

## Stuff About Things

### Episode 18: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Clocks, and Candy

Wait, am I recording? You are listening to *Stuff About Things*, an art history podcast. All right, let's Van Gogh. Hello, and welcome, bienvenue, benvenuto, willkommen to *Stuff About Things*, an art history podcast. My name is Lindsay, and I am a Ph.D. student in -- give you three guesses what -- art history, you say? You are correct. What gave that away? This is my little corner of the internet, where I come to escape the daily drudge, which is researching and writing my dissertation. You could only read and write about something for so long before you go crazy. For each of these episodes, I choose a thing that I've always wanted to know more about, I research that thing, and then I tell you stuff about it. Hence, the podcast's name -- *Stuff About Things*. Simple and to the point.

Before we jump into today's episode, I have a favor to ask of all of you. If you like the podcast, which I hope that you do, I would really appreciate it if you would rate and review it on iTunes. I put an obscene amount of time and energy into making these episodes, which is why they are monthly-ish, and I think that they've gotten a lot better since I started. I would be incredibly grateful if you would just take two minutes to hop on iTunes and leave me a review. A huge thank you to anyone who does that. Thank you, thank you.

Also, you may hear some noises in the background of today's episode. I am dog-sitting two massive yellow labs that are currently supervising me -- oh, hi. Speak of the devil. Hi, Zigs. One of them just walked in the closet and is now licking the carpet, so, yeah, that's a -- that's what we're working with, and we will make do. If you would like to see managers Gus and Ziggy, I will post a picture of them slumbering beside me on the podcast's Instagram page.

I am really excited and a little bit nervous for today's episode, because I am talking about one of my favorite artists of all time, and I want to do him justice. That artist is Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a contemporary artist who was active in the 1980s and 1990s. Felix Gonzalez-Torres created some of the coolest, most touching and relatable works of art that I have ever had the privilege of seeing and consuming. Yes, consuming. More on that later. Despite being one of my favorite artists, I hadn't even heard of Felix Gonzalez-Torres until about three years ago, when a work of his was displayed at a museum where I was interning. Mind you, my specialty is the Italian Renaissance or, like, thereabouts with a little bit of French Modernism sprinkled in here and there, so it's no surprise that I don't know that much about contemporary art. But the truth, dear listeners, is straight-up for a long time, I did not like contemporary art. I'm the person who would, if they went to the contemporary wing of a museum at all, would usually be going there to use the bathroom, because -- pro tip -- contemporary art wings are usually newer, which means the bathrooms tend to be nicer. Or worse, I'd walk around the contemporary wing, like, pretending to be enjoying myself, like, "Oh, yeah, that's nice. I don't get it, but, like, it's fine. It's interesting, I guess." The reality is that I simply didn't know enough to appreciate what I was seeing, and I do still struggle with it. Like, I'm not going to lie, still struggle with it. But Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his art were my gateways to a new-found appreciation for and curiosity about contemporary art, and I wanted to take this opportunity to learn more about him, his work, and to share all of that knowledge with you.

In this episode, we are going to talk about it all, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, his life, his work, and the events, relationships, and ideas that he engaged with, including a brief history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that hit the United States and the world in the 1980s. Throughout the episode, I will be referencing any number of Gonzalez-Torres's works, but I will focus primarily on the work of art he made using candy. Yes, candy. No wonder he's my favorite artist. As always, I will post information on my source materials as well as any supporting images on the podcast's website, [stuffaboutthingspodcast.com](http://stuffaboutthingspodcast.com), and I'll give shout-outs at

the end of the episode. With that, let us get into it. This is the part where I tell you stuff about a person and the beautiful things that he made.

First, some background. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, which is a mouthful to say, was born in 1957 in Cuba, which is where he spent most of his early childhood. It was in Cuba that Gonzalez-Torres first encountered two of his greatest passions in life: arts and cats. In the very short autobiography that Gonzalez-Torres wrote in the form of a timeline, he fondly recalled the year 1964, which is when his dad bought him his first set of watercolors and his first cat, which I thought was very sweet. In 1971, Gonzalez-Torres and one of his sisters moved to Spain for a very short period of time before settling in with extended family in Puerto Rico. The rest of his family stayed in Cuba. Gonzalez-Torres spent the rest of his young adulthood in Puerto Rico, where he pursued a Bachelor's degree at the University of Puerto Rico, San Juan. He moved to New York City in 1979 to complete that degree at the Pratt School of Design, and it's safe to say that he didn't love Pratt. Tough for all you Pratt-heads out there, I know, but Gonzalez-Torres would go on to talk major trash about Pratt in an interview, even saying, "Spend your money on a car, but don't waste it on Pratt." Ooh, ouch. When the interviewer warned Gonzalez-Torres that the people at Pratt might not like hearing that, Gonzalez-Torres didn't give a damn. He just responded with, "They know."

