

After the Party

A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life

Joshua Chambers-Letson



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York

www.nyupress.org

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Sections of chapter 2 first appeared in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, special issue on “Living Labor: Marxism and Performance,” vol. 26, nos. 2–3 (2016), edited by Aliza Shvarts and Joshua Lubin-Levy. Other sections also appeared in *TDR: The Drama Review*, special issue on “Reproduction and Performance,” edited by Rebecca Schneider. Vol. 62, no. 1, 2018. A subvention to support publication of *After the Party* was generously provided by Northwestern University’s Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities.

References to Internet websites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor New York University Press is responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chambers-Letson, Joshua Takano, author.

Title: *After the party : a manifesto for queer of color life* / Joshua Chambers-Letson.

Description: New York : New York University Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017055001 | ISBN 978-1-4798-9017-0 (cl : alk. paper) |

ISBN 978-1-4798-3277-4 (pb : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Queer theory. | Performance art. | Minorities—Social conditions.

Classification: LCC HQ76.25 .C425 2018 | DDC 306.7601—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017055001>

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper, and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability. We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the greatest extent possible in publishing our books.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Also available as an ebook

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The Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

“Untitled” (Felix)

I have noticed this tendency amongst other queers of color: We often call the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres by his first name. Casually, as if we knew him, though most of us did not. Many of us were still kids when he was living, teenagers in 1996 when the plague took him. But one of Felix’s contemporaries, the artist Glenn Ligon, describes a similar relationship to his proper name: “Now, I didn’t know Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Felix Gonzalez-Torres wasn’t a friend of mine. And I’m no Felix Gonzalez-Torres. But Felix is the artist that artists of my generation feel on a first name basis with. It is his interviews and writings that we pass along to students; his work that we make pilgrimages to see; his passing that we most deeply mourn.”¹ The name “Felix” has become something of a queer of color commons.

Felix’s ascendance to art star and icon is not uncomplicated. As Ligon relates, “One has the sense that he was the artist that everyone in the early 1990s was waiting for: articulate, bright, clean, and a nice-looking guy. Felix was the artist of color whom curators and critics buzzed into the corridors of power, while the angry, torch-and-issue-wielding ‘others’ were told to go around to the service entrance or wait by the coat-room. To be sure, his work had ‘issues’ too, but the discussion of them rarely leaves predetermined intellectual comfort zones.”² He bore many markers of privilege, making him palatable to an otherwise racist and homophobic art world: He was light-skinned, male, formally educated, and aesthetically oblique. Even this embrace has come with a cost. As art historian Miwon Kwon and curator Ann Goldstein separately observe, in spite of the wide range of meaning in Gonzalez-Torres’s work, certain critical approaches prevail, approaches that often remain within Ligon’s “predetermined intellectual comfort zones.”³ In particular, the black, brown, and sometimes queer “issues” at play in his work are commonly elided.

Scholars and interlocutors of color have consistently resisted this tradition. Ligon gestures to one such exception, praising an essay by Gerardo Mosquera for “Mosquera’s insistence on the ‘Latineness’ of Felix’s project.”⁴ Here, Ligon isn’t promoting a critical apparatus that essentializes Felix’s work, reducing it to his racial identity as a gay Cuban HIV-positive man living and working in exile in the United States. Rather, he recognizes that these factors were not only part of the complex context that informed the conditions under which Felix made his work, but that they were also often directly addressed by and within the work.

The critical reticence around questions of Felix’s background are partially an effect of the artist’s own tactical attempts to disrupt or eschew what Muñoz described as “the facile conceptions of identity” that are often imposed upon people of color and queers by the dominant order.⁵ During his lifetime, for example, Gonzalez-Torres removed diacritical marks from his name for English publications—a tradition I have reproduced here, following his wishes, though with some reticence and ambivalence. “The roles that are available within dominant culture for Latino/a and other minority identities are narrow, static, and fixed,” Muñoz continued, “[and] in most instances, unable to account for the specificity of black and queer lives or any other . . . minority designations.”⁶ Felix, he concluded, “rejected the general strictures of identity and what he understood as the constraints of multiculturalism . . . but nonetheless called for what I see as a reconstructed identity politics. . . . Gonzalez-Torres’s art insisted on speaking queerly and speaking Latino in ways that were oblique. Consequently, his work functioned as a formidable obstacle to facile conceptions of identity.”⁷

Building on the work of Kwon and Carlos Basualdo, Ligon draws a similar conclusion. But for Ligon, instead of obliquity, it is Felix’s capacity for opacity that transforms the work into something that can be shared, intimate, and common to so many of us: “Like Kwon, [Basualdo] proposes that community brought into being by [Felix’s] public projects is premised not on a shared understanding of their imagery but on those images’ ultimate opacity.”⁸ What is shared, in this sense, is the unshareable, or what Muñoz ultimately described as the commons of incommensurability: a brown commons akin to queerness, which “is about the incommensurable and is most graspable to us as a sense rather than as a politic. Jean-Luc Nancy also suggests that there is something

that exceeds politics, what he describes as nonequivalence, something incalculable that needs to be ‘shared (out).’”⁹ This sharing out of the incalculable—this commons of incommensurability—is ultimately what Muñoz was calling for in his call to return to the idea of communism.

To share “Felix” is to share him not in spite of but because of our different and incommensurable proximities to him. “The challenge here,” as Muñoz wrote, “is to look to queerness as a mode of ‘being-with’ that defies social conventions and conformism and is innately heretical yet still desirous for the world, actively attempting to enact a commons that is not a pulverizing, hierarchical one bequeathed through logics and practices of exploitation.”¹⁰ When the queer of color commons takes form, and when it takes form through minoritarian performance, alternative practices of being with and sharing out are bodied forth as new, material realities. In these flickering instances, some kind of communism *is*.

In one of Felix’s favorite poems, Wallace Stevens’s “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” Stevens describes a union of lovers who “collect ourselves, out of all the indifferences, into one thing.”¹¹ Not the individuality of the “I” or the potentially coercive, fascist union of the “we,” but instead the incommensurable communism of being with and being together in the gaps and breaks between “I” and “we.” From time to time, we stitch ourselves loosely together and gather under a name like “Felix,” where we “make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough.”¹² And in the halls of this dwelling we say the names of our dead out loud to each other.

But what we are really saying is this: We were. We are. We shall be.

“Untitled” (Madrid 1971)

It is a risky bit of provocation: putting Felix’s name in the same space as a call for communism. After all, he didn’t come to Marxism so much as Marxism came to him. Felix was born during the Cuban Revolution in Güaimaro, Cuba, in 1957. Before the revolution came to power in 1959, Cuba was subject to the dictatorship of Fulgencia Batista. When first elected to power in 1940, Batista garnished the support of the Cuban Communist Party, but by his second term he became avowedly antiCommunist (in part, to gain support from Washington, DC). He established an

increasingly brutal dictatorship and police state, and in 1952 he canceled elections before staging a coup.

There was no single revolution, but instead a proliferation of armed and political insurgencies. Of the various parties jockeying for power before and after the collapse of Batista, a new leadership eventually emerged via Fidel and Raúl Castro, alongside Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos, who, as the mythology goes, led a relatively small group of fighters in a successful campaign against the Cuban military before the revolution took Havana in 1959. The following years were marked with uncertainty and paranoia, especially among the wealthy and middle classes. Shortly after consolidating power, Fidel denied that the revolution was communist. But for years, as the revolution nationalized industries, instituted progressive social reforms, and struggled to disestablish the capitalist mode of production within Cuba, great debates waged, at the level of the street, about its nature: Was it communist or even Marxist? Was Fidel?¹³ Some parents (typically drawn from the privileged class) began to send their children away. As described by Alexandra Vazquez, “They couldn’t bear the uncertainties or what the swift changes happening around them would mean for their children. So, they sent them, alone, to a strange array of US cities. The separations were supposed to be temporary. Some families were reunited. Just as many were not.”¹⁴ In 1971, along with his sister, Felix was separated from his parents and sent to Spain before coming to the United States by way of Puerto Rico.

It wasn’t uncommon for Gonzalez-Torres to incorporate the autobiographical into his work, and in a 1988 piece titled “*Untitled*” (*Madrid 1971*), he looked back on those early days of exile.¹⁵ “*Untitled*” (*Madrid 1971*) consists of two puzzles in plastic bags: an image of the artist as a thirteen- or fourteen-year old boy and a photo of a statue (possibly in Madrid). His portrait looks like a standard school photo; he stares back at us with a flat, pensive expression. The photograph of the statue is shot from underneath, which might induce a sense of domination for the spectator who looks up at the monumental figure from below. For Muñoz, the juxtaposition of the two images “gestures to the fashion in which identity is eclipsed by a system of national signs that do not constitute one’s citizenship but instead one’s alienation, displacement, and exile.”¹⁶ Printing the images on puzzles, Gonzalez-Torres



Figure 3.1. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (*Madrid 1971*), 1988. C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag and wall lettering. Three parts, 15 x 18 in. overall; one part 9 ½ x 7 ½ in., one part 7 ½ x 9 ½ in., one part: ½ x 3 in. ARG# GF1988-012. (© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, NY.)

stages this moment from his childhood as fragile, barely held together, and ever on the verge of falling apart. Making a puzzle of the statue underlines, as well, the fact that the seemingly monumental (the national or the symbolic) can be dissolved in a revolutionary instant. It also reminds us of the material costs incurred in the wake of revolution at the point of the body of a little boy.

That one can trace this range of meaning from the relatively oblique materials supplied by the artist underlines the fact that, as Muñoz wrote, Gonzalez-Torres performed “a strategic obliquity that is anti-identitarian in the service of a reconstructed identity politics.”¹⁷ This reconstructed identity politics was the ground of the communal, the social, and the political as, in Gonzalez-Torres’ work, commonality is not forged through shared images and fixed identifications but fashioned

instead from connotative images that invoke communal structures of feelings.”¹⁸ As a result, during an encounter with the work, what Muñoz describes as “exile and ethnos” can be experienced as a structure of feeling that clusters around the work. The work, in other words, is charged with brownness—a feeling that, for Muñoz, is incalculable and nonetheless needs to be shared (out).¹⁹

Art came early to Felix, well before he left Cuba. At seven or eight years old his father “bought me a set of watercolors, and gave me my first cat.”²⁰ Cats and art would be a recurrent theme in his life until his death thirty years later. After Spain, he went to live with his uncle in Puerto Rico, where he studied art at the Universidad de Puerto Rico in the late 1970s, staging early experiments in performance and body art.²¹ He would not visit Cuba again until 1979, when he saw his parents for the first time after eight years of separation. Shortly after, they were reunited when his parents came to the United States as part of the Mariel boat lift. Around that time, he relocated to New York to complete a BFA at the Pratt Institute in 1983. One night that same year he met a boy who also loved cats at the Boybar. Felix’s chance encounter with the disarmingly handsome sommelier, Ross Laycock, would have an immeasurable impact on his life and work. “To say that Félix and Ross were close would scarcely do them justice,” wrote their friend Joe Clark. “Their lives would become intertwined like the strands of a helix.”²² Felix and Ross fell in love with each other and built a world in which they could sustain each other.

