broader audience, but also change the ways in which the works are experienced. This seemed especially appropriate since a recurring theme in the artist's work is the way in which context shapes meaning, and also how meaning migrates between contexts. Gonzalez-Torres encouraged such repositioning of his work. His publicly sited billboard projects hold a significant place in his production. In **"Untitled"**, 1991, the image of a slightly rumpled, empty bed focuses on two pillows lying side by side, the indentations left by their occupants' heads clearly visible. Do these indentations express the trajectory of their dreams or their erotic desires? The impressions trace the outlines of their presence but also their absence. What has happened to the persons who slept there? How we 'read' the image in answer to these questions depends to some extent upon the location of the billboards and on personal experiences. The meaning we might project on the image in the cavernous and dimly lit halls of a London Underground station may be different when it appears on the facade of the corporate offices of Bloomberg, one of the largest media companies internationally, or, indeed, on a billboard close to City Airport. But this image of an unmade bed is not only about the 'aftermath of sleep or sex' but also the aftermath of the image.<sup>34</sup> Lodged in our consciousness, the image is poised to resurface at some unexpected moment, or reconnect with some unexpected place within ourselves.

Regardless of its themes, Gonzalez-Torres's work is always in part challenging aesthetic and cultural conventions. The stacks and candy spills, as well as such works as **"Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform)**, 1991, in which an empty, pale-blue platform resembling a sculptural plinth is animated, when exhibited publicly, by the occasional unannounced performance of a bikini-clad dancer, question the nature of the sculptural monument as static and unchanging. (Within the history of the

Serpentine, the empty plinth also recalled the work of another artist who challenged the sculptural monument, Piero Manzoni, whose *Socle du Monde* was included in the inaugural exhibition of the newly renovated Gallery in 1998.) Gonzalez-Torres's text-based portraits of individuals and institutions similarly question the conventions of portraiture. These portraits remind us that identity is not reducible to an image captured on canvas or etched in marble because we can never escape the constructions of language. 'We are not who we think we are but rather a compilation of texts,' the artist once wrote to a collector.<sup>35</sup> Gonzalez-Torres's work seeks to topple all monuments from their plinths and to dislodge any complacent conventions. What, for example, does it mean to be a man? he asks in the twelve photographs comprising **"Untitled" (Natural History)**, 1990, that include inscriptions surrounding the monument to President Theodore Roosevelt situated in front of New York's American Museum of Natural History.<sup>36</sup> In this series, masculine identity is reduced to once unquestioned clichés writ in stone: courage, civic pride and duty to one's country. When the photographs are installed with **"Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform)**, the dancer, usually male, but in the Serpentine exhibition also female, gyrates with his or her back to the photographs, a performance of protest against this monumental definition of the hero. Gonzalez-Torres fragmented monolithic conventions such as masculinity, exposing them as myths that distort reality rather than exploring their fissures or uncertainties.

Fragmentation was a leitmotif throughout Gonzalez-Torres's work which enabled him to account for an identity that was anything but monumental, a

*compilation of histories, past, present and future, always, always, shifting, adding, subtracting, gaining.*<sup>37</sup>

It also became a theme that was embodied in the forms and materials he chose to suggest loss and the gradual erosion of memory. The jigsaw puzzles, for example, fit together to form an image that

can easily be dispersed, like his paper stacks and candy spills. To fragment and disperse was also a way to 'let go' of the work, to face the profundity of loss. Explaining his landmark exhibition of paper stacks in 1990, conceived in part as an installation that would entirely disappear, he stated,

*this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day right in front of my eyes.*<sup>38</sup>

This statement also reflects Gonzalez-Torres's understanding that a monument, though it may seem durable, is not, essentially, permanent. To be permanent is to resist its fundamental purpose, to memorialise, and memory, while it may sometimes seem as implacable as stone, is easy to fragment. It expands and contracts inside us. For Gonzalez-Torres, monumentality, to cite the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, 'transcends death' because it is not merely physical but also 'spatial', that is to say that it functions as a place that is

*"non-visible"... it is determined by what may take place there, and consequently what may not take place there ... What appears empty may turn out to be full – as is the case with sanctuaries ...*<sup>39</sup>

With the simplest gestures Gonzalez-Torres transformed modest materials into dialectical and elegaic monuments, sanctuaries for questioning our impulse to make and remake objects that can only capture the fragments of who we are, for redefining the enduring monument as a place, rather than a space. To fragment monuments, to chip away at our cultural assumptions, was, for him, the ultimate act of creation.