The Pratt Institute clearly did not scare him off of education. Gonzalez-Torres went on to pursue a graduate degree in photography from the International Center of Photography -- as you do -- which is also in New York City. As part of his master's program, Gonzalez-Torres read a lot of art theory, which is essentially people writing about art and attempting to answer the big art questions: What is art? How should it be defined? What was art's place and purpose in the past? What is that place and purpose today? All that kind of stuff. Felix Gonzalez-Torres was very well-read and intellectually engaged with those theoretical concepts of art. He read all of the stuff that still haunts my dreams from my own coursework, including names like Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Bertolt Brecht. Now, if you've never heard

of those names, consider yourself blessed. If you are an insomniac or a lover of intellectual torture, maybe check out some books by those dudes I mentioned at the library. You'll be cured.

Art history -- oh, art history, I just almost bad-mouthed art history -- art theory can be very interesting and enlightening. Some people freaking love it. But it can also take a lot of mental energy to understand, and sometimes it just takes alcohol. Gonzalez-Torres advocated for reading art theory at various stages of soberness to open the mind up to the author's ideas -- and I say, "Cheers to that." Art theory was critical to Gonzalez-Torres's formation as an artist. Gonzalez-Torres himself credits art theory as the gateway that led him to create some of the works of art that he did. He also said that art theory allowed him to create art with greater freedom, with a greater sense of possibility of what his art could be. For Gonzalez-Torres, art was first and foremost about ideas, albeit ideas that were given physical form. He wanted to make his viewers think, to make us engage intellectually and emotionally with his art, to make us question why things are the way that they are and what our role in that looks like.

After graduating from the ICP with a Master of Fine Arts, Gonzalez-Torres split his time between creating his own art, teaching as an adjunct professor, and making art as part of an artists' collective. In the 1970s and 1980s, artists would frequently come together, make groups, and then create art under the title of that group, which could also include hosting exhibitions. Most of these artists' collectives focused on cultural activism, community education, and inclusivity in the art world. Gonzalez-Torres was part of one of those groups, specifically the group called Group Material. As its manifesto says, Group Material was dedicated to "the creation, organization, and promotion of art dedicated to social communication and political change." Gonzalez-Torres joined that group in 1987 and was an active member until 1991.

I am not going to go into Group Material the way that I perhaps should, given that I think this episode is already going to be pretty long. It's actually a really interesting group, and you can find a lot of great information online about it. I'll post some links. But I did want to mention it, because it was an important

part of his career. As both a member of Group Material and in the creation of his own art, Gonzalez-Torres created works that pushed for social activism, political change, and personal awareness of current events. He and his peers also challenged the way that art was made, the way it was marketed, and the way it was consumed and by whom. In an interview once, he said that he made art for people who watched *Golden Girls* in La-Z-Boy armchairs. To update that reference for 2019, I'd say that that's people who binge *Parks and Recreation* for the billionth time and consider their couch their dining room table. Or maybe that's just me.

One of the major things that defines Felix Gonzalez-Torres's art is his use of nontraditional materials. He made art out of some of the most mundane items that you can think of. These materials included -- but of course were not limited to -- billboards, string lights, stacks of paper, puzzle pieces, and, as we will discuss shortly, clocks and candy. He even created art from -- get this -- beaded curtains. Confession: I definitely had a set of beaded curtains in my closet doorway in the late 1990s. Got them for my birthday. They were green, and they looked -- chef's kiss -- fantastic alongside the bright blue inflatable chair that I also got that birthday. I think that Felix Gonzalez-Torres would have approved. But, FYI, beaded curtains are a freaking terrible idea. They are the absolute worst. They get tangled together, they snag on your sweaters, they can hurt if you go through them too fast, and your three brothers can and will use them as a weapon against you. But I digress.

In addition to his use of nontraditional materials, there is also another thing that is constantly mentioned whenever you read about Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and that is the HIV and AIDS crisis of the 1980s. As an openly gay artist working in the time of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, Gonzalez-Torres and his work are inextricably linked to the disease. Now, I do want to say very clearly that Gonzalez-Torres was a multi-faceted artist whose work engaged with any number of things, but I think it's safe to say that the HIV and AIDS epidemic was an overwhelming presence in his life, both in terms of the time in which he was living as well as in his day-to-day lived experience. As someone who was born in 1990 -- that's me; now

you know how old and decrepit I am -- I, of course, knew about the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Anyone with a half decent sex education program would know of the epidemic. But I didn't live through it. I became a cognizant human being in, what, like 2000? I was worried about the world ending. Now, obviously it's called an epidemic for a reason. It was really, really bad. However, it's really hard to grasp the gravity of something that you didn't experience. I actually learned most of what I know about the HIV and AIDS epidemic -- other than, obviously, the research I did for this podcast -- from my art history lectures and courses and museum presentations, because artists played a massive role in HIV and AIDS advocacy. And what I learned during those talks horrified me, and I wanted to include a brief history of the epidemic here. I think that that background is crucial, not only to Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his work but just, like, for a general person wanting to be an informed human being, and if art history was my way of learning about it, maybe this will be yours. If you lived through it or know about it, stick around. This can be just a super-depressing refresher for you.

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, while AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. As the name suggests, HIV is what you contract. It's the virus, and AIDS is the eventual result that that virus can lead to. The virus is spread through a number of ways, the most well-known of which is through the exchange of bodily fluids. Now, usually when we talk about exchanging bodily fluids, we are referring to sex. That includes semen, saliva, pre-ejaculate, and any other natural lubrications that the body makes. Now, never in my life did I think I'd be saying natural lubrication into a microphone for the entire internet to hear, but here we are. Life works in mysterious ways.