For much of their relationship, Ross lived in Toronto, Felix in New York. Neither Canada nor the United States recognized the status of the relationship, so what time they had together they had to steal from a regime of homophobic policies separating queer partners at the worst possible time. The first wave of the AIDS crisis was starting to ravage queer urban lifeworlds in places like New York and Toronto and it was coming, soon enough, to Felix and Ross.

Felix’s reunion with his family didn’t last long. His mother died in 1986. A year later he earned an MFA in photography from New York University, accepted an invitation to join the influential art collective Group Material, and continued to develop his solo practice. The world that Felix and Ross built to survive together became a kind of living toward death. Ross died of AIDS complication on January 24,

1991, devastating Felix.²³ With US immigration rules being kinder to pets than people, the artist wrote that in 1991, “Bruno and Mary, two black cats Ross found in Toronto, came to live with me.”²⁴ In the wake of Ross’s death, he tried to rebuild, but “the world I knew is gone,” so he “moved the four cats, books, and a few things to a new apartment.”²⁵ As his artmaking was one of the means through which he had sustained his dialogue with Ross, and unsure of where to go next, he began to make more work.

From the late 1980s until his death on January 9, 1996, he appropriated the forms and strategies of conceptual art and minimalism to explore a range of themes. His work staged deconstructions of the binary between the public and private spheres, critiquing and intervening in the economic and social systems organizing and threatening queer, black, brown, and immigrant life. But rather than taking these issues on through direct representational means or political didacticism, he engaged in the tactical deployment of abstraction, obliquity, and opacity. His work took a range of forms exemplified in ten dominant series (listed in approximate order of emergence): c-print puzzles, framed Photostats (featuring chains of nonchronological nouns and dates), statues, paper stacks, candy spills, graphite drawings of bloodwork, beaded curtains, billboards, nonrepresentational portraits (also comprised of curated chains of dates and nouns), and strings of light.

To be clear, when I describe the communism of Gonzalez-Torres’s work, or even the Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, I’m not making a claim that the artist was a communist or Marxist. Instead, I’m attending to the Marxist valences of his thought and the sense of communist sociality performed in/through the work. The praxis, tactics, and strategies of Gonzalez-Torres were at least influenced by, if not directly expressive of, a Marxist worldview.²⁶ He told Joseph Kosuth that his work was animated by “psychoanalysis and Marxist analysis and feminism more than anything else.”²⁷ He mobilized a Marxist vocabulary in interviews and writings, appropriating and employing key concepts from Marxism, while repeatedly acknowledging his debt to theory. It was no accident that many of the theorists he regularly turned to (Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, Louis Althusser) were situated within or proximal to the Marxist tradition. Without their work, he insisted, “I wouldn’t have been able to make certain pieces, to arrive at certain positions. Some of

their writings and ideas gave me a certain freedom to *see*.”²⁸ Theory and Marxist theory, in particular, could bring about an emancipatory form of demystification and the emergence of a new sense (“a certain freedom to *see*”).

His relationship with Marxist theory was so self-evident that at one point he went out of his way to describe his desire for a public *beyond* the students of Marxist thought: “I don’t want to make art just for the people who can read Fredric Jameson sitting upright on a Mackintosh chair. I want to make art for people who watch *The Golden Girls* and sit in a big, brown, La-Z-Boy chair. They’re part of my public too.”²⁹ Underscoring the communist impulses that animate his work, he named a desire to “make art for people,” describing the “people” as not just the artistic or intellectual elite, but also the *common* people (“people who watch *The Golden Girls* and sit in a big, brown, La-Z-Boy chair”). But, importantly, the person reading Jameson, sitting upright on a Mackintosh chair, was “part of my public too.”

Gonzalez-Torres gave his work away to the public in a fashion akin to performance. From sculptures made of stacks of paper, to spills of glittering, wrapped candies staged and spread across the floor or piled into a corner, many of his works become themselves through performance’s dialectic of presence and disappearance as they are given away to their audiences. The artist described this as an intervention in the means of distribution. “A reading [of my work] that has been overlooked is the radicality of certain forms of distribution,” he said to Robert Nickas in 1991.³⁰ “I am trying to alter the system of distribution of an idea through an art practice,” he told Tim Rollins in 1993.³¹ As Kwon observes, Gonzalez-Torres’s work posits “modes of exchange in the marketplace as integral rather than extrinsic to his work’s artistic meaning.”³²

The work was an intervention into the market *at the level of the market*; distribution wasn’t just a component of his work—in many instances it was the work. But as much as his aesthetic strategies (using mass-produced materials or public media, like billboards) aimed at achieving the (re)distribution of the work to the public, he was also uniquely invested in art’s ability to function as a means for affecting the redistribution of resources and knowledge for the commons. Mass distribution was not merely an endpoint for his practice; the artist appropriated the dominant means of distribution to transform the aesthetic encounter

into a scene of redistributive sharing, and the sharing of minoritarian knowledge in particular. All of this, he would say, served his commitment to radical social change: “I’m still proposing the radical idea of trying to make this place a better place for *everyone*.”³³

As Marx makes clear in the Gotha Critique (“from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs”), communism and redistribution are intimately intertwined. This is a general problem for political economy. In the *Grundrisse*, for example, Marx notes that liberal political economists generally figure distribution as secondary to the primacy of production: “The structure of distribution is entirely determined by the structure of production. Distribution itself is a product of production, not only with regard to the object, [in the sense] that only the results of production can be distributed, but also with regard to the form, [in the sense] that the particular mode of participation in production determines the specific forms of distribution.”³⁴ Marx later argues, in volume 3 of *Capital*, that the distribution of resources (and wealth) is the social “form” produced by distribution: “These are thus relations or forms of distribution, for they express the relationships in which the total value newly produced is distributed among the owners of the various agents of production.”³⁵ The relations of distribution (including the distribution of labor, resources, and social hierarchy), again, follow from the relations of production, but as a set of social relations they are inseparable from each other: “The relations of distribution are essentially identical with these relations of production, the reverse side of the same coin, so that the two things share the same historically transitory character.”³⁶

Given the primacy often attributed to production, it is unsurprising that historical struggles to realize just and equitable redistribution have placed so much emphasis on acquiring the means of production. The orthodox assumption is that if you conquer the means of production (and the institutions responsible for the reproduction of the relations of production—including the state), you necessarily reorganize the corresponding forms and relations of (unjust) distribution. Historically, communism revealed that assumption to be complicated, at best, and disastrous, at worst. And the fact that the distribution of resources, wealth, power and knowledge often also falls along lines defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and/or citizenship—in excess of or as

a contradiction within dominant economic arrangements—requires a radically modified approach.

As revolutionary parties in places like Stalinist Russia planned for communism, the centralization of the means of production into the state often led to the modified replacement of the private capitalist class with a “bureaucratic-administrative one-party state.”³⁷ But the reproduction of capitalism’s exploitative relations of production and distribution often remained in place in some form. As the Johnson-Forest Tendency (James, Dunayevskaya, and Boggs) insisted in 1951, the crucial question for Marxism was thus “Can the nationalized property be planned without having as the inevitable consequence the domination of a single party,” which in turn evolves into the tyranny of the political dictatorship of state capitalism?³⁸ Gonzalez-Torres’s intervention at the point of distribution, and through aesthetic means, offers us one (bloodless) way of exploring the Johnson-Forest Tendency’s question. Though the work can’t provide an answer to the question, it rehearses and materializes the social conditions under which we might begin to develop one.

There are a few moments when Marx theorizes the capacity for radical transformation to occur as a result of changes in distribution and it is in these moments that we catch an anticipatory glimmer of the Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Before declaring, in *Capital*, the “essentially identical” nature of the relations of production and distribution, the Marx of 1857 wrote that “the result at which we arrive is, not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they are all elements of a totality, differences within a unity.”³⁹ While he maintained that “the process always starts afresh with production,” distribution (insofar as it distributes the agents of production) has its own productive powers and “is itself a moment of production.”⁴⁰ While production determines distribution, exchange, and circulation, it “is in its turn also determined by the other moments.”⁴¹ As a result, “Changes in distribution . . . entail changes in production.”⁴²

For the remainder of this chapter, I track Gonzalez-Torres’s interventions at the point of distribution to cast light on the moments when redistributive practices open up a horizon of queer of color communist sociality. But as Marx himself insisted, the world is full of contradiction. Which is to acknowledge that the Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is

not without significant contradictions. Indeed, his interest in and relationship to contradiction was one of the primary characteristics of his Marxist praxis.

“Untitled” (Perfect Lovers)

In the early winter of 2015 my friend Jeanne comes to visit Chicago. We go to see a show at the Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago, where Gonzalez-Torres had a major solo exhibition in 1994. As we’re making our way out of the exhibition space, we pass the administrative offices. “Look,” I say, gesturing to two clocks side by side, perfectly timed to each other, and hanging on the office walls. “Yeah,” she whispers. A little sadness passes between us. Our late friend and teacher loved Felix, and an encounter with Felix is an encounter with missing him.



Figure 3.2. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *“Untitled” (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987–1990. Wall clocks, 13 ½ x 27 x 1 ¼ in. overall: two parts, 13 ½ in. diameter each. Edition of 3, 1 AP. Photographer Peter Muscato. (© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, NY.)

