VENICE: The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who died of AIDS in 1996 at the age of 38, did not exactly cut the figure of a secret agent, an infiltrator foiling lines of defense. He was a generous man with a handsome, cherubic face and a wicked sense of humor. He loved candy. And some of his best-known art is made of candy, mounds of it, free for the taking and endlessly replenished, a Willy Wonka vision of post-minimalism.

But Gonzalez-Torres also firmly believed that all art was political, whether it intended to be or not. He knew that his was, and he believed that for it to be effective, it should not preach or proselytize or even show its hand too fully. "The most successful of all political moves," he once said, "are ones that don't appear to be 'political.'" Such a strategy could be called subversive. Another way to describe it is to say that it worked on many levels: candy as candy; as an art object; as a questioning of art objects; as a metaphor for mortality and depletion in the age of AIDS; as a means for his art and ideas literally to be spread, like a virus — or maybe like joy — by everyone who took a piece.

Whichever way the work is seen, the fact that it will be exhibited here beginning Sunday as the United States' official representative at this year's Venice Biennale undoubtedly would have been considered a huge victory by Gonzalez-Torres, the kind of slipping past the gatekeepers that he delighted in. And because his work often dealt squarely with the reality of death, including his own, he might have been pleased that it was not to be excluded. "He would not even without even being around, people who knew him say, "(He is the only second artist to represent the United States posthumously in the Biennale in its modern history; the work of Robert Smithson was chosen for the 1982 exhibition, nine years after his death.)"

"I was shocked that he was chosen, frankly," said Nancy Spector, chief curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, whose proposal for an exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres' work was selected last year in an open competition by a committee of curators, museum directors and artists that advises the U.S. State Department.

Gonzalez-Torres, who was born in Cuba and raised in Puerto Rico before moving to New York, had a complicated but unashamed love of America and of the ideals it represented. His work was often a way to express his bitter disappointment when he felt that the country was failing those ideals, during the early days of AIDS, the Gulf War and the administrations of Ronald Reagan and former President George Bush, a time when he feared that civil liberties and other democratic protections were eroding.

Spector, who curated the exhibition at the Palladian-style United States pavilion here, said that she chose Gonzalez-Torres as her candidate for the Biennale in part because his work has become even more influential since his death, inspiring many prominent young artists like Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Tino Sehgal.

But she said she also thinks that Gonzalez-Torres probably would have considered his art to be even more relevant politically now than when he made it, with the war in Iraq and domestic battles ranging over government eavesdropping, gay marriage and the concentration of wealth in America.

"I feel pretty confident that he would have felt this was the right time and the right place," she said, "because it would have signaled that notion of both total infiltration and of really arriving at the center and being able to speak the narrative that he wanted to."