

## MASSIMODECARLO

*Blue water meeting endless sky,  
That's what you are to me  
(You're my lover)  
-Working Week, I thought I'd Never See You Again*

There are those times when certain things insinuate themselves into your brain. A phrase, like the one above, might leap out of a song almost as if by accident, slowly assuming significance. Inversely, sometimes information is so spectacular, you cannot help but take notice. Network news reports of hostages released, or countries in turmoil, or mounting deaths due to AIDS can have this effect.

Some early works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres articulate such an assimilation of popular culture and historical events. These date works, as they have been called, collapsed memory and history into an irrational list of events, commenting on our culture's obsession with monitoring and regulation. A typical work might list Anita Bryant's 1977 crusade against homosexuality next to 1980's design craze, High Tech. These date works began as framed photostats, yet eventually evolved into a sort of extreme egalitarian sculpture – stacks of paper with their lists of events printed low on their respective pages.

*Untitled (Still Life)*, 1989, a small stack work consisting of grey captions on light blue paper, had the same look as Gonzalez-Torres' earlier historical date works with the same typeface and placement of text on the page, yet contained the following information: "Red Canoe 1987 Paris Blue Flowers 1984 Harry the Dog 1983 Blue Lake 1986 Interferon 1989 Ross 1983". This was the first of Gonzalez-Torres' "portrait" works, listing intensely personal moments from the subject's life, denying the viewer easy entry into the work while at the same time achieving an emotional evocativeness unknown in the "date" works. Each viewer's knowledge of lack of knowledge of the subject, coupled with their own relationship to the various "clues" can make the experience of "reading" this piece profoundly variable. The meaning of the work is as subjective, or even more subjective, than the moments chosen as the content. In such a work, Gonzalez-Torres has gone beyond a subjective examination of culture and forged an examination and exploration of subjectivity itself.

Even while probing the new territory of more personal work, Gonzalez-Torres has not limited himself, ever shifting back and forth from his more "private" and "public" works, blurring the distinction between the two. An early candy "spill" piece, *Untitled (A Corner of Baci)*, 1990, sited a 40 pound mound of Baci chocolates in the corner of a room. Like his paper stacks, Gonzalez-Torres' candy works are meant to be sampled by the public; a viewer can come away with a part of the work which can either be eaten or kept. In the Baci corner spill, what took the quietly subversive act of giving parts of the sculpture away to be eaten by the public even one step further was the small wax paper messages to be found beneath the candies' beautiful foil wrappers: each candy comes with a quotation, translated into four languages, on the subject of love. Each taker was "kissed" with sugar and love, yet each "kiss" is essentially different; there are a vast variety of quotations used. In another work, Gonzalez-Torres supplied viewers with good fortunes in this *Untitled (Fortune Cookie Corner)*, 1990. However, such sweet tidings are not without their cynical edge, as was apparent in a more recent work using Bazooka bubbler gum, the fleshy pink gum named after heavy artillery that includes a small cartoon and riddle printed on its inner wrapper. *Untitled (USA Today)*, 1990, named after a moderate to right-wing American newspaper, possessed a similar sharp retort, with its 300 pounds of red, white, and blue candy sitting en masse in a corner.

The aforementioned candy corners and spills all functioned in a similar fashion to the historical date works, imparting seemingly random bits of data to their viewers. Each piece of information clearly exists as a part of a whole or totality, independent yet constitutive. In this way, the candy

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spills are like the stacks, and both are akin to Gonzalez-Torres' puzzles, in which the artist has had various photographs laminated onto board and cut into a jigsaw puzzle. The puzzles' subjects range from a fuzzy image of a crowd culled from a newspaper or magazine to a snapshot of recent footsteps in the snow. In these cases, the images relate to the fragility of the puzzle itself; both the half-toned image of the crowd and the endangered nature of footsteps in the snow easily speak to the relative ease with which each image could dissolve into tiny bits of visual information. And the fragility also relates to a collective memory of puzzles as a part of childhood, a memory referenced in a puzzle featuring a childhood photo of the artist himself.

The different types of Gonzalez-Torres' work have also converged on specific information at times. Oscar Wilde's trial for charges of homosexuality appeared as a historical date, along with other events important to the gay community, on a Greenwich Village billboard. The Wilde reference was put in a context of repression and empowerment, such as the U.S. Supreme Court's 1986 decision upholding individual state's sodomy laws and the creation of the People With AIDS Coalition in 1985. A photographic puzzle, however, acts as a different kind of memorial, picturing a fleeting tourist-type snapshot of Wilde's grave. Another testament to Wilde's influence and importance was a quote from Wilde himself, a statement about love found wrapped around an Italian chocolate taken from *Untitled (A Corner of Baci)*.

These correspondences have not ended with definite cultural references, however. The light blue color of *Untitled (Still Life)*, 1989, has also been used in many other of Gonzalez-Torres' works. It has appeared in various forms in paper stack works, as a stack of solid light blue paper and as stack with a light blue printed rectangle surrounded by a thin white border, to describe only two. A wall painted with the same light blue also appeared behind a corner spill of silver candies in *Untitled (Loverboys)*, 1991. The blue in Gonzalez-Torres work means a number of things at once. It is a color of both romance and melancholy, love and memory. Its shifting meaning is curiously appropriate for the stack and candy spill works, changing with each viewer's interpretation of their moment of the piece. Obviously, blue is also a color that symbolizes boy or boys, a meaning Gonzalez-Torres subverts with his titles (*Loverboy*, *Loverboys*, etc.) that refer to homosexual desire.

A recent sculpture, a stage for a go-go dancer, was also painted blue and bordered by small white lights. The blue color of the stage was a reference to the gay subcultural phenomenon of go-go boys, as well as a nod to blue as a color of charged expression. Gonzalez-Torres' go-go stage, with the dancer's unannounced performances, opened up a space for individual sexual, physical, and emotional venting and made issues of voyeurism and exhibitionism seem secondary.

Such is the conflict within Gonzalez-Torres' work. Issues of the personal and the social are constantly foregrounded over one another. History is privileged at one point, memory at another. Yet it is precisely this difficulty that contains the work, helping it to slowly give over its meanings to the viewer. The candy spills and the paper stack pieces subtly impart their allegorical meanings. Whether poetic or critical, the intents insinuate themselves in the viewer's mind as stealthily as they might enter the viewer's physical space. Perhaps a sheet from a paper stack piece is folded up and saved in a drawer or pinned to the wall as a poster, reiterating its message every time it is looked at. Perhaps the sweetness of a piece of candy from a work with the parenthetical title "*Rossmore*," the name of a street upon which the artist once lived, gives the viewer the slightest inkling of the flavor of a memory Gonzalez-Torres holds of a time he spent at that place.

© Steven Evans. Felix Gonzalez-Torres at Massimo De Carlo, from September 17 to October 20, 1991. Milano. Cover photo: *Untitled (Placebo)* 1991, 1500 lbs of silver wrapped candies. Detail. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, NYC. Photo credit: Peter Muscato.