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felix gonzalez-torres

projects



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Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

Wallace Stevens,
from *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour*

These lines from a Wallace Stevens poem describe a fictive space, a dwelling place constructed from imagination. Upon rereading these words in late 1991, the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres realized that some deep memory of them lay behind his decision, earlier that year, to photograph his own empty double bed. Closely cropped, Gonzalez-Torres's photograph, which is displayed here in the Museum's Projects gallery and on twenty-four billboards throughout New York City, is an intensely private image that recalls the intangible space Stevens described.

Gonzalez-Torres came across *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour* in a book of Stevens's poetry given to him by his lover, Ross, in 1988. Between the time of this gift and the present moment lie not only years, but irrevocable loss. In 1991, Ross, whom Gonzalez-Torres has referred to in the past as his only audience, his public of one, died of AIDS. His illness and, ultimately, his early and tragic death permeate the panorama of Gonzalez-Torres's art.

Two risks are taken in introducing the topics of homosexual love and death at the outset of this discussion. First, there is a chance this work will be misinterpreted as being only about AIDS. And second, there will always be those who find in such subjects cause for discomfort. Yet the risks are intentional. For as the artist himself has said "[My work] is all my personal history, all that stuff . . . gender and sexual preference. . . . I can't separate my art from my life."

In striking this intimate note, then, the aim is not to limit our perception of Gonzalez-Torres and his work, but to ground it in reality. It is to begin with the artist's own story about the origins of the image of this vast bed. It is also to emphasize what is really at issue here: not private revelations—of personal history and sexual preference—but what happens to such revelations when they are placed in a public context. Much of Gonzalez-Torres's art questions what we mean when we describe things as "private" or as "public." Are we referring to private lives, for example, or private thoughts? To private property or to private spaces? Are we responding to how these meanings conflict, intersect, and draw significance from their apparent opposite, that which is "public"—public personas, public opinions, public art, public space?

The artist uses diverse formal means to explore this territory; he works with billboards and books, words and images; he uses materials that range from candies and cookies to jigsaw puzzles and stacks of paper; he takes advantage of commonplace techniques such as offset printing and photography to make his art. In so doing, he creates work that can adapt, chameleonlike, to whatever a particular set of circumstances requires.

One way to think about Gonzalez-Torres's art and about the questions of public versus private is to think about the conceptual and physical spaces in between things. In his

"caption" or "dateline" pieces, the artist runs apparent non sequiturs such as "Pol Pot 1975 Prague 1968 Robocop 1987 H Bomb 1954 Wheel of Fortune 1988 Spud" in white type across the bottom of black sheets of paper. Here he asks the viewer to consider not only the correlations of the events or things named, but also the historical or conceptual gaps between them.

In an analogic manner, Gonzalez-Torres invites people to take away pieces of his candy-spill and paper-stack sculptures, activating the literal physical terrain between audience and art object, rather than the conceptual space of history. By focusing on the public implications of a private individual's actions, Gonzalez-Torres complicates conventional distinctions between the two realms.

Like those of many other artists of his generation, Gonzalez-Torres's concerns extend beyond the self-contained boundaries of the art object to encompass the circumstances that surround it. At issue here is not only the artist's choice of image (his bed) and medium (photography) but also the decision of where and how to display the picture (on billboards, scattered across New York City, repeated twenty-four times over, enlarged to superhuman scale). The exhibition focuses not only on the photograph's personal content but also on its social context and on the inextricable connections and differences between the two.

Whereas in previous works Gonzalez-Torres has taken elements from the public discourse—newspaper snippets for instance—and isolated them in the center of large sheets of paper, here the process is reversed. Rather than clipping something from the mass media and repositioning it within the clean smooth space of a work of art, he makes the photograph of the bed the informational fragment, and collages it into the broad and varied pattern of the contemporary urban landscape.

The artist has explained that by "taking a little bit of information and displaying this information in absolutely ironic and illogical meetings," he hopes to reveal the real meaning of issues. The juxtaposition of an image that we are inclined to read as private and a space usually conceived of as public is what Gonzalez-Torres would describe as an "illogical meeting." When we call something illogical, we are essentially saying that it runs counter to our expectations. A bed, for instance, might most simply be defined as one of the smallest amounts of space that we can call our own. But Gonzalez-Torres presents his audience with something quite different—a bed that has been recast in a new and extraordinary form. Some of our most basic associations with this familiar piece of furniture—its human scale, its domestic location—are upset.