In the work “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987–1990, one of the clock’s batteries will eventually give out and the pair will fall out of synch. If one, or both, clocks stop working, the work is de-installed until the clock is replaced (or its batteries are), and both clocks are re-installed, reset to a synchronous time.⁴³ He began to exhibit the work to the public in 1988, and I like to think that the work might have been a love letter to Ross. “When people ask me, ‘Who is your public?’” he once said, “I say honestly, without skipping a beat, ‘Ross.’ The public was Ross. The rest of the people just come to the work.”⁴⁴

Queer life and love in the 1980s was cruelly characterized by the knowledge that time was running out. Even if Felix didn’t make the piece for Ross, he inscribed a similar image in a love letter to Ross where he drew two clocks at the top, side by side, in blue ink. Beneath them he typed the words, “Lovers, 1988,” followed by an address: “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 back credit were [sic] it is due: time.”⁴⁵ In spite of the fact that time was running out, time also gave them to each other. Time bound them together, and they still had time together, before and beyond death. “We are synchronized, now and forever,” he concluded. “I love you.”⁴⁶ Ross and Felix were together for eight years, and for much of that time they couldn’t be in the same place. But apart, they were in synch. They were *with* each other. Perfect lovers.

A contradiction: This, generous, gentle, loving work is the result of exploitative conditions of production. The artist didn’t always physically make his pieces. His base materials were often industrially produced (two clocks, a stack of printed paper, a pile of candies, a strand of lights). He was acutely aware that he was selling the products of other people’s labor (what Marx described as the merchant capitalist’s act of “buying in order to sell dearer”) as he was conscious of the implications of doing so on the art market.⁴⁷ The move, he suggested, was tactical. It was performance, and he was playing a part: “It would be very expected, very logical and normal and ‘natural’ for me to be in alternative spaces, but it’s more threatening that people like me are operating as part of the market—selling the work, especially when you consider that, yes, this is just a stack of paper that I didn’t even touch. Those contradictions have a lot of meaning.”⁴⁸

During Gonzalez-Torres's lifetime the market was (as it continues to be) driven by the enduring fetishization of the work of straight white male artists. The overvaluation of such often mediocre work (by, for example, Julian Schnabel, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst) coincided with the devaluation and derision of work by "people like me," artists of color, queer, trans, and women of color artists who were, and continue to be, denied access to and support within the educational and exhibiting institutions of the art world. Gonzalez-Torres saw the tactical advantage that a performance of infiltration would give him, allowing him access to the institutions and apparatuses of the majoritarian sphere where he set out to appropriate the dominant mode of production and means of distribution in order to turn them against themselves. Performing the recognizable role of the institutionally sanctioned artist allowed him to function, in his own words, as a "virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are . . . replicating themselves, because that's the way culture works. So if I function as a virus, an imposter, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions."⁴⁹

Majoritarian systems often diffuse the threat of minoritarian difference through controlled absorption, assimilating the threat of difference and neutralizing it in the process. When he took on the institutionally recognizable role of the conceptual artist or minimalist sculptor, Gonzalez-Torres did so less to assimilate into the system than to infiltrate it and function as an internal contradiction within it. "This type of work," he once said referring to the stacks, "has this image of authority, especially after so many years of conceptual art and minimal art. They look so powerful, they look so clean, they look so historical already. But in my case, when you get close to them, you realize that they have been 'contaminated' with something social."⁵⁰ They are, in other words, charged with queerness and the sense of brown. The point I'm making, following Felix, is not that minoritarian subjects need to become bankers so that we can reform the ills of racial capitalism and cis-heteropatriarchy from within the bank. Rather, we need to learn how to play the part of the banker in order to get inside the bank, gain access to the vault's codes, steal what's inside, redistribute it to the people who need it, and fund the insurgency with what's left over. Easier said than done.

If we take seriously Jameson's suggestion that art functions as the political unconscious of a given social order, we might see the production

of value in Gonzalez-Torres's work as a reflection of dominant modes of value production in the era of financialization.⁵¹ In the era of finance capital, value commonly emerges through what Franco Berardi describes as a "parthogenetic" process: "The monetization and financialization of the economy represent a parthogenization of the creation of value. Value does not emerge from a physical relationship between work and things, but rather from the self-replication of the parthogenetic force of finance."⁵² The financial economy's parthogenetic production of value thus finds a correlative in the form of value produced by the conceptual artist: "The financial economy (like conceptual art) is a parthogenetic process."⁵³ We catch an example of this with "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987–1990, in which the artist plays no role in the clock's material construction.

For many of Gonzalez-Torres's pieces, purchase results in the transfer of title of ownership, a certificate of authenticity with instructions for producing/assembling/materializing the work, but not always including a prefabricated art object-as-commodity. Gonzalez-Torres appropriated this tactic from the tradition of conceptual art, as in Sol Lewitt's wall drawings. Lewitt insisted that a wall drawing only exists during the period of its materialization and exhibition, effectively constituting the work as a time bound performance event. As performances, the wall drawings at least complicate the process of capital accumulation insofar as they are not enduring objects (commodities) to which value can be attached.

The market eventually figured out how to monetize conceptual and performance art, but the insurgent, value-confusing potentialities animating Lewitt's or Gonzalez-Torres's tactics are still by no means exhausted. Lewitt's wall drawings explore what occurs when the artist appropriates the industrialized means and relations of production. Gonzalez-Torres expanded on this experiment, appropriating industrial means of production, but focusing his intervention at the point of distribution. Still, there remains the question of *who* physically produces the work and under what conditions?

Even in the era of financialization, value still emerges from the physical relationship between work and things. An owner of "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) still displays the work in its objectified, material form (two clocks). What the spectator encounters is an art object that is the result

of productive labor performed by someone other than the artist. Productive labor remains a central node for the extraction of value, and it is a form of labor that is increasingly gendered and racialized, having shifted from the factories of Europe and North America to the feminized productive centers of the Global South.⁵⁴ So while the value extracted from “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) may be parthogenetic, Gonzalez-Torres must have understood that the exploitation of productive laborers remained a contradiction embedded within his work. Without the unnamed worker responsible for producing the clocks, there can be no “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) to infiltrate the market. This contradiction takes on added significance when we consider the fact that “people like” Gonzalez-Torres (people of color) aren’t supposed to be agents on the market; more nearly, they are meant to perform as the invisible labor that makes its machinery turn.

Rather than reading this contradiction as an impasse, Gonzalez-Torres approached the matter dialectically. Performing the strategic infiltration of the art market and appropriating the dominant means of production, distribution, and exchange, he could cast light upon (and ultimately become) an antagonistic site of contradiction within the market. In the Marxist tradition, the dialectic proceeds through the contemplation and working through of the contradictions and antagonisms contained within a single system. To think dialectically is to understand that contradiction “is not that which blocks and suspends movement,” as Jameson observes, “but [that from] within which movement itself takes place.”⁵⁵ In his conversation with Kosuth (which doubles as a tactual manual on infiltration), Gonzalez-Torres admitted, “And I think that maybe I’m embracing those institutions which before I would have rejected. Money and capitalism are powers that are here to stay, at least for the moment. It’s within those structures that change can and will take place.”⁵⁶

For Jameson, a dialectician embraces contradiction, working through “the paradoxes, antimonies, and ultimately contradictions which then historicize the previous moment of ‘conclusion’ and enable a new dialectical ‘solution.’”⁵⁷ Gonzalez-Torres described his primary goal similarly: “I want to work within the system. I want to work within the contradictions of the system and try to create a better place.”⁵⁸ Marx

himself describes the working through of contradiction as the engine of movement and transformation. “The exchange of commodities,” he writes, “implies contradictory and mutually exclusive conditions. The further development of the commodity does not abolish these contradictions, but rather provides the form within which they have to move. This is, in general, the way in which contradictions are resolved.”⁵⁹ Capital contains its own antimonies and antagonistic forces, and Marx insisted that it was by working through the contradictions within the capitalist mode of production that labor’s revolutionary triumph over capital could be achieved. Gonzalez-Torres, too, understood the working through of contradiction as a necessary condition for the radical reorganization of the social.

The artist’s strategies were unquestionably supported by registers of privilege. As Muñoz notes, the strategies of resistance and self-making performed by Gonzalez-Torres “are, for the most part, more readily available to subjects whose class privilege gives them access to systems of representation.”⁶⁰ Still, Gonzalez-Torres’s agenda didn’t take as its end the assumption of a privileged, protected position of power, waiting for the dialectic to work itself out. Rather, the act of infiltration was a tactical attempt to amplify and manipulate the system’s contradictions. It’s here that we find the similarities between the Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and (what Georg Lukács described as) the Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg.⁶¹

For Luxemburg, “the breakdown” of the capitalist system will be the result of the weight and drag of its own internal contradictions.⁶² Capital’s sublimation by communism is not predetermined, however, so much as it requires the strategic antagonization of these contradictions. Furthermore, as Karatani Kojin would later remark, in order to avoid the manipulation of the breakdown by reactionary forces (or what Naomi Klein describes as “disaster capitalism”), “a noncapitalist economic sphere must be created.”⁶³ That is, alternatives need to be in place as options for when the breakdown occurs. To experiment with and rehearse alternative practices of social and economic arrangement (by way of producer cooperatives, for example) is necessary “even if they are unable to immediately transcend capitalism,” since “the creation of an economic sphere beyond capitalism . . . gives people a foreshadowing of what it might mean to transcend capitalism.”⁶⁴ What I am suggesting



Utagawa Hiroshige, *Fukagawa Susaki and Jumantsubo*, No. 107, from *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, fifth month of 1857. 14 3/16 x 9 1/4 in. Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Ana Ferris, 30.1478.107. Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 30.1478.107. (Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum.)



Danh Võ, *08:03, 28.05, 2009*, and *Tombstone for Nguyen Thi Ty, 2009*. Late nineteenth-century chandelier; marble, granite, bronze and wood relief. 86 5/8 x 23 5/8 x 7 7/8". Installation view at Kunsthalle Basel. (Courtesy of Danh Võ.)



Danh Võ, *IM UUR 2*, 2013. Installation view. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. (Courtesy of Danh Võ.)



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (*March 5th*) #2, 1991. Light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, and extension cords. Overall dimensions vary with installation. Two parts: approximately 113 inches in height each. Edition of 20, 2 AP. ARG# GF1991-012. (© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, NY.)



Eiko & Koma, *Naked*. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 2010. Photo: Anna Campbell. (Courtesy of Eiko & Koma and Anna Campbell.)