There are, of course, other ways that HIV could be spread, including blood transfusions, the sharing of needles, and from a mother to child via either pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding. Scientists believe that the disease originated in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the early 20th century. Note that the H in HIV stands for human. There's also a primate version of the immunodeficiency virus that eventually passed to humans. When I first read that, I got a little bit nervous about what people were doing with

those monkeys, but it turns out that the transmission of the virus from primate to human took place due to the consumption of meat from chimpanzees and monkeys and not another more nefarious activity.

So the virus gets transmitted to humans in the early 1900s, but the disease doesn't progress or, to be more specific, it doesn't progress in a known way until the 1970s. The first known case of HIV in the United States appeared in the late 1960s, but no one knew what it was at the time, because the term HIV and AIDS didn't even exist until the early 1980s, which is when shit really hit the fan. In 1981, five otherwise healthy men in Los Angeles all contracted the same rare lung infection. There was also a rare form of highly aggressive cancer that hit a group of, again, otherwise healthy men in California and New York, and doctors were stumped. Why were all of these rare diseases suddenly appearing in this particular group of people? It turns out that all of the affected individuals had something in common: they were all gay. And at first, doctors didn't know what to make of gay men becoming ill due to compromised immune systems, because no one had ever seen this happen before. If you don't know what the disease is, it's impossible to prevent or even manage it. And things got out of hand very quickly. By the end of 1981, there were 270 known cases of gay men with compromised immune systems in the United States. By the end of that year, 121 of those 270 people had died. That's nearly half of the men who contracted this mysterious disease that were dead within a year, which is a horrifying statistic, which was to become even more of a nightmare as the years progressed.

Up until 1982, this disease that seemed to be disproportionately affecting gay men was known as GRID, which stands for Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. That name alone underlines the common misconception that HIV is a quote-unquote gay disease, which of course it's not. HIV can spread in any number of ways, although the likelihood of contracting the virus does vary based on the type of contact you have with someone who is HIV-positive. There's also the rationale that a lot more people are probably having sex than, say, needing a blood transfusion. At least, I hope so, because one is generally a lot more fun than the other, so long as people are being safe, which a lot of people weren't, because

awareness then wasn't as pervasive as it is now. And, of course, modern-day notions of safe sex are much different than they were in the 1970s and 1980s.

I won't go into the whole history of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, but I do want to drive home how serious things were, so I'm going to throw some numbers at you. Remember that in 1981, there were 270 people identified in the USA as having what would become known as HIV and AIDS -- 270. By 1986, just five years later, there were over 37,000 reported cases of it. Over the course of five years, that number had jumped from the hundreds to the tens of thousands. And that's only identified cases. Like, who knows how many unidentified cases there were. For example, in 1987, there were 72,000 reported cases of AIDS worldwide, over half of which were in the US. However, medical professionals and scientists have estimated that that number -- 72,000 -- was actually probably closer to five to ten million cases throughout the world. That's insane. Seventy-two thousand compared to five to ten million. By the end of the 1990s, over 14 million people had died due to complications with AIDS. So many people had died that HIV and AIDS became the fourth leading cause of death worldwide.

The cultural reaction to the AIDS epidemic wasn't great. Surprise, surprise. The 1980s were a time of new conservatism, both politically and socially. It was the time of Ronald Reagan, of pushing back against rapidly changing social norms. The 1960s had brought gay liberation. Women were entering the workforce in larger numbers. Sex was becoming a more prominent topic in popular culture. God forbid. Can you imagine what the reaction would have been to *Game of Thrones* back then? Ugh. To be clear, there is never a great time for an epidemic. Like, epidemics equal bad all the time. But the 1980s were a period of both economic and social conservatism, and that was a particularly bad time for an epidemic that primarily affected gay people to hit. Social reactions to the epidemic were as bad as you might imagine them to be. The public's general reaction was one of fear, disgust, and pearl-clutching. People who were HIV-positive were frequently banned from school, evicted from their housing complexes, fired

from their jobs, even shunned by their families. As of the early 1990s, people who were HIV-positive were not allowed to enter the USA, a ban that wasn't lifted until 2010. That's just nine years ago.

The whole thing was a panic, because this was a new disease. People didn't know anything about it. And panic breeds misinformation. For a long time, HIV was considered the disease of gay men and drug addicts, which, of course -- I keep saying this -- was not the case, even though those two groups were heavily affected by the disease. There's also the fact that HIV had a high mortality rate, given that scientists were only beginning to develop medications with which to manage the disease, and anything associated with death tends to get a bad reputation.

This is all to say that the HIV/AIDS epidemic had an enormous cultural presence over the 1980s and 1990s. During that time, artists were instrumental in spreading awareness of the illness and attempting to correct misconceptions about it, to get people thinking differently. Felix Gonzalez-Torres was one such artist. But for Felix Gonzalez-Torres, HIV/AIDS affected all aspects of his life, from the very big elements -- such as, like, American culture and politics -- to the very personal, including his closest relationships and his own body.