<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letter to a Young Poet*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1962, p.35.

<sup>2</sup> They were introduced at the Miami home of their mutual friends Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz shortly before Gonzalez-Torres's death. Teresita Fernández shared this anecdote with me in April 2000.

<sup>3</sup> 'In-between' is a phrase used by the artist in a taped interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist made for the Museum in Progress in 1994.

<sup>4</sup> The fax was sent by the artist to Jennifer Flay, his friend and Paris gallerist, on 24 June 1994, and is in Ms Flay's gallery archives.

<sup>5</sup> The word 'virus' was used by the artist in the video interview cited in note 3. The quotation is excerpted from his interview with Tim Rollins in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993, p.23.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Dorment, 'Beauty and joy in the face of death', *Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 7 June 2000, p.23.

<sup>7</sup> According to Andrea Rosen, of the artist's estate, in a conversation with this author in May 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Rollins, op.cit., p.23.

<sup>9</sup> 'Gift sphere' is a term used by Lewis Hyde to describe the result of what an artist does in reconciling his or her 'inner gift' with the marketplace. See Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, London: Vintage, 1999, p.276.

<sup>10</sup> Rollins, op.cit., p.23.

<sup>11</sup> Hyde, op.cit., p.280.

<sup>12</sup> For these insights, I am indebted to Richard Sennett, *Authority*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1993, especially pp.125–70. The phrase 'crisis of authority' is used by Sennett in conjunction with his reading of Hegel's discussion of liberty in his *Phenomenology*.

<sup>13</sup> Rollins, op.cit., p.27.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>16</sup> These are artists named by Gonzalez-Torres as those who most affected his artistic production in the 1980s, his formative years. Ibid., p.26.

<sup>17</sup> Appropriation also provided a vehicle for blurring the distinctions between popular and high culture, and Gonzalez-Torres often recycled snapshots and postcards as a basis for his jigsaws. Gonzalez-Torres

was forever taking snapshots. They were sometimes used as the basis of works but were also one of the ways in which he communicated with his friends. He never officially designated them part of his oeuvre. A study of the snapshots in his work was the subject of the exhibition *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: snapshots* presented at the Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, from 26 September to 17 December 1999.

<sup>18</sup> This story was shared with me by Andrea Rosen in May 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Rollins, op.cit., p.23.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Spector in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, op.cit., p.87, note 21.

<sup>24</sup> Spector, ibid., p.17.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Searle, 'All this, and free sweets too', *Guardian*, Tuesday 6 June 2000, p.13.

<sup>26</sup> See Nancy Spector's excellent exposition of this theme in the artist's work in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, pp.39–87. *Traveling* was also the title of a major touring exhibition of his work organised collaboratively by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, and the Renaissance Society, Chicago, in 1993. The exhibition changed form significantly as it travelled in response to the different contexts of each institution.

<sup>27</sup> Spector, op.cit., p.65.

<sup>28</sup> See Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1998, p.xiii.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.ix.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.xiv.

<sup>31</sup> The artist quoted in an interview with Bruce Ferguson in *Rhetorical Image*, exh.cat., New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991, p.48.

<sup>32</sup> Spector, op.cit., pp.65–66. In her landmark study, Spector provides further insights into this connection between space and place by looking at the artist's work in relation to Michel Foucault's idea of

'heterotopia'. Heterotopic zones are sites 'without a material geography', 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.' The concept of heterotopia allows for a single space to incorporate disjunctions and discontinuities of location as well as of time. See Spector, op.cit., p.28.

<sup>33</sup> Spector cites as specific examples the artist's choice of works for each site of *Traveling*, such as works related to 'racial conflict and economic devastation' when the exhibition was in LA, and works that would play off against a 'backdrop of political intrigue, bureaucratic gridlock, and homophobia' in Washington, DC. See Spector, op.cit., pp.65–72.

<sup>34</sup> Searle, op.cit., p.12.

<sup>35</sup> See Andrea Rosen "'Untitled (The Never Ending Portrait)" in Dietmar Elger, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1997, p.52.

<sup>36</sup> After the original installation of **"Untitled" (Natural History)**, 1990, Gonzalez-Torres decided that the thirteenth photograph included in the work was not to be exhibited publicly.

<sup>37</sup> Rosen, op.cit., p.52.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>39</sup> See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, excerpts reprinted in Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp.139–43.