Eiko, *A Body in Fukushima. (On the Tracks, Momouchi)*, Summer 2014. Photographer: William Johnston. (Courtesy of Eiko and William Johnston.)



Eiko, rehearsal for *A Body in a Station*, October 2014. Photographer Anna Campbell.
(Courtesy of Eiko and Anna Campbell.)



Tseng Kwong Chi, *East Meets West Manifesto*, 1983. (© Muna Tseng Dance Projects, New York. Courtesy of Muna Tseng Dance Projects.)

here is that Gonzalez-Torres's work offers an ephemeral experience of such alternatives from within the coordinates determined by and within capitalism.

Gonzalez-Torres took on the role of the artist in a fashion that dissolved a division of labor that distinguishes the work of the artist from the work of insurgency:

As Che Guevara said during the 1960s, whatever you do, that's your trench. So this is my trench and I trust my agenda. People misunderstand this, thinking that for the "revolution" to succeed, everyone must literally go into the trenches. But no, we need hairdressers, bakers, carpenters, pastry chefs, artists—not just guerrillas. As it is impossible to ever escape ideology, maybe the only way out is to work with the different levels of contradiction in our culture.⁶⁵

In mobilizing performance to infiltrate the institutions of the art market, as well as the ideological apparatuses reproductive of the majoritarian sphere, he sought to "work with the different levels of contradiction" within that system and forge a "way out" from an inside (since there is *no* outside). Once inside, he set to subverting and undermining the basic assumptions that undergird the market's mode of value production, transforming his work into hubs for the (re)distribution of the resources and knowledge necessary to sustain imperiled and minor life.

"Untitled" (Memorial Day Weekend)

He began to grapple with the question of distribution early in his career, focusing first on solving a practical problem: how to get the work shown. He developed his first paper stacks in 1988. Among them, *"Untitled" (Memorial Day Weekend)* and *"Untitled" (Veterans Day Sale)* both consist of a stack of paper, each with an offset print featuring one of the parenthetical references to a national/commercial holiday. As spectators take the paper with them, the sculpture diminishes over time, but a certificate of authenticity stipulates that the stacks are to be replenished at the discretion of the owner (or exhibiting institution).⁶⁶ Within the Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, destruction is tied to renewal and reproduction, and the work is achieved through its constant distribution.

The use of the floor to display the sculpture helped solve the practical problem of distribution. “The first stacks I made were some of the date-pieces,” he said. “Around 1989 everyone was fighting for wall space. So the floor space was free, the floor space was marginal. I was also interested in giving back to the viewer, to the public, something that was never really mine to start with.”⁶⁷ Turning to the minor or “marginal” space of the floor, Gonzalez-Torres inverted capital’s process of primitive accumulation (seeking out “new” or “untapped” sites for value extraction, often resulting in colonial and imperial enterprise).⁶⁸ He appropriated marginal zones in spaces already developed by the market in order to transform them into distribution platforms where he could give his work away to the public that encountered them.

While he staged the paper stacks in marginal spaces, the form they took appropriated the tactics of majoritarian artists, effecting what Muñoz described as a disidentificatory performance “strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”⁶⁹ Performing the role of the conceptual artist, or minimalist sculptor, allowed Gonzalez-Torres to produce minoritarian knowledge from within an art market and art-critical establishment that was (and continues to be) hostile to or exploitative of the innovations of artists of color, women, and queer of color artists. As curator Nancy Spector writes, “By appropriating and inhabiting classically ‘straight’ aesthetic genres—the documentary photograph, the macho graffitilike scrawl, the Minimalist cube, and so on—[queers, women, and artists of color] effectively infiltrated the art system and undermined some of its most conventional, complacent assumptions.”⁷⁰ Mimicking “classically ‘straight’ aesthetic genres,” minoritarian artists deployed performance to infiltrate the exclusive structures of a majoritarian art sphere that was effectively predicated upon their exclusion. Once inside, Gonzalez-Torres appropriated the dominant means of distribution to facilitate the sharing out of his work and the redistribution of minoritarian resources and knowledge.

Minimalist sculpture, largely associated with the work of straight white men, presupposed that the subject of sculpture was limited to what the spectator *sees*: the sculpture’s physical presence, its mass and matter. As Gonzalez-Torres observed, however, minimalism’s insistence on the work’s formal neutrality was ultimately a facile reproduction of the straight, white, male artist as a neutral, universal form of unmarked

subjectivity. “After twenty years of feminist discourse and feminist theory,” Gonzalez-Torres replied to the minimalist’s declarations of neutrality, “we have come to realize that ‘just looking’ is not *just* looking but that *looking* is invested with identity: gender, socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation.”⁷¹ (For many of us, when we *look* at a Carl Andre sculpture, for example, all we see is the outline of Ana Mendieta falling to her death from their high-rise apartment.) Working within the form’s own contradictions, at the same time that he dismissed the minimalist’s claim to absolute formalism, Gonzalez-Torres exploited the possibilities opened up by these experiments in form. “Minimalist sculptures were never really primary structures, they were structures that were embedded with a multiplicity of meanings.”⁷²

When an artist “like” Gonzalez-Torres (a queer of color, Cuban immigrant) appropriates the aesthetics of the minimalists, the form’s presumed neutrality is exposed as a fiction serving the interests of the dominant power bloc. “Believe it or not,” he said, “I am a big sucker for formal issues, and, yes, someone like me—the ‘other’—can indeed deal with formal issues. This is not a white-men-only terrain, sorry boys.”⁷³ As he declared that “this is not a white-men-only terrain,” Gonzalez-Torres insisted that race, sex, and sexuality *still* make a difference to and remain salient points of interrogation within the work. Indeed, his appropriation of the anti-representational, seemingly neutral, formalism of minimalism opened up new means for him to proliferate a multiplicity of meanings for what brownness and queerness can be (or what a queer Cuban American artist can do) beyond the limited presumptions attached to and projected across his body/body of work.

Just as we should be suspicious of a critical scheme that reduces Gonzalez-Torres’s work to his various identities, we should be equally suspicious of formalist critical practices that ignore or erase the queer brown content of the work, neutralizing the effect that minoritarian subjects (“people like me”) can have upon the majoritarian institutions and forms that they infiltrate, appropriate, transform, and even destroy. Though you wouldn’t know it from the relative silence that the dominant critical tradition brings to bear on the question of race in Gonzalez-Torres’s work, brownness (and blackness), while not necessarily deterministic of the work, remained a central thematic concern for the artist.

“Untitled” (Death by Gun)

When describing his strategy of appropriating the gallery floor, Gonzalez-Torres claimed that “it was also about trying to be a threat to the art-marketing system, and also, to be really honest, it was about being generous to a certain extent. I wanted people to have my work. The fact that someone could just come and take my work and carry it with them was very exciting.”⁷⁴ In the 1980s the United States art market began to recover from years of crisis and stagnation. As Lisa Phillips argues, after decades of radical experiments in performance art, minimalism, and conceptual art (which challenged the commodification of the enduring art object), the art world returned to elevating the conservative figures of the white male painter/sculptor embodied by the rise of Julian Schnabel or David Salle.⁷⁵ Gonzalez-Torres described this as a “scary return of the bohemian painter . . . a very dangerous, anti-historical, anti-intellectual movement that served, very clearly, the needs of an artificially wealthy new clientele who wanted some art to decorate their new lobbies, apartments, and (now empty) offices.”⁷⁶ While the Reagan administration was dismantling the public sphere (redistributing wealth upward through a combination of tax cuts, privatization, and mass deregulation), the financial class gained a new potency and influence over the institutions of cultural production.⁷⁷ The art market increasingly emerged as a slush fund for the financial class, and the enduring art object returned to the international art market with a vengeance. Today, the art-object-as-commodity increasingly functions as a means for the financial class to store self-generating capital while avoiding taxation.⁷⁸

Creating pieces that had to be given away to the public, Gonzalez-Torres infiltrated the market in order to invert its prevailing logic of private ownership. Though the responsibilities of the owner of a work are variable and specific to the piece, when a private investor purchases certain of his billboards, for example, what they may end up purchasing is a responsibility to share the work freely with the public. “They’re privately owned,” he remarked, “but always publicly shown. People can buy these billboards, but they have to put them in public—they have to rent a public space.”⁷⁹ As an event, such works become a condition for the constitution of a commons. As Spector noted, “By inviting his viewers

to share in the work . . . Gonzalez-Torres opens up a communal space in which a dialogic relationship between artist and audience becomes possible and in which the various meanings of the work begin to coalesce.”⁸⁰ Having appropriated the market’s means of distribution to give his work away to the public, he designed the work to function as a nexus for the redistribution of resources and knowledge.

As Gonzalez-Torres often argued, the technological innovations of late capital’s media-sphere have produced a deluge of information that short-circuits our capacity to locate meaning and thus to collectively mobilize resistance to the forces effecting meaning’s catastrophic implosion. His work invited the spectator to be a source of knowledge production and meaning-making, but equally important was the work’s function as a node for distributing knowledge in a way that could counter the hegemony of the majoritarian sphere. The work thus became a means for the (re)distribution of minoritarian knowledge: insurgent, counter-discursive forms of knowing and being in the world that disrupt the dominant hegemony and offer the epistemological alternatives of black, brown, queer, trans, feminist, decolonial, and anti-capitalist ways of knowing and being together.

Against the eliding forces of the majoritarian sphere, minoritarian knowledge insists on the intelligence and the revolutionary intellectual faculties of minoritarian subjects. But as Muñoz describes it, “Within majoritarian institutions the production of minoritarian knowledge is a project set up to fail. Mechanisms ensure that the production of such knowledge ‘misfires’ as it is misheard, misunderstood, and devalued.”⁸¹ Minoritarian knowledge negotiates this limit, accounting for, announcing, and theorizing the world from a minor position. Minoritarian knowledge is the theory that imagines and articulates the vision of another world in which we might all *continue* to live together despite the promise of impending annihilation. Minoritarian performance is its praxis.