That's all depressing as hell, so let's chase that with a love story. Gonzalez-Torres met the love of his life, Ross Laycock, at a gay bar in New York in 1983. As you do, the two fell madly in love and embarked on an eight-year relationship. Ross Laycock as a Canadian gentleman working as a sommelier, a wine professional. As if that's not enough for me to become his new best friend, he was remembered by friends as being funny, smart, joyful, and very handsome. I've seen pictures. I can confirm. Homeboy was cute.

From everything that I read, Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock enjoyed a very loving, passionate relationship that was ended far too soon when Laycock died due to complications with AIDS in 1991. Laycock was diagnosed with the illness just a few years before after a routine appendectomy -- he got his appendix

removed. The doctors did blood tests following his surgery, and the results came back. His blood had tested positive for HIV. Gonzalez-Torres took care of Laycock during the illness up until the very end, literally the last second. Gonzalez-Torres described the experience of taking care of Laycock as watching someone in the absolute prime of his life just disappear, made victim to an illness that had taken so many others and would take so many more. But that never deterred Gonzalez-Torres. He would go on to comment that as Laycock lost himself to the illness, Gonzalez-Torres only loved him more. I don't think that many people with HIV had the same experience.

Gonzalez-Torres's relationship with Laycock and the experience of losing him would have an enormous, astronomical impact on Gonzalez-Torres and his art. Gonzalez-Torres would pay tribute to his relationship with Laycock in any number of works, though I think the most beautiful of them -- in my opinion -- is one called "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers). All of Gonzalez-Torres's works are called "Untitled", but then they're accompanied by a more specific designator in parentheses. It was his way of allowing the viewer to bring their own spin to the work of art while still giving a hint as to the sentiments or ideas that he brought to the project while he was making it. Instead of me constantly saying, "'Untitled' parenthesis something else," I am going to refer to the works by "Untitled" and then their parenthetical names, which just makes things easier on me.

"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers) is definitely my favorite Felix Gonzalez-Torres work, because it really hits deep, and yet it's so freaking simple, and that, to me, is what makes his art so special. His artwork utilizes the simplest, most commonplace things to talk about some of life's most spectacular and painful moments, and I find that to be incredible. Like, how do you do that? How do you think that stuff up? It's amazing.

To create "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), Gonzalez-Torres started by taking two identical regular clocks -- just like regular ticky-tocky wall clocks. He then loaded them both with the same kind of battery, set them

to tick, and then hung them on the wall side by side. The idea is that the clocks will tick, and they will tock, and they will tell time. However, even though both clocks are the exact same make, model, material, etc., and they are powered by the exact same type of battery, the nature of those batteries and of the clocks themselves will cause one clock to stop ticking before the other one. One clock will stop, and the other will keep going.

The symbolism here should be obvious, especially since you know some backstory about Gonzalez-Torres. It's that the people we love die. Clocks tick side by side, and then one day, one clock stops ticking, and the other ticks on. There is, of course, a profound sadness to this idea. It's really freaking scary to think about yourself and your loved one as ticking clocks on a wall whose time will eventually run out. Like, that's horrifying. That's like my worst nightmare. But Gonzalez-Torres wanted to turn time into something beautiful. Not something stolen away, but something earned and given. No matter how much or how little time we have with our loved ones, that time is still a gift. We still have it. We met them in space and time, and we felt like we were ticking with them. Someday, that relationship will end, because it has to. We all die, that's just a fact of life. But it's the time that we had with the people that we loved that made things special, that made the absence of someone hurt so profoundly. Gonzalez-Torres distilled all of that into a single, simple work of art that involved hanging two clocks on a wall.

For Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers) was a love letter in the form of art to Ross Laycock, who died the same year that the artist made the work. Even though he made the work in 1991, it is clear this concept of time and clocks had been something that the two had discussed previously and that Gonzalez-Torres had been thinking about for a long time. In a 1988 letter to Laycock, which is typed out on a sheet of paper, Gonzalez-Torres wrote the following: "Don't be afraid of the clocks. They are our time. Time has been so generous to us. We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered fate by meeting at a certain time in a certain space. We are a product of the time. Therefore, we give that credit where it is due. Time. We are synchronized now and forever. I love you." Gonzalez-Torres then

drew two clocks side by side on the typed-out message. He would later call “Untitled” (Perfect Lovers) the scariest work that he ever made, because it forced him to confront the ticking clock as the love of his life was dying of a horrible illness. But in making his art, he forced himself to be grateful for the time that he had with Laycock, eight years spent loving someone else, all while facing the fact that Laycock’s life, his clock, was running out of battery and that Gonzalez-Torres would have to find some way to carry on without that synchronized heartbeat at his side.

There is also additional symbolism to the clocks. In addition to this beautiful idea of time as a gift, the clocks also served as a self-portrait of a man and his lover. In the 1980s and 1990s, as I said, society was overall more conservative -- or maybe more accurately, conservatism was the dominant narrative of the age. If Gonzalez-Torres were to actually put up a portrait of himself and Laycock, there would surely be some homophobic backlash that claims that the artist was attempting to push the gay agenda -- whatever exactly that is. I’m still not quite sure. But no one could complain about two clocks on the wall. If a homophobic jerk even tried to complain about two clocks on the wall pushing a homophobic agenda, then that person would look crazy, and rightly so. Gonzalez-Torres was very shrewd when it came to playing the system, but he was also highly inclusive in his art-making. He knew that for him, the clocks represented himself and Laycock. But he invited people to bring their own experiences and perspectives to the table as well -- to the clocks, I suppose.

