

Susan Tallman

The Ethos of the Edition

The Stacks of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

For better or for worse, the edition—that group of art objects which exist in numerous examples, each with an equal claim to “authenticity”—is of a fundamentally different nature from its more prestigious cousin, the unique painting or sculpture. Things that exist in multiple are seen as less authoritative, less assertive, less ringed about with that nebulous, charismatic quality that Walter Benjamin called “aura.” The idea that there might be something *interesting* in this condition, that in the difference between the edition and the unique object there might lie some poignant metaphors for broader social and cultural truths, that indeed there might be a “poetics of multiplicity,” seems to have occurred only to a handful of artists. And of them, none has pursued the issue as eloquently as Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

Gonzalez-Torres is one of those younger artists—not exactly sculptors, not exactly photographers, not exactly conceptual artists—who try on new forms and new materials as they happen to fit. His work has appeared in shapes ranging from typeset lists of names and dates (meaningful to the artist, enigmatic to the viewer), to disco-dancing platforms, to jigsaw puzzles, but the materials with which he is most frequently identified are piles of candies, spilled Smithsonian-style onto the floor or into corners, and stacks of printed paper. His style, insofar as that word is appropriate to such a protean aesthetic, is a kind of ardently lightweight Minimalism (the allusion to Smithsonian is intentional and fully felt), leavened with a subversive, anarchic streak—viewers are invited to eat the candy and to help themselves to the printed sheets. In the candy pieces, which often bear titles like *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, this license makes clear allusion to desire and consumption, especially illicit desire and consumption. In the stack pieces, the act of taking away



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Implosion)*, 1991, Silkscreen on Coventry Rag, 40" x 30", edition of 190 with 10 artist's proofs. Published by Edition Julie Sylvester.

sheets has a different effect: it transforms the object into an edition; it subjects the stolidity of sculpture to the ephemerality of the leaflet.

The first stack piece was done in 1988 as a memorial: the stack was designed to be roughly the size and shape of a tombstone, and its pages were printed with advertisements for one of America's more peculiar notions of appropriate holiday observance, the Memorial Day sale. Subsequent stacks have shared these intimations of mortality: *Untitled (The End)* (1990) consisted of black-bordered, text-free sheets of paper; in *Untitled (Death by Gun)* (1990) the pages were printed with the faces, names, and brief histories of gunshot victims. The elegiac quality

of the imagery is heightened by the idea that all it would take was a bus-load of covetous gallery visitors, and the stack could just disappear or, more precisely, be scattered leaf by leaf into a vapor of dispersed souvenirs. But this appearance is somewhat deceptive: the pieces can also regenerate, starfish-like, to regain their full size. Each stack piece is created with an ideal size and proportion in mind (the dimensions of a tombstone, for instance) and Gonzalez-Torres will print as many as necessary to maintain each piece in something approaching its “ideal” state.

So while the stack has one life as a sculpture, occupying a block of space not dissimilar to that which might be occupied

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by an early Robert Morris or Donald Judd box, that block is far from the inviolate cube of the Morris or Judd: it is instead in a constant state of flux—diminishing each time a sheet is removed, restored each time a sheet is replaced. Furthermore, with each removal it moves out from that concise block into the broad, dilute space of the edition, spread over a hundred walls, drawers, refrigerators (what do people do with these things when they get them home?), and there assumes a life both linked to the original sculpture and independent of it.

This kind of double life is qualitatively different from the double life of a famous painting and its poster reproduction: the painting and the poster are related by appearance only; the poster was never a part of the painting; the destruction or adulation of the poster in no way affects the painting; they have no shared history. More importantly, the poster is an afterthought, unconnected to the artist's original intent. The displaced member of a Gonzalez-Torres stack, on the other hand, is a gift of the artist, as close to his thought as any other object. This peculiar spirit of generosity in Gonzalez-Torres's works goes beyond the physical act of allowing people to take home pages—the pages they take are unencumbered with instruction, unlike most conceptual art, which had very specific ideas about how its objects should be treated, even (or especially) when out of the artist's view. One artist, well versed in Duchampian theory, was very concerned about how to treat a sheet she had lifted from a stack piece: was it contrary to the intent of the work to frame it archivally, since it was, after all, a giveaway; or was it important to frame it archivally to be sure that one copy would survive? She was told that the intent of the piece was that she should do with it whatever she liked.