Amada Cruz describes Gonzalez-Torres’s 1990 “Untitled” (*Death by Gun*) as a work in which “he is perhaps at his most didactic.”⁸² But we might also describe it as an explicit, unapologetic mobilization of his work to facilitate the distribution of minoritarian knowledge. The stack debuted in 1990, and printed on each page of the stack is a photographic montage of people killed in gun-related violence during a one-week

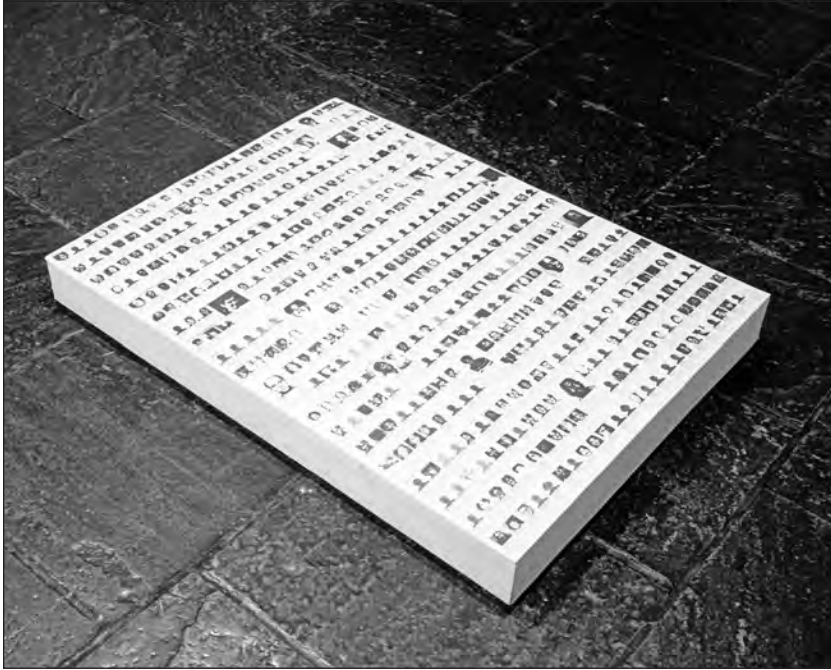


Figure 3.3. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (*Death by Gun*), 1990. Print on paper, endless copies, 9 in. at ideal height x 33 x 45 in. (original paper size). Installation view: 1991 Whitney Biennial. The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. April 19–June 16, 1991. Catalogue. (© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, NY.)

period in the United States. Accompanying each entry there is either a thumbnail portrait of the victim or a stock silhouette as well as the victim’s names, stats, and details of their death. The sheet is a collated reproduction of a July 17, 1989, article from *Time Magazine* divided into twenty rectangular frames. Each frame is a page from the *Time* spread, and every one contains approximately twenty portraits. While most of the thumbnails are the same size, about eleven of them are enlarged. One can pick individual profiles to read at will or work one’s way through the list of deaths sequentially.

The serial repetition of the thumbnails recall Andy Warhol’s sequencing of images in the early 1960s with works that include *100 Dollar Bills* (a serialization of the US dollar bill), *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*, and

Warren (a portrait of Warren Beatty). “*Untitled*” (*Death by Gun*) has a particular visual resonance with *Warren*. Produced with silkscreen ink and pencil on linen, *Warren* is also a black and white image. The repetition of Beatty’s headshot virtually obliterates the singularity of the movie star’s handsome features, and the expression on Beatty’s face, repeated eighty times, becomes as empty as the vacant areas that occupy the right side of the canvas. When read in relation to *100 Dollar Bills* or *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*, Beatty is figured as merely another mass-produced commodity issued from the machinery of the culture industries in the same way that soup cans, coke bottles, or paper money surge forth from a factory.

Let’s imagine a gallery in which *100 Dollar Bills* hangs between *Green Coca-Cola Bottles* and *Warren*. In such a configuration, the dollar bill would stand in as the “universal equivalent.” Through the mediation of money, the Hollywood star and the Coke bottles are figured as commodities that, in Marx’s words, “relate to each other merely as exchange-values.”⁸³ When we think of these three paintings in this imagined curatorial sequence, we get a glimpse of three incommensurable things (a coke bottle, a dollar bill, Beatty’s face) as they are flattened into a relation of equivalence by way of exchange value: “When a product (or an activity) becomes exchange value . . . it must at the same time be qualitatively transformed, converted into another element, so that both commodities become denominated quantities, in the same units, thus becoming commensurable.”⁸⁴ But commensurability, necessary for market exchange, flattens the sensuous and detailed nature of life as it is actually lived.

From within this imaginary gallery, picture “*Untitled*” (*Death by Gun*) placed on the floor in front of the Warhol sequence. When imagined in a relationship to each other, we begin to see the gunshot victims, like Beatty’s celebrity or the coke bottle, as a product of industry. We might grasp the fact that the arms industry doesn’t merely manufacture and distribute guns, but also produces death at a rapid pace. Furthermore, the surge in gun deaths in cities like Chicago is overwhelmingly distributed to black and brown people. Death can now be replicated at a mechanical rate, just as a Hollywood studio affects the mass production of the smiling celebrity. But if “*Untitled*” (*Death by Gun*) appropriates Warhol’s aesthetic strategies, it ultimately inverts their effect to tell

a story not about the commensurability of things, but rather about the radical incommensurability of black and brown life and death.

As we look into the individual faces of gun victims, reading their names and the summaries of their final moments on earth, we discover their irreducible incommensurability. Even in places where portraits of the victims apparently couldn't be obtained, the stock silhouettes vary in shade and saturation. It looks as though someone photocopied the pages from *Time*, thereby lending a faded and grainy quality to some of the reproduced images. At various points in the print, there is an oversaturation of ink, producing crushed blacks (underexposed areas in a photograph where the details are too dark to be perceptible), which obscure or distort the image of the gunshot victims. Rather than a mere printing flaw, however, the over-inking of an image, as in Warhol's *Warren*, can function as an aesthetic strategy.

Given the historical optimization of film and photography equipment for lighter skin tones, crushed blacks often appear in portraits of dark-skinned people. My turn to the theme of crushed black is inspired by Tavia Nyong'o's theorization of the crushed blacks that populate Shirley Clarke's experimental film *Portrait of Jason* (a 1967 cinéma vérité study of black performer and hustler Jason Halliday). Nyong'o argues that we might understand crushed blacks as contributing "to the enigmatic shape and undecidability of the images . . . projecting outlines without interiors, surfaces without depths, and a history folded upon itself so as to perpetually produce doubles."⁸⁵ For Nyong'o, crushed black also becomes the subject of Clarke's film "insofar as Jason is the quintessentially crushed black."⁸⁶ The formal element of crushed black thus becomes a metaphor for black and brown life in the United States. At the same time, in "*Untitled*" (*Death by Gun*), the "enigmatic shape and undecidability" of a figure in crushed black might be read as a form of concealed autonomy or possibility. Enigma, in this sense, holds to a place where a multiplicity of meanings and possibilities (beyond the limited and often deadly options currently available to black and brown people) can occur.

"*Untitled*" (*Death by Gun*) features a large number of black and brown victims. To take in the crushed blacks in "*Untitled*" (*Death by Gun*) is to observe the disproportionate distribution of gun violence toward black and brown people, a reminder of the fact that, as Rinaldo Walcott writes, "Black people die differently."⁸⁷ The piece invites the spectator

to see the inequity of gun violence's racialized *and* gendered distribution in the United States and the attentive reader will notice that most of the women featured in the piece died in one of two ways, from suicide or within the context of domestic and sexual violence. (Black and brown people and women of color, too, die differently.) In the work, we meet Rachel Parris, a twenty-year-old black woman and a sex worker from Chicago, Illinois, who was shot while trying to get away from an eighteen-year-old man; Sylvia Contreras, a twenty-six-year-old woman who left her partner after nine years of domestic abuse only to be shot by him when she returned to rescue their children; or Whitney Rainey, a two-year-old black girl whose mother's ex-boyfriend shot her during a fight with her mom.

"Giving [my work] away," Gonzalez-Torres once mused, "was a fair way of giving back something that was not even mine. This information belongs to everybody."⁸⁸ Insistent on the intellectual freedom of his spectator, he must have understood that the distribution of these stories would have different effects on different viewers. For some, it is a lesson in the distribution of gun violence toward black and brown bodies. For others, the encounter with the work mobilizes performance's mode of reproduction to remember and keep some fragment of the dead alive. The work might also be creatively repurposed to serve as reading material during a break from work. "A page or stack in a gallery reads differently from one you see in an artist's studio or one you see in a home or museum," he once reflected. "I once went to the employees' toilet in a museum in Germany and found one of my pieces, *Death by Gun*, pinned to the door of the toilet stall. The employees told me that they loved reading about all those people's violent deaths while they were sitting. It helped them 'go.'"⁸⁹

I'm anxious about what it means to reduce Parris, Contreras, or Rainey's final moments to bathroom reading, though it does feel like a fitting description of the way people often consume the destruction of black and brown life: in passing, as entertainment, something they "love" to read about. At the same time, I don't want to underestimate the insurgent capacity that an encounter with "*Untitled*" (*Death by Gun*) might have, regardless of the setting. I can't shake the way that a face-to-face encounter with their faces (or with the expanse of crushed black where their faces ought to be) might remind a spectator that "something's

missing.” Not only something, but someone. Nor should we devalue the way this encounter with loss and incompleteness can inspire spectators to ask, wherever they are, “What is to be done?”

Disturbed as I am by the German museum employees who “loved reading about all those people’s violent deaths while they were sitting,” I am yet interested in the queer valences of Gonzalez-Torres’s example, insofar as it occurs in a public bathroom. Like most gay men in the 1990s, he would have had at least an indirect (if not sensuous) awareness of the serious *and* playful forms of queer knowledge production and world-making that can occur in a toilet stall. He also would have been aware of the risks of systemic violence, policing, entrapment, and abuse that threaten these queer zones of sexual autonomy and social experimentation. (The link between queer sites of public sex and policing is a common theme in queer memoir work, from Samuel Delany to Reinaldo Arenas, to whom we’ll return in a moment.)⁹⁰ These queer, sexuate ways of knowing and being can be necessary for queer survival, and we share them with each other as we try to sustain life in crushed blacks and browns.

Unlike the experience with the endless reproducibility of Beatty’s celebrity or the green Coca-Cola bottle, as the spectator reads the stories in “*Untitled*” (*Death by Gun*), looks into their faces, and says their names, the dead need not be flattened into a relation of equivalence or commensurability. Rather, Gonzalez-Torres confronts us with a fragment of the detailed singularity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of every person. As in Moten’s description of black performance’s “revaluation or reconstruction of value,” “*Untitled*” (*Death by Gun*) reanimates and reevaluates the singular lives of people who otherwise endure the living death of crushed black.⁹¹ Appropriating industrial means of production, the stack becomes a node for the distribution of minoritarian knowledge about the conditions of living death affecting black and brown people, as much as it serves as a conduit for the sharing out of their/our lives with the commons.