Yes, the two clocks are entitled “Untitled” (Perfect Lovers), but not everyone has to see them like that. A person could interpret the clocks to be whomever they choose. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a lover. For example, when I look at (Perfect Lovers), I simultaneously can see Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock while also projecting my own life and experiences onto those clock faces. I can think of the dozens of loved ones that I have who are still ticking, too, or I can think of the loved ones whose clocks have stopped. I, the viewer, can take the idea of the artwork -- the idea of two clocks on a wall -- and interpret

them in a way that best suits my own experience. And in so doing, I have a relationship with the art. I feel it. I can appreciate it.

Some of Gonzalez-Torres's works are more conducive to that fluidity of interpretation than others, even if they take the same shape. This is especially true of Gonzalez-Torres's works that are made of candy -- dozens, if not hundreds, of pounds of candy. These candy works don't have a specific name. I'm just calling them candy works, though I've also seen them called candy spills. The idea behind these candy works is that Gonzalez-Torres would devise a concept of some sort, choose candies that fit that concept in some way, and then the candy would be displayed for people to not only view but take. You can literally go up to a work, take a piece of candy, and eat it, which is, like, the most unnatural thing to do in a museum environment. In museums, we are told not to touch the art and certainly not to eat it. But Gonzalez-Torres wanted his viewers to do just that. He would even chat with gallery attendants at museums where his candy works were shown and explain to them that people should indeed be encouraged to take a piece of candy. Depending on what work was displayed, the process of taking a piece of candy and eating it can have various meanings. Now, I chose a few different candy works to discuss so that you can get a better sense of precisely what that means.

The first candy work that I want to discuss is called "Untitled" (USA Today). This work features 300 pounds of candy wrapped in red, blue, and silver metallic cellophane. Of course, the silver is intended to be white, like an American flag, but it's silver. That's 300 pounds of red, white, and blue candy spilled out onto the floor. The way that the candy is displayed can differ based on the place, but one of the more common configurations is to arrange the candy in a corner to make it look like it's spilling forth from the wall. This particular candy work, "Untitled" (USA Today), is a commentary on both the news outlet, *USA Today*, as the title implies, but also the state of the United States of America in 1990 or, presumably, whenever you're engaging with the work. As a gay man, artist, and university professor, it's perhaps not surprising that Gonzalez-Torres was critical of rightwing media outlets. In the late 1980s and early 1990s,

*USA Today* was notoriously conservative in its viewpoints. It was a media outlet that was known for embracing more frivolous, “feel-good” stories and for practicing reductive journalism, which, you know, basically dumbed things down or made news stories more palatable for people to consume. It sugarcoated things.

On a more macro level, the candy spill also represented the predominant willingness of Americans to accept such stories. We get sucked in by the bright cellophane. Maybe there’s even a sense of patriotism as we bend down to take a piece of candy, presumably with the intention of eating it. You then walk around, sucking on this piece of candy, or, in my case, crunching it between your teeth until it’s dust, like a maniac. We are literally consuming something. In the case of “Untitled” (*USA Today*), we’re metaphorically consuming the idea of sugarcoated or frivolous news stories that shape our view of the world, and that’s, of course, still happening today -- maybe more than ever, especially given our unheard of ability to curate our own news intake, to ignore what we don’t want to face, and to fling the words “fake news” all over the place. If Felix Gonzalez-Torres was still alive and creating art today, I bet you that he would make a work called *Fox News*, and it would have a similar driving force behind it as “Untitled” (*USA Today*) does. But what would the candy be? Like, I still -- like, I think about that. So, like, would *Fox News* be like an off-brand cinnamon candy made with sugar substitutes? Like, that’s what I picture. But you might hate CNN and think that they taste like black licorice, I don’t know. It’s a game I like to play. Anyway, back to the point.

As with all of Felix Gonzalez Torres’s candy works, viewers were encouraged to take the piece of candy and eat it. Over the course of a day, you can literally watch the pile start to dwindle and take weird, jagged shapes, and the piles are usually replenished to their ideal weight, or somewhere thereabouts, before the next day.

Another one of Gonzalez-Torres's more famous candy works is called "Untitled" (Placebo). *Placebo*. There are a couple of iterations of this particular candy spill. From what I can tell, each version of "Untitled" (Placebo) features between 1,000 and 1,200 pounds of candy. These candies are usually wrapped in a single color of cellophane, specifically blue, silver, or gold, depending on which iteration you're seeing. Broadly speaking, Gonzalez-Torres conceived of this work in response to the AIDS epidemic.

Like "Untitled" (USA Today), which we just talked about, "Untitled" (Placebo) can operate on a couple of different levels interpretation-wise. If we take the name (Placebo) as a hint, we will probably think of each one of these candies, of which there are thousands, as a representation of the enormous amount of pills consumed by people who were HIV-positive in the 1980s. Of course, oftentimes the pills that were developed in hopes of managing HIV had little to no effect, especially in the 1980s, when many HIV-positive individuals were literally consuming placebos when they participated in any number of drug trials that were attempting to find a pill that would actually work. In the end, though, each pill that we take, placebo or not, are just an attempt to stave off our mortality for a little bit longer. And yet, the more pills that we take -- AKA, the more candy we remove from the pile -- the closer that mortality gets.