In displaying his work not only within the relatively intimate space of the museum but also outdoors, the artist challenges yet another assumption. Most of this exhibition is not here in the museum—where we naturally expect it to be—but elsewhere. The gallery contains only keys to the whole: a billboard-scale enlargement of the photograph of the bed, identical to those posted throughout the city, and this brochure, which documents the billboards in situ and guides viewers to their sites. Museumgoers enter the gallery only to find that the artist wants to send them back out into the world.

By presenting this work in twenty-four different loca-

tions, the artist shifts emphasis away from the photograph's content to its context. Through its reiteration, what becomes distinctive is not the image, but what surrounds it. The white, undifferentiated surface of the gallery wall is supplanted by the variegated features of industrial, residential, and commercial zones. Given the vitality of these places, it becomes almost impossible to keep our eyes on the photograph. This is the artist's intention. The viewer is encouraged to note the contrasts between the rich colors and textures of the local scene and the gray and white tones of the photograph. The artwork and peripheral phenomena (passing cars, architectural details, advertisements, and signs) trade places, slipping back and forth between the center and margins of our focus.

Yet while city and image vie for our attention, the urban landscape serves as a colorful foil against which the photograph's absolute reticence and interiority are revealed. Set high above the street, the image of the bed is literally remote from the viewer. Thus what may at first seem to be an act of self-revelation—the placing of one's bed on public display—ultimately gives nothing away. Rather than being confronted, as we might anticipate, with intimate clues to the artist's presence, we are instead presented with overwhelming absence.

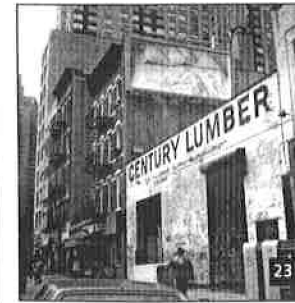
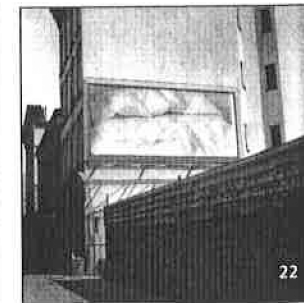
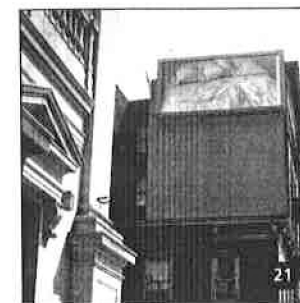
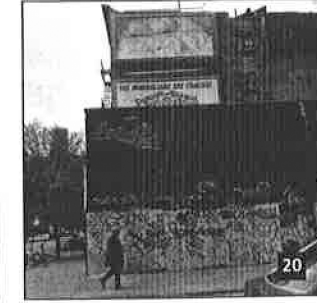
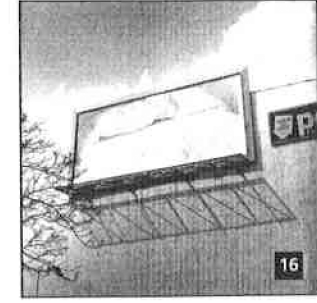
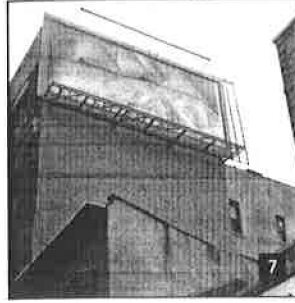
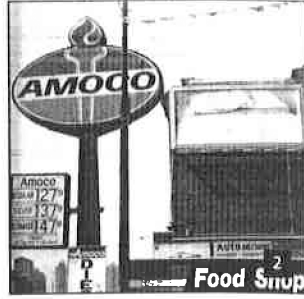
Abseⁿce shadows Gonzalez-Torres's work in every way. Rumpled bed sheets and dented pillows are presented both as evidence of and as a sign for two absent human bodies. Ghostly contours are all that is left of beings who are no longer there. Pasted to and inseparable from both gallery wall and billboard surface, the image hugs its supports rather than taking up space. To remove the picture is to destroy it. Awareness of this fact heightens our consciousness of the physical fragility that inhabits the work as a whole.

Also absent are human touch, which is banished by the use of photography, and color, which is eliminated by the use of black-and-white film. In addition, there is no original. No "unique" art object is presented, and the "whole" of this work can never be seen all at one time. In each instance, what is visible is defined by the invisible. Presence, whether of bodies in bed or of art in a gallery, becomes only a mirror of things unseen.

When Gonzalez-Torres's photograph is compared to other billboard displays, it becomes clear that something else is missing. There is no language, no logo or label. Through the omission of caption or text, Gonzalez-Torres leaves the picture's significance open-ended, responding to the varied nature of his audience—wanderer, worker, commuter, city-dweller, all those who will pass the billboards by—and to the wide range of associations they may bring to the work.