The Division of Labor

And then there was his assault on that other effect of distribution within a capitalist system: the division of labor. In the third volume of *Capital*,

Marx describes the division of labor as “an organization of production which has grown up naturally, a web which has been, and continues to be, woven behind the backs of the producers or commodities.”⁹² In the *Grundrisse* he also casts a perspective on the entanglements between distribution, production, history, and the division of labor:

Conceived most superficially, distribution appears as the distribution of products, and thus further removed from production and quasi-independent of it. But before distribution becomes the distribution of products, it is (1) distribution of the instruments of production and (2) (which is another determination of the same relation) distribution of the members of society among the various types of production (the subsuming of individuals under definitive relations or production). The distribution of products is obviously merely a result of this distribution, which is comprised in the production process itself and determines the structure of production.⁹³

What appears to be a “naturally” occurring arrangement is in fact the result of a sedimented historical process through which economic social relations (class, the division of labor) are shaped by the feedback loop between production and distribution. “At the very outset these [relations] may appear as naturally evolved,” he continues. “Through the process of production itself they are transformed from naturally evolved factors into historical ones, and although they appear as natural preconditions of production for one period, they were its historical result for another. They are continuously changed within production itself.”⁹⁴ Similarly recognizing that the division of labor was anything but natural, Gonzalez-Torres’s work staged a practice of redistribution that took an undoing of the division of labor as one of its primary targets.

On March 10, 1992, he delivered a lecture titled “Practices: The Problem of Divisions of Cultural Labor” at The Drawing Center in New York. Speaking at the height of the 1990s culture wars (charged disputes over queer, black, feminist representation, censorship, and public arts funding), he was largely critical of the notion that the culture wars even constituted a debate.⁹⁵ Instead, he argued that the culture wars were an effective way for the Right to focus public attention on the spectacle of sexual and racial difference, often organized around the National

Endowment of the Arts' funding of "obscene art." This focus served as a distraction from the state's concurrent withdrawal from and privatization of the public sphere. "Why bother with the destruction of the environment or lack of adequate health care," he asked elsewhere, "when we have a black-and-white photo of two men kissing?"⁹⁶ The assault on free expression forced artists into a corner in which their energies were directed toward the defense of art and artistic expression, shifting the focus away from other, broader and connected systemic concerns. In short, the NEA debate reified a cultural division of labor that limited the proper province of the artistic laborer to questions of free expression.⁹⁷

As Gonzalez-Torres pointed out, "The NEA debate is not actually a debate, but a rhetorical posturing about freedom of information, and the first amendment of so-called free speech—which was never free, you had to pay for it. It was about white, male, straight speech—or classical values. The Constitution was not written by single black mothers, or factory workers on a three-day work schedule somewhere in Chicago. No, it was written by free white men with properties and titles—what I call, 'The other.'"⁹⁸ His critique resonated with Marx's position in "On the Jewish Question," where Marx explains that the liberal discourse of rights encourages the subdivision of a social collective into property owning (that is, rights bearing) individuals.⁹⁹ For Gonzalez-Torres, the division of cultural labor bars the artist from imagining her work's relationship to a broader social collective. When artists are circumscribed to the practice of defending "art for art's sake," the artist fixates on battling censorship (and securing First Amendment rights), without necessarily developing effective means for combatting the system that produces the censors, if not altogether reifying the legitimacy of the legal order that makes the artist's disenfranchisement and silencing a possibility.

In response to these conditions, Gonzalez-Torres directed cultural workers to refuse the division of labor: "So if you ever get invited, or get invited again, to pretend that there is a debate about freedom, just remember a few things if you are a cultural producer. First, don't act 'artistic.' Screw the division of labor really good, and don't talk about how important it is for your 'creative self' to smear shit all over your body as a metaphor."¹⁰⁰ Smearing shit all over the body may well serve

as a powerful metaphor in artistic practice, but when the artist is boxed into responding *only* to a work's controversy (a controversy that may be manufactured by an opponent who hasn't even seen the work), the nuances of this position will most likely be obliterated by the fog of controversy. As Jennifer Doyle argues, "Attention to a work's controversy actually suppresses attention to a work's difficulty."¹⁰¹ Rather than falling into this trap, Gonzalez-Torres argued that artists should instead "recite—at the drop of a hat—numbers and statistics about the increase in infant mortality, the new cases of tuberculosis, the defunding of supplement food programs for pregnant women, infants and children, the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs, by the supposedly pro-family, pro-environment, pro-education administration."¹⁰² Inviting the artist and critic to "screw with the division of labor," he mapped a strategy for antagonizing the system from within its own contradictions: "By taking over issues of housing, health care, queer rights, women's rights, the environment, the government coverups (and many more unfamiliar acts), we artists, critics, and art historians do in fact rearrange the divisions of cultural labor, and perhaps in this way, we might be able to put forward our own agenda."¹⁰³

If the division of labor reproduces the domination of the oppressed by isolating them, Gonzalez-Torres insisted that a refusal of the cultural division of labor could be the condition for the realization of what (appropriating the language of Althusser) can be described as a revolutionary rupture produced by "an accumulation of 'circumstances' and 'currents' so that that whatever their origin and sense . . . they '*fuse*' into a *ruptural* unity."¹⁰⁴ In his own words, Gonzalez-Torres insisted that by defying the cultural division of labor, a form of common and active, yet incommensurable, solidarity might come into existence, forming a "voice of opposition [and] infiltration that upsets the expected narrative."¹⁰⁵ Invoking Marx's vision of communism in the Gotha Critique, Gonzalez-Torres argued that this voice would call for the redistributive justice of the commons: "Ultimately this will be a voice that truly attempts liberation through meaning and renaming, and reordering *according to our own needs*."¹⁰⁶ In an important revision of Marx, Gonzalez-Torres shifted the power of a communist vision of the world from an order that would meet the needs of the individual ("to each according to his needs") to one of collective sustenance ("reordering according to our own needs").

It's not merely that he theorized the possibility of such a practice. His work functions as a stage upon which the undoing of the division of labor is made manifest.

"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)

In the early days of January 2014, I worked my way through the Art Institute of Chicago's contemporary galleries toward an encounter with one of Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills. At the time, *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* was manifest as a large pile of colored candies configured as a triangular mound flowing out from a corner. The piece has, as Gonzalez-Torres' works often do, ideal specifications for materialization, including an ideal weight of 175 pounds. This weight may gesture to Ross's body weight, though the same weight was used, for example, in *"Untitled" (Portrait of Dad)*, 1991, allowing for a range of interpretations.¹⁰⁷ The spectator can take candy from the spill, participating in the work's production, consumption, and destruction. Each time we take and consume a piece of candy, we contribute to a process that mirrors the shrinking and decimation of Ross's body by the plague. But viewers are not directly invited to take the work, and since the gallery is a space often marked by prohibition against physical interaction with the art, how is the spectator to know that she can take and eat it?

With the exception of a small curatorial plaque that stands at a distance from the piece, the sculpture doesn't announce its interactivity. Given the prominence of Gonzalez-Torres's work, it's not unlikely that a spectator who is in the know will reach down and take a few pieces of candy. Other spectators become the audience, locking eyes on what seems like a violation of museum etiquette, before deciding if they will perform the same actions in relation to the sculpture. But on that day it wasn't a curator's wall plaque that informed people about the sculpture's interactive nature. Instead, as interested spectators approached the piece, the guard stationed in the room spoke with them, inviting them to take and eat the candies. He was a young black man. The guards at the Art Institute of Chicago are often black and brown, and it's not uncommon, given Chicago's ongoing, violent practices of racial segregation, for the guards to be the only other black people in a room when I visit the museum's galleries. On that day spectators seemed genuinely surprised

that the guard was not only speaking to them, but also educating them about the art in the room.

Eventually I approached him to ask how often the candy is replenished. He explained that the work is usually restored on a daily basis, saying that “it would defeat the point” of the work if the pile of candy ever disappeared. Without prompting, he described the work as becoming itself not through disappearance but through renewal, teaching about the significance of the piece, the loss of queer life during the AIDS crisis, and an artist who was grieving the loss of his lover.

In a 1995 *ArtPress* interview of Gonzalez-Torres, art critic and curator Robert Storr describes a similar encounter:

When I was at the Hirshhorn and saw the show, there was one particular guard who was standing with the big candy floor piece “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), and she was amazing. There was this suburban, white middle-class mother with two young sons who came in the room and in thirty seconds, this woman—who was a black, maybe church-going civil servant in Washington, in the middle of all this reactionary pressure about the arts—there she was explaining to this mother and kids about AIDS and what this piece represented, what a placebo was, and how there was no cure and so on. Then the boys started to fill their pockets with candies and she sort of looked at them like a school mistress and said, “You’re only supposed to take one.” Just as their faces fell and they tossed back all but a few she suddenly smiled again and said, “Well maybe two.” And she won them over completely! The whole thing worked because they got the piece, they got the interaction, they got the generosity and they got her. It was great.¹⁰⁸

Storr’s recollection might remind us that, as a result of the division of labor, museum guards are usually limited to a form of (in Marx’s terms) “one-sided, machine-like labor” in which they function as an extension of the art institution’s security apparatus.¹⁰⁹ This fact is overdetermined by the racialization of guard work. Security guards at art institutions in large US cities are commonly drawn from working class immigrant communities and communities of color. On the one hand, security guards are hypervisible. They are embodied nodes in the institution’s panopticon—the eyes and ears of a security apparatus that protects the

institution's investments by regulating and disciplining the spectator's behavior. But they are not supposed to be its mouth or mind. Like most forms of racialized labor, the guard is supposed to be silent and invisible to the spectator—watching, but not seen or heard.