So if you sat in the corner of a gallery with "Untitled" (Placebo) before you, you could literally watch as the pile literally wastes away, as this neat rectangle of glittering candies becomes slowly reduced to jagged edges that seem to have no rhyme or reason. In addition to commenting more literally on the number of pills that people took in hopes of managing HIV and AIDS, the pile of candy could also represent the population of HIV-positive individuals, which, much like individual bodies, wasted away as science and medicine attempted to find a cure that, to this day, has not been found.

On a much more macro level of thinking, these individual candies could represent any number of things that we use in the modern day to distract ourselves, to self-medicate. Gonzalez-Torres once remarked that

after Ross died, he became reliant on sleeping pills, not necessarily because he was an addict, but because sleep was the only way he could think of to escape from the pain of losing his loved one. Those sleeping pills were his placebos. And yet no matter how many he took, he still always had to wake up.

When I think of “Untitled” (Placebo) in the context of my own experiences, I think of how much crap I put into my mind on a daily basis that does way more harm than good. For me, it’s the social media posts that I consume without thinking. It’s the tenth black dress I consider buying that might make my waist look fractionally thinner. It’s the vitamins I take to make my hair look good that I’m not convinced work but taste delicious. We all consume placebos. What Gonzalez-Torres’s work does is it asks us to become more aware of what those placebos are, how we consume them, and what the ultimate outcome of that consumption could possibly be.

And that’s what I love about his work, is that it has all of these different levels of interpretation, all of which are valid. I can bring my own interpretation to the table while still acknowledging the fact that he made this work in a specific environment and was commenting on a specific thing. It’s a give and a take between artist and viewer, on both a literal level of the artist giving us candy, and of us engaging in some way with the art.

The final candy work that I wanted to talk about is the one that I find the most touching – “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.). It’s a portrait of Ross Laycock that Gonzalez-Torres made in 1991, the year that Laycock died due to complications with AIDS. This particular candy spill features 175 pounds of brightly-colored candy in various shades -- red, yellow, purple, green, silver -- all of the colors. The ideal weight of this work is 175 pounds, as I said, which represents the healthy body of Ross Laycock, which slowly but surely wasted away as his illness progressed towards death. This portrait, to me, is the most interesting of Gonzalez-Torres’s candy works, because there really isn’t a clear meaning of what’s happening. I’ve read any number of interpretations, some of which directly contradicted others. But that’s

the beauty of the work -- it defies a single explanation. There isn't even supposed to be a single explanation. That's the point. If you think about a portrait of someone, it's supposed to remind you of them. And, yeah, maybe it's supposed to remind you of certain things over other less desirable things, but a person isn't any one thing, and their portrait shouldn't be, either. This particular candy spill, "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), is so beautiful in its full 170-pound glory. It's so happy and colorful, and you get this sense of pure joy and plenty. And then, as each person takes a piece, it gets smaller and smaller and smaller. It wastes away. It becomes something else. It loses its original glow, its original impressiveness, until soon it's just a single piece of candy on the floor, ready to be taken and eaten, erasing all visual traces of the original pile.

Now, that's clearly a metaphor for the physical deterioration of Laycock. Then again, there's also the fact that people are consuming these candies. You could, of course, interpret that as Sigmund Freud would and say that it's sexual. You could also say that it's spiritual. It's hard not to think about consuming "a person" and not think about the Catholic sacrament of communion, by which Jesus Christ is made material at every mass and consumed for the salvation of the faithful. Now, I'm not sure precisely what you would make of that and this portrait, but it's worth a thought.

And then you get the complete opposite side of things, which is one essay that I read likened the act of taking and consuming the candy as a metaphor for the transmission of HIV. I found that particularly disturbing, because what I envision when I think of consuming a piece of candy from this pile is that it's sort of an act of respect and remembrance for someone who is now more sensorial than physical -- someone who's not there in person but is there in spirit. Now, that's not to say that my interpretation is any more or less valid than anyone else's. It's not. It's simply mine. Another person might argue that in taking a piece of the candy, we become complicit in the wasting away of the larger pile, which is also true. And yet, taking a piece of candy is at the heart of the work. The faster people take the candy, the faster the pile wastes away, but in doing so, you are also moving the pile towards eventual replenishment.

This is all to say that the (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) creates tension between beauty and decay, between presence and absence, between taking and tasting. It's a portrait of contradictions and complications that inspires you to think. Above all else, that is precisely what Gonzalez-Torres wanted of us, his viewers. He wanted us to have a role, to complete his art by way of taking it piece by piece, and above all, he wanted to make us think.

And here's a real talk moment -- this is not scripted -- it took me forever to write this particular episode, because I kept thinking about the works of art, how there are so many contradictions and their potential interpretations, how you communicate that to someone, and it just made me realize that these works were meant to be conversations pieces. You're supposed to both relate to them on a personal level, but also be able to discuss them with others, to picture yourself in them in some way, to think about what kind of candy you would be, what kind of candy someone else would be. And that's why I love making this podcast. It allows me to talk to you about things that I love. Art is supposed to allow for communication and emotion and connection, and that's why Felix Gonzalez-Torres is one of my favorites.