The fact that many of the stacks feature blank pages—pages that have only a color, or only a border, to signal artistic intervention—has a similar effect; it allows the viewer a space in which to personalize the work, so that the black-bordered sheets of *Untitled (The End)*, for example, become an all-purpose elegy, memorializing anyone the viewer has loved and lost.

But it is important to note that all these pieces have been exhibited not as “editions” but rather in the gallery and museum contexts usually reserved for painting and sculpture. This generosity, this designed fluidity of meaning, this repudiation of artistic control,

are visible largely because they mark a defiance of our expectations of the unique, inalterable art object. So what are we to make of the fact that last spring, Gonzalez-Torres produced *Untitled (Implosion)*, an edition of silk-screens, limited to 190 impressions and 10 artists proofs, signed and numbered, produced with a print publisher and exhibited in a print space? Where, one might reasonably ask, is the critical edge in that?

The trick is that *Untitled (Implosion)* is only available as a unit—the whole edition, all 190 examples plus all ten artist's proofs, all in a tidy stack. With one clever stroke, Gonzalez-Torres has cut to the quick to the artificial, oxymoronic nature of the “limited edition,” that unsatisfactory compromise between endless repetition and the aura of originality. Just as there seems to be something perverse about a sculpture you're allowed, even encouraged, to dismember, there is something equally contrary about an edition bound together for life. How sad and frustrated those lower 199 pages might be, sulking in the dark, never to reveal their glowing, elegant faces to the light. The image of *Untitled (Implosion)* is an even coating of dull opalescent silver—a color that is less a color as such than it is a mute reflection of whatever conditions of light surround it. Gonzalez-Torres had in mind the look of a switched-off TV tube—a dying light, morose and vacuous, its cacophony of information all played out. The blankness is seductive—unlike the dispersible stack pieces, neither the paper nor the printing here are cheap—and you want to get closer to figure out just what that strange surface may be, just what it may mean, but the construction of meaning is, like the quality of light, reflected back to the viewer.

Gonzalez-Torres is usually considered a “political artist.” This is not because his work argues a particular polemic or exposes a specific injustice, the way Sue Coe's and Leon Golub's do; and not even because of the element of commercial subversion in those endlessly reproducing pieces (as we know, the art-collecting public will buy anything from dirt to Letraset if convinced of the charm, or importance, of an idea). Gonzalez-Torres is a member of the activist art collective Group Material (along with Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, and Karen Ranspacher), and he has been public and articulate about his identity as a gay man, and the distance that this places him from the standard macho artistic role models. His political mindfulness appears in his art in the form of a scrupulous sensitivity to the ramifications of traditional art activity—the business of occupying space, inserting creations into someone else's visual territory, producing perfect, unalterable ob-

jects, imposing meanings that brook no argument.

Thus he has discovered a political use for the edition that has little or nothing to do with the history of the print as a propaganda tool, and everything to do with metaphor and language and the construction of sexual identity. Contrast, for example, the single, potent, assertive object, which takes charge, extends itself into the world at large, even strives to govern the physical and psychological circumstances around it (Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* would be a good case in point), with the multiple, adaptable, *social* character of the edition, content to be different things to different people. (Taking the game to its logical conclusion, one could even go so far as to compare the single, unrepeatable, urgent rush of creation with the multiple, recurrent pleasures of the edition.)

Multiplicity flies in the face of uniqueness and also of authority: as those numerous sheets flutter out into the street the artist is losing control of the piece—its physical substance and its meaning. Also, every time you have more than one of something you open the door to difference: differences of natural variation, differences of human treatment, differences of interpretation. Repetition is possessed of two very different kinds of power: that generated by a mass of something in one place, and the more elusive power of an equal mass of something spread out into a thousand small instances. It has been generally assumed that concentrated power is more effective than dispersed power. That Gonzalez-Torres should willingly choose the latter over the former suggests that power may not be his aim.

Outside the realm of art these are issues of general social interaction—questions our mothers would have filed under “Polite” rather than “Political.” But part of the enduring myth of the Avant-Garde is that important art must be impolite, must be driven by a brutally assertive urgency of expression. Gonzalez-Torres calls the myth into question with an art that is radical, not in its stridency, but in its reticence.

To a degree, of course, politics are in the eye of the beholder. Speaking about a recent stack piece whose pages read WE DO NOT REMEMBER in German—a piece that speaks through the historically specific to address questions of collective will and individual responsibility—Gonzalez-Torres said, “I don't think my work is political. I think it's about the stuff that doesn't let me sleep at night.” □

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