In a chilling interrogation of the racialization and desubjectification of the art museum security guard, Fred Wilson's *Guarded View* (1991) features four headless, brown, seemingly male mannequins. Each mannequin is dressed in a different uniform from one of New York City's major cultural institutions: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Jewish Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney. *Guarded View* was developed from a 1992 performance titled *My Life as A Dog*. As curator Thelma Golden described the piece, Wilson moved through the Whitney's galleries dressed as a museum guard and asked people, "What do you think of this work?": "It was amazing because half the people ran down to the front desk and said, 'There's a guard going crazy.' And he was only talking about work and any of you who know, Fred is very smart, so it was not like he was babbling. . . . Other people walked up to him and said, 'Oh my God, you are so smart. You know you should not be a guard.' Equally as problematic."¹¹⁰ The "problematic" response of the Whitney's patrons is unsurprising. *Within majoritarian institutions the production of minoritarian knowledge is a project set up to fail.*¹¹¹ As Wilson's intervention makes clear, the division of labor is also about the distribution of knowledge. Black security guards—if not black people in general—are not expected to possess knowledge about art in places like the Whitney. When we do, we are often either apprehended as disruptive, crazy, or made into targets for condescending praise.

Museum guards spend an extraordinary amount of time with the art that they guard. They are afforded the time and opportunity to contemplate and learn about a particular piece with a depth and duration that may exceed the time given to the work by critics, curators, or scholars, whose critical utterances assume the authority of official expertise. The intellectual division of labor functions as an engine for the reproduction of class and racial hierarchy because the badge of expertise is primarily distributed on the basis of one's perceived access to formal education and other luxuries of the ascendant classes. The critic's or spectator's active refusal to engage with museum guards as experts on the art they watch over

must thus be understood as a commitment (however unwitting) to the maintenance of the cultural, racialized, and intellectual division of labor.

An inadvertent example of this surfaces in Storr's reading of the Hirshhorn guard's performance. Storr characterizes the guard less as a source of knowledge production than as a translator for Gonzalez-Torres. He emphasizes her gender twice ("this woman," "like a school mistress"), going out of his way to tell us that she is black, without explaining the significance of this detail. He curiously imagines her (with little discernible evidence) as "maybe church-going" and then, as if to contain this phantasmatically black church lady's capacity to perform as a source of knowledge, he undercuts her defiance of the cultural division of labor by reducing her to the position of caretaker. In fact, she becomes a black woman taking care of a white woman's children as he resituates her within one of the few (gendered) categories of labor in which black women are stereotypically allowed to function as limited sources of knowledge (teachers) by describing her as "a school mistress." She "suddenly smile[s]" at the white children, allowing them their indulgence before offering free, affectively charged, maternal and pedagogical guidance to another woman's kids. As a result, the piece is rendered ready for apprehension, consumption, and possession by the family as, "they *got* the piece, they *got* the interaction, [and] they *got* the generosity."¹¹² She, too, becomes an object for possession by this white family as "they *got* her. It was great."¹¹³

In the same conversation, Gonzalez-Torres narrates this scenario in a different fashion:

In my recent show at the Hirshhorn, which is one of the best experiences I have had in a long time, the guards were really into it. Because I talked to them, I dealt with them. They're going to be here eight hours with this stuff. And I never see guards as guards, I see guards as the public. Since the other answer to this question "Who's the public?" is, well, the people who are around you, which includes the guards. In Washington people asked me, "Did I train the guard, did I give them a lecture?" I said, "No, I just talk to them when I'm doing the work." They said, "You know we have never been to an exhibit where the guards go up to the viewers and tell them what to do, and where to go, what to

look at, what it means.” But again, that division of labor, that division of function is always there in place to serve someone’s agenda.¹¹⁴

Acknowledging that the division of labor is central to the reproduction of the social hierarchies sustained and necessitated by racial capitalism, Gonzalez-Torres echoed Marx’s complaint that capital strips the laborer to specialized functions as it “develops a hierarchy of labour-powers, to which there corresponds a scale of wages. The individual workers are appropriated and annexed for life by a limited function; while the various operations of the hierarchy of labour-powers are parceled out among the workers according to both their natural and their acquired capacities.”¹¹⁵ The division of labor thus validates the unjust distribution of resources and knowledge along lines of race, gender, and class, tautologically justifying the inequity of distribution as the product of the naturally developed social order.

At the very least, Gonzalez-Torres’s work suggests that a better distribution of knowledge, resources, and labor is both possible and necessary. According to David Graeber, “Communism really just means any situation where people act according to the principle of ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’—which is the way pretty much everyone always acts if they are working together to get something done. . . . Communism, then, is already here. The question is how to further democratize it.”¹¹⁶ Gonzalez-Torres’s work opens a path toward an answer by transforming the scene of aesthetic encounter into a stage for the redistribution of resources, knowledge, and the sustenance of More Life. As the work performs for the spectator, that which is signified by the inadequate word “communism” comes just a little closer to us.

The Revolution

Of course, to say that Gonzalez-Torres was advocating communist revolution, which I am *not* saying, would skip over one of the central contradictions in his relationship to revolution. Gonzalez-Torres was deeply suspicious of the very concept of revolution:

I’ve been waiting for the revolution for a long time and it hasn’t come. The ones that have come have done very little to change our ways. Therefore

I don't want a revolution anymore, it's too much energy for too little. So I want to work within the system. I want to work within the contradictions of the system and try to create a better place. I think revolutions were a really nice idea in the nineteenth century and in the early part of this century, but we must take into consideration the technological advances that are being made right now. These technological shifts are happening in a world that has become very fragile and also very small.¹¹⁷

The passage is rich with contradiction and generative ambivalence. If he doesn't "want a revolution" anymore, he still speaks in the present perfect progressive: "I've been waiting for the revolution." This could mean either that he doesn't want the revolution he's still waiting for or that he doesn't want it anymore, though he still waits for it. After disavowing the revolution, he describes the very strategy ("working within the contradictions of the system") espoused by revolutionaries from Marx and Luxemburg to Mao and Castro.

Revolutionary theory has long struggled over the question of when "working within the contradictions of the system" passes over into insufficient reformism. This is perhaps most famously articulated in Rosa Luxemburg's "Social Reform or Revolution."¹¹⁸ But even Luxemburg insisted that (social and legal) reform was necessary to the revolutionary process, so long as it presupposed a revolutionary end. If Luxemburg might have chafed at Gonzalez-Torres's seeming embrace of "the system," both of them, with Marx, shared the belief that revolution required the right set of conditions to be successful.

Living and working in the United States at the height of the Reagan Revolution, Gonzalez-Torres must have understood that the conditions for *actual* revolution were nowhere remotely present. Beyond this, due in part to the accident of autobiography, he had serious reason to question a romantic ("nineteenth century") idealization of revolution. In his (albeit broad) assessment that the "ones that have come have done very little to change our ways," he was effectively in agreement with the Johnson-Forest Tendency's mid-century conclusion that in spite of a half century of revolution, social and economic relations under both socialist and capitalist states remained exploitative, hierarchical, and destructive.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the Cuban Revolution, despite its many achievements, also reproduced and expanded many of the forms of violence,

exploitation, and injustice it had been fought to abolish. Gonzalez-Torres's skeptical approach to revolution, despite his at times explicitly revolutionary agenda, is itself a working through of the fundamental contradiction at the center of the question posed by Johnson-Forest. This was the contradiction that was playing itself out across Cuba when Gonzalez-Torres was a child.

He was part of the first generation of children to be raised in the revolution. 1970 was the last full year that Felix lived in Cuba. That same year Ernesto Cardenal—a famed Nicaraguan poet, priest, liberation theologian, and future minister of culture for the Sandinista government—visited Cuba and then produced *In Cuba*, a book that offers a textured, admiring, but also critical account of the revolution. The book consists of a host of fragments, notes, and poems (by Cardenal and others) recounting Cardenal's conversations and encounters with the people he met in Cuba. He marvels at the revolution's progressive achievements: attempts to dismantle antiblack racism, care for the needs of the poor, education reforms aimed at eradicating illiteracy, national health care, the dismantling of capitalist ideology, and available labor for the working classes. But he also worries about the state's discrimination against and suppression of Catholics (while being deeply critical of the reactionary tendencies of Cuban Catholicism), expresses anxiety regarding the revolution's persecution of homosexuals, its practices of censorship, surveillance, and repression, and is concerned about the ideological consolidation of power into the extraordinary figure of Fidel. Indeed, by the end of the book, Fidel comes to accrue an increasingly (and ominously) godlike status in revolutionary Cuba.

Cardenal's criticism is framed early in the text by the caveat offered by two young poets who arrive at his hotel to speak candidly of the revolution's failures. "We want you to know all the bad things about this Revolution," they say to him, "because you must have been seeing the good things from the moment you arrived. And we don't want the same thing to happen to you that has happened to others who have come to Cuba; they became disappointed."¹²⁰ Their criticism of the revolution is not mounted *against* it, but from inside of it. "I am not a revolutionary," one says. "I am the Revolution. I and the others of my generation did not make the Revolution. We are its product, we were made by it. . . . We have never known anything but the Revolution."¹²¹ In their criticism of

the revolution, they aim not to topple it, but to transform it into what it ought to be, rather than what it was becoming.

The young poets denounce the revolution's treatment of homosexuals, in particular, as a "hateful and unnerving" component of a general campaign of "repression" carried out by the state in the name of the revolution.¹²² At various points throughout the text Cardenal expresses a similar anxiety, speaking with a man who had the chance to visit a "Social Disgrace Unit" where seminarists were held "with marijuana smokers and homosexuals and other delinquents, working in the marble quarries."¹²³ When he asks if there was "forced labor," the man responds, "practically," then underlines the social hierarchies of the labor camps in which homosexuals find themselves near the bottom, "under very harsh conditions. It's very annoying for them [the seminarists] to be with homosexuals, sneak thieves, and other antisocial types."¹²⁴ Later, one of his interlocutors "admits that the repression in Cuba against homosexuals is very severe. They are not allowed to study, he notes, before musing, 'It is terrible to think what would have happened to a Whitman or a Lorca in Cuba: they would not have been able to study.'¹²⁵ But in a way, the revolution had already produced its own Whitman or Lorca.