Surrounded by the predominantly vertical structures of New York City, Gonzalez-Torres's bed is resolutely recumbent. An empty bed invites us all to "climb in," no matter who we are—gay or straight, male or female, black or white. Thus, the artist establishes a common ground. At the same time, one of the merits of art like this is that it reminds us that no one work of art, no single image, means the same thing to everyone.

Unmade beds with tousled sheets may provoke sexual fantasies for some, and evoke painful memories for others. Nearly all of us were born in beds, and many of us know



people who have died in them. Between these moments of birth and death, beds are a place where we can rest. And in this city with its huge homeless population, the image of a bed reminds us of something lost.

For Gonzalez-Torres, the bed suggests not only personal and social realities, but another reality, which is the law. To him, one of the most important meanings to be attached to this work returns us to the question raised at the start: what do we consider public and what do we deem private? While most of us might prefer to think our beds are private, the artist insists they are anything but, and the law concurs.

In the 1986 case *Bowers versus Hardwick*, the Supreme Court determined that the zone of privacy—that area which in principle we can call our own—does not encompass a private individual's right to engage in certain sexual acts. This decision frames Gonzalez-Torres's perception of the bed: for him it stands as a legislated and socially contested zone. For him private space no longer exists.

This said, Gonzalez-Torres is uncomfortable with the label "political," fearing that the larger meanings of his work will be impoverished. Yet his art is far from political in the limited sense of the word. It does not simply illustrate a programmatic message at the expense of form. It is not, in other words, *about* politics. If anything, it seeks to act as politics, to trigger action of some sort, any sort, inspired by the artist's fundamentally romantic desire to "make this a better place for everyone."

Action for Gonzalez-Torres is not an abstract matter. Nor need it take place on a grand scale. Everything begins with the individual, in this case with the museum visitor who leaves, ready to cast a fresh eye upon her or his surroundings. What is important is the idea of passage, from museum to street, from the personal (the loss of a loved one) to the political (the loss of privacy), from private to public, and then back again. At issue are notions of change and renewal, the idea that meanings are not static but shift according to who we are and where we are at any given moment.

These billboards will remain in place only through the end of June. Twenty-four in number, they commemorate the date of the death of the artist's lover, Ross. At the end of June, they too shall pass, torn down to make way for new images, new messages, new meanings. In the photographic print from which they were generated, however, lies the potential for hope. A photograph promises the possibility of replication, of reemergence in a different time and under different historical circumstances, a moment when this poignant image of "a dwelling in the evening air" may come to mean very different things.

Anne Umland, Curatorial Assistant

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Güaimaro, Cuba, in 1957 and now lives and works in New York City. He has exhibited extensively in recent years in both national and international exhibitions, and is a member of Group Material, an art collaborative dedicated to cultural activism. Further information on the artist is available at the Museum's Information Desk.

Billboard locations

Each billboard image is 10'5" high and 22'8" wide. Unless otherwise noted, the billboards are in Manhattan.

1. 2511 Third Avenue/East 137th Street, Bronx
2. 144th Street/Grand Concourse, Bronx
3. 157 Kings Highway/West 13th Street, Brooklyn
4. 30 Dekalb Avenue/Flatbush, Brooklyn
5. 412 Fifth Avenue/8th Street, Brooklyn
6. 47–53 South 5th Street/Berry Street, Brooklyn
7. 765 Grand Street/Humboldt Street, Brooklyn
8. 656 Metropolitan Avenue/southeast corner Leonard Street, Brooklyn
9. 133 8th Avenue/West 16th Street
10. 1886–88 Park Avenue/East 129th Street
11. 31–33 Second Avenue/East 2nd Street
12. 27 Cooper Square/northeast corner East 5th Street
13. 520 East 14th Street
14. 2060 Second Avenue/southeast corner East 106th Street
15. 77–79 Delancey Street/southeast corner Allen Street
16. 275 West Street/Desbrosses Street
17. 254 West 42nd Street/between 7th and 8th Avenues
18. 365 West 50th Street/between 8th and 9th Avenues
19. 310 Spring Street/Renwick Street
20. 950 Columbus Avenue/West 107th Street
21. 13 Carmine Street/northeast corner Bleeker Street
22. 504 West 44th Street/between 10th and 11th Avenues
23. 1873 Second Avenue/East 97th Street
24. 31–11 21st Street, Queens

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Cover: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Untitled. 1991. Black-and-white photograph. Dimensions vary depending on installation.

Billboard photographs © Peter Muscato and Alessandra Mannoni, 1992