Moving back to think about the candy works as a whole, there's clearly a democratic aspect of the work. Anyone who is in the museum, be you visitor or director or gallery attendant or intern, anyone can take a piece of candy. You could potentially stick whole handfuls of candy into your purse or pockets or, I don't know, down your pants. I don't know how you operate. But that brings up another question: does that mean that you own part of the work? Before you get any ideas, it definitely doesn't. Yes, you are now in possession of 12 pieces of candy that comprised, say, "Untitled" (Placebo). Congratulations, you're a candy hoarder. You get to eat the candy or, I don't know, find it behind your couch when you move out in six years. But having those 12 pieces of candy does not mean that you own a portion of "Untitled" (Placebo). It doesn't work like that.

So, how does it work? First and foremost, Gonzalez-Torres designed his candy spills to be consumed. There is no original “Untitled” (Placebo). That’s gone. It was digested by hundreds of people some 28 years ago. Even if by some miracle some piece of candy still existed from that original, you would definitely not want to eat it. Or, like, at least, like think about it before you do. To illustrate this, let’s do a one-sided role play. Let’s pretend that I, Lindsay, am a super-rich person, which in case you needed confirmation of it, I am not. In this alternate timeline in which I am super-rich, I find out that “Untitled” (Placebo) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres is now on the art market. I have the ability to buy it. Okay, cool. So what exactly would I get if I purchased “Untitled” (Placebo)? After all, there is no original “Untitled” (Placebo). That’s gone. If I did purchase “Untitled” (Placebo), I would get a document called a certificate of ownership. I don’t get anything else. It’s just that document. In procuring that document, I enter into a good faith relationship with the now late Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his representatives. The certificate of ownership in my possession certifies that I own the original concept of “Untitled” (Placebo). It also gives me directions about how to go about supplying and displaying the artwork. The certificate puts me in control of when, where, and, to some degree, how “Untitled” (Placebo) is exhibited. The certificate of ownership does lay out some ground rules about how to give the concept of “Untitled” (Placebo) physical form. Thankfully, I’m rich, so I don’t even mind that I have to BYOC -- Buy Your Own Candy. It’s up to me, the owner, to buy at least a thousand-ish pounds of silver-wrapped candy, thus achieving the ideal weight of the work. But let’s say that that silver-wrapped candy isn’t available. In fact, there was a candy factory that did provide quite a bit of candy for Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s works that actually went out of business, so that candy type is gone. But if that happens, the certificate of ownership states that I may buy the next closest thing. I may then display the candy in any way that I choose. Do I want it in a rectangle? Do I want it in a pile? Do I want to stick it in a corner? That’s my choice as the super-rich owner of the work.

It’s also up to me whether or not I choose to replenish the candy and, if so, how often I do that. It’s also up to me, the owner, whether or not I loan out the work. Let’s say that a museum approaches me, and

they're like, "Hey, I want to exhibit 'Untitled' (Placebo)." If I say yes, I am giving the museum the right to give physical form to the concept for "Untitled" (Placebo). The curator of that museum operates under the same tenants of the certificate of ownership as I do. He or she can decide how to display the work and whether or not it gets replenished.

Ultimately, the artwork is about the concept, not about its material expression. I can choose to keep "Untitled" (Placebo) on display in my -- I don't know -- my massive living room at the same time that the museum down the road is exhibiting it. The fact that two versions of "Untitled" (Placebo) exist at the same time doesn't detract in any way from the value of either. They are both equally important and valuable, because both are embodying a single concept of which, again, I am the owner.

It's also up to me, as the owner, whether or not I ever display "Untitled" (Placebo) ever again. If I am truly an evil garbage person, I could potentially buy the artwork, receive the certificate of ownership, and then never display the work. But that would be incredibly stupid, because I probably paid a boatload of money for it, and if I'm a halfway decent art lover, I want the art to live on. This is all to say that essentially, in buying the work, you become its custodian. You are responsible for displaying it, for supplying it, for taking care of it, and ultimately ensuring that it lives on.

Now, if you're listening to me talk about this and just thinking, "What?" you aren't alone. I've spent hours trying to write this section in the least confusing way possible. So if you're still sitting there like, "Hmm?" let me explain it like this: much, if not all, of Gonzalez-Torres's work is about a concept. It's an idea that is expressed through cheap, everyday materials. There is technically nothing stopping me from going to my local grocery store and buying 1,200 pounds of silver candy to create my own "Untitled" (Placebo). In my mind, doing that would be like trying to paint a replica of a famous painting. You can do it, but the thing that I create won't be the original, and I'm not the owner of anything other than this copy that I've made. I am now the proud owner of 1,200 pounds of silver candy that probably cost me

something like \$6,000. Again, have we reiterated the concept that I ain't rich? I literally pay money to do this podcast. Ain't no one got \$6,000. Essentially, if I were to do that, I could be congratulated on having a crap-ton of silver candy that I arrange in a rectangle in my room. I'd have created the fine arts version of Felix Gonzalez-Torres fan fiction. So, I might be a plagiarist, or I might be someone who just bought a crap-ton of candy. It's all a matter of perspective, but somehow, I don't think his estate would be pleased.

Given the kind of art that Gonzalez-Torres made and the materials he used, certificates of ownership are crazy important. The certificates are as much about ownership as they are about the continued existence of the work. That's pretty important. At any given time, the certificate of ownership might be all that exists of one of Gonzalez-Torres's works, which is what led someone to once describe the certificates as "the most valuable parts of a Felix Gonzalez-Torres work." And valuable, indeed, they are. In 2001, one of Gonzalez-Torres's candy works sold at auction for \$666,000. In 2015, a similar work of Gonzalez-Torres's sold for nearly \$8 million. Sweet indeed.

In the end, Felix Gonzalez-Torres not only challenged the normal rules of museums -- no touching of the artwork and definitely no eating of the artwork -- but he definitely challenged the art market. His works were not an exchange of goods so much as they were an exchange of ideas. Gonzalez-Torres also challenged viewers. He presented us with art works that defy singular interpretations. He challenged us to think, to be critical of our actions while also enjoying his art with both eyes and mouth.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres died of complications due to AIDS on January 9, 1996 in Miami, Florida. He was just 38 years old. He is survived by a series of friends, family members, and colleagues as well as dozens of art works that he created during his life. His death has now become part of his myth, and it's not surprising as to why. The artist known for visual commentaries on HIV and AIDS claimed by that very disease, the same one that had claimed his partner, Ross Laycock, just five years earlier. But Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work goes beyond a single disease, even an epidemic. He created monuments to love,

loss, and all of the things in between the two. It's the kind of artwork that inspires us to look closer, to think harder, and to love deeper. And, to me, there's no better art than that.

That is where I will leave Felix Gonzalez-Torres for today, though I do want to give a massive shoutout to the sources that I used to write today's episode. The most important names in the Gonzalez-Torres sphere, if you will, are Nancy Spector and Julie Ault, who both wrote and/or edited the major books about Gonzalez-Torres and his work. Both knew the artist personally, and they produced great books that I will have linked on the website. I also want to give a huge shoutout to the author of a 2005 unpublished dissertation on Felix Gonzalez-Torres by Anne Cushwa. The dissertation is unpublished, so I kept my use of it to a minimum in regard to writing the episode, but it was incredibly helpful for background information and where to find other source material for the episode. There was also a great article by Joan Kee about certificates of ownership that helped me not only write that portion of the episode but also helped me find Dr. Cushwa's dissertation. I also want to acknowledge a wonderful lecture that I heard as part of the 2018 Intro to Modern Art course at Washington University in St. Louis, which is a course that I TA-ed for. Professors John Klein and Buzz Spector gave a truly great lecture on Gonzalez-Torres that changed the way that I thought about his art, the way that I interpreted it, and opened my eyes to the true severity of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

As for Gus Corner this week, it's not just Gus Corner, it's Gus and Ziggy Corner. Gus is doing great. He's entering his sixth summer, which he is enjoying immensely. He's currently sharing the run of the house with Ziggy. If you've heard any dog noises throughout the episode -- oh, there's a yawn. That's Ziggy, who's my brother's dog. I am home alone, dog-sitting both of them, and it's one of the reasons it took me so long to finally record this episode. All of this hub, hub, hub has made Gus very tired, and so he hasn't found the time to infiltrate new works of art, mainly because his intern -- that's me -- hasn't had the time to screw around on Photoshop as much as she used to. For those of you who enjoy seeing Gus edits, I will be posting those whenever I have them on the podcast's Instagram page. Just search *Stuff*

*About Things* podcast, and it should come up. I recently posted an image of Gus as Frieda Kahlo, so head on over there to see that. You will also find a list of sources, resources, and images related to today's episode on the podcast's website, [stuffaboutthingspodcast.com](http://stuffaboutthingspodcast.com).

Once again, if you enjoyed the podcast, I'd really appreciate it if you took a couple of minutes to review it on iTunes or wherever else you listen to it. I just got my first written review, which was exciting. A genuine thank you goes out to that person who took the time to write it. I really appreciate that. It takes a village to produce a podcast, and I'm currently a single person village named Lindsay. It's why I only average about one a month, if that, and I would so appreciate it if you would just carve a couple minutes out of your day to tell me how I'm doing and to tell me what you'd like to hear about in the future. I already have a bunch of books checked out for the next episode, and I will have that up in about a month or so.

A huge thank you to the usual suspects: [hooksounds.com](http://hooksounds.com) and [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org) for the royalty-free music that you hear at the beginning and the end of the episode. The first song that you hear is a version of Bach's "Brandenburg Concerto No. 4" by Kevin Macleod, and the second is a song called "Success Dreams."

That is it for me today. Thank you so much for listening. And remember, it's always good to take the time to look at something beautiful today. And eat candy. Or look at beautiful candy before you eat it. The opportunities are endless.

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus while AIDS stands for Acquired -- oh, hi. Is that Zigs or Gus? Hi, not a great time. Not a great time to be interrupting me. I'm trying to talk about the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Hello. Oh, hi Zigs. Oh, boy. How you doing? Oh, thank you for the kiss. It's very nice of you. Lay down. Oh, boy. Bye.