Reinaldo Arenas was born into poverty in Batista's Cuba. Like the young poets, and Gonzalez-Torres, he was of the first generation raised under the revolution's education reforms and literacy programs. Shortly before he died of AIDS complications, while living in exile in New York in 1990, Arenas told his own story in his memoir *Antes que anochezca* (Before Night Falls).¹²⁶ But his first book, *Celestino antes del alba* (Singing from the Well), was published from Cuba in 1967, which established him as a prominent author nationally and globally. Arenas's formally innovative, challenging novels boldly explored the limits of the revolution, as well as its successes, holding the spectral figure of homosexuality and the sensuous content of queer desire at the center of much of the work. This, and his withering criticisms of the state, drew him into increasing conflict with the Cuban government. He avoided the Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP) camps of the mid-1960s, concentration camps in which "anti-social" and "counter-revolutionary" figures, including large numbers of homosexuals, were forced to perform hard labor. But in the 1970s, after a sexual encounter with a group of young men on a beach, he became entangled in the state's legal apparatus,

eventually winding up in the notoriously bleak El Morro prison after a brief attempt to escape from earlier imprisonment. Like Gonzalez-Torres's parents, Arenas migrated to Miami as part of the Mariel boatlift, before migrating to New York, where he lived until his death.

Queer Cubans in exile, especially those self-identified on the Left (such as Gonzalez-Torres, Muñoz, or Cortiñas), occupy a nearly impossible position with relation to the revolution. In an essay describing his return to Cuba during 1977–1978 as a member of the Antonio Maceo Brigade (which consisted of young US residents and citizens of Cuban descent returning to Cuba to work in support of the revolution), José Quiroga names the problem of homosexuality as one of the revolution's key internal contradictions. Furthermore, "Being homosexual and revolutionary entailed inhabiting a major contradiction, if not an impossibility."¹²⁷ Revolutionary queer figures like Lourdes Casal, one of the Maceo Brigade founders, had few good options for navigating these straights. Casal "never openly revealed her sexuality, nor did she criticize the state persecution of homosexuals and lesbians in Cuba."¹²⁸ Quiroga calls for an approach that works through these contradictions, rather than running from them: "But if we are going to inscribe the queer in the Revolution, let's do so not solely from the point of victimhood but also from within the axis of agency. Problematic, disturbing, difficult agency—silencing itself at specific moments, gaining for itself spaces of freedom in the microcontext, appealing to the outside world when the inside universe is terribly unjust, and at times at the center of the national scenario."¹²⁹

In turning to this brief history of the revolution's contradictory relationship to homosexuality, I aim to highlight the material and historical complexities that surely impacted Gonzalez-Torres's ambivalent relationship to the concept of revolution. But in spite of the many ways the Cuban Revolution failed, it's important to emphasize the fact that Gonzalez-Torres's critique of it still manifested revolutionary and even communistic impulses. Indeed, until the point of their deaths, Arenas and Gonzalez-Torres were no less critical of capitalism or the United States (even if Arenas adopted a fervently anti-Castro, anti-communist position for the remainder of his life). As he was approaching death, this is how Arenas described his adopted home in New York City: "My new world was ruled not by political power but by another power, also

sinister: the power of money. After having lived in this country for some years, I realize that it is a country without a soul: everything revolves around money.”¹³⁰

There’s a painful irony to how things turned out. Like his contemporary Ana Mendieta, Felix was sent abroad as a child to what his family believed were safer shores in the north. Arenas fled to Miami as a *marielito* to escape political and sexual persecution. And still, by 1996, all three were dead, precipitously, in the United States. Arenas and Gonzalez-Torres were consumed by a disease that took on genocidal proportions as a result of the US government’s hostility toward queer, black, and brown life. Mendieta died under suspicious circumstances, falling to her death from the balcony of her thirty-fourth-floor apartment during a fight with her husband, minimalist sculptor Carl Andre. (Andre was later acquitted for the murder in a controversial decision that remains maddening.) In keeping with the criticisms of the two young poets, we might read Gonzalez-Torres’s ambivalence toward revolution less as a dismissal of the revolutionary principle than as a response to an impossible position marked by the quite material knowledge of the ways in which the revolution betrayed (or was betraying) itself, in spite of the fact that we continue to wait for it.

“Untitled” (*March 5th*) #2. Rossmore. More Ross. More . . .

But before the revolution there is still, and as yet, life. “When people ask me, ‘Who is your public? I say honestly, without skipping a beat, ‘Ross.’ The public was Ross.”¹³¹ The public *was* Ross. For five months in 1990, Ross and Felix lived together in Los Angeles at the Ravenswood building on Rossmore Avenue. Their world was full, but Ross was dying. Felix later drafted a list of his primary impressions of that time: “1990 moved to L.A. with Ross (already very sick), Harry the dog, Biko, and Pebbles, the Ravenswood, Rossmore, golden hours, Ann and Chris by the pool, magic hour, rented a red car, money for the first time, no more waiting on tables, *Golden Girls*, great students at CalArts.”¹³² Ann, his friend and curator Ann Goldstein, also lived at the Ravenswood. When Felix was looking for a place to live, she recalled that, he “immediately was drawn to the name of the street: ROSSmore.”¹³³ Rossmore: More Ross.

Describing their time in LA, Felix wrote: “L.A. 1990. Ross and I spent every Saturday afternoon visiting galleries, museums, thrift shops, and going on long, very long drives all around L.A., enjoying the ‘magic hour’ when the light makes everything gold and magical in that city.”¹³⁴ But this world was falling apart: “Ross was dying right in front of my eyes. Leaving me.”¹³⁵ During one trip to MOCA (the Museum of Contemporary Art) they encountered Roni Horn’s *Gold Field* (1982), a four-by-five-foot sheet of golden foil. It was, for them, “a new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty.”¹³⁶ As they faced one ending, *Gold Field* opened up a space to rest, take refuge, and keep breathing. It was a place where they could stay still, quiet, and alive together for just a minute longer. “In the midst of our private disaster of Ross’s imminent death,” he wrote, “and the darkness of that particular historical moment, we were given the chance to ponder on the opportunity to regain our breath, and breathe a romantic air only true lovers breathe.”¹³⁷

Two light bulbs, sometimes wrapped tightly around each other, cast a soft light across the room. Eventually one flickers out, leaving the other alone. Felix made the first manifestation of this light strand, “*Untitled*” (*March 5th*) #2, in the wake of Ross’s death. March 5 was not the date of the work’s production. It was Ross’s birthday. After death, rebirth. “When I first made those two light bulbs,” he told Spector, “I was in a total state of fear about losing my dialogue with Ross.”¹³⁸ But it was by continuing to make work that he kept some fragment of Ross, and their dialogue, alive and with him, with us. In the years that followed, he introduced pieces including “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), “*Untitled*” (*Rossmore*) (a strand of light bulbs), and “*Untitled*” (*Rossmore II*) (a spill of green candy). In works like these he sustained and made more Ross, to keeping alive the flickering gold vision of that better world they brushed up against in the Ravenswood on Rossmore.



Figure 3.4. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (*March 5th*) #2, 1991. Light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, and extension cords. Overall dimensions vary with installation. Two parts, approximately 113 inches in height each. Editions of 20, 2 AP. ARG# GF1991-012. (© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, NY.)

- 108 Gumbs, “Forget Hallmark,” 120.
- 109 Spillers, “Black, White, and in Color”; Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 110–37.
- 110 Lorde, “Man Child,” 73.
- 111 Musser, “Re-Membering Audre,” 354.
- 112 Ibid.
- 113 Lorde, “Man Child,” 74.
- 114 Ibid., 73.
- 115 Ibid., 74.
- 116 Ibid., 75.
- 117 Ibid.
- 118 Ibid., 76.
- 119 Musser, “Re-Membering Audre,” 356.
- 120 Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 9.
- 121 Boucher, “Danh Vo Channels Martin Wong,” Accessed July 13, 2017.
- 122 Petty, *Stealing the Show*, 38.
- 123 Pérez, “The Glory that Was Wrong,” 282, 281.
- 124 Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 116.
- 125 Ibid., 116.
- 126 Ibid. This phenomenon is exemplified by the modern commodification and exportation of Filipina nurses and domestic workers; see Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 140.
- 127 Strober and Strober, *Reagan*, 138, 40.
- 128 See Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*.
- 129 This letter was included in the exhibition *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic*, curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa and Yasmin Ramirez, Bronx Museum of the Arts, November 4, 2015–February 14, 2016.
- 130 Examples of the women I am referring to include, but are by no means limited to: choreographer Muna Tseng (Tseng Kwong Chi’s sister), curator Andrea Rosen and artist Julie Ault (friends of Felix Gonzalez-Torres), Eve Sedgwick (queer theorist and teacher, editor of the work of Gary Fisher), Nicole Atkinson (Marlon Riggs’s colleague who contributed to the posthumous completion of his final film, *Black Is, Black Ain’t*).
- 131 Ault, “Some Places It Will Always Be Eureka.”
- 132 Ibid.
- 133 Ibid.
- 134 Spillers, “Black, White, and in Color,” 228. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 186.
- 135 Skype interview with Danh Võ, Tuesday, March 15, 2016.

CHAPTER 3. THE MARXISM OF FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

- 1 Ligon, “My Felix (2007),” 19.
- 2 Ibid., 21.
- 3 Kwon, “The Becoming of a Work of Art,” 282–3; Cruz, Ghez, and Goldstein, “Reflections on a Proposal for 1995,” 49.

- 4 Ligon, "My Felix (2007)," 24.
- 5 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 166.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ligon, "My Felix (2007)," 23.
- 9 Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate," 104.
- 10 Muñoz, "'Gimme Gimme This,'" 96.
- 11 Stevens, 524. Nancy Spector notes Gonzalez-Torres's attachment to the poem in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 183.
- 12 Stevens, 524.
- 13 Cardenal, *In Cuba*, 72.
- 14 Vazquez, *Listening in Detail*, 204.
- 15 Gonzalez-Torres commonly mobilized "Untitled" followed by a parenthetical reference to title his works. The works thus do not lack a title, even when only titled "Untitled" as a component of his conceptual practice.
- 16 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 174.
- 17 Ibid., 177.
- 18 Ibid., 176.
- 19 Muñoz, "Feeling Brown" and "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down."
- 20 This narrative is drawn from Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled Biographical Sketch," 89. Julie Ault expanded upon this chronology, posthumously, in her "Chronology."
- 21 From February 24 to May 21, 2016, El Museo del Barrio featured an exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's early work. See Fuentes, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*.
- 22 Clark, "Ross Laycock," 33.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled Biographical Sketch."
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 On Gonzalez-Torres as tactician, see Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 165–79.
- 27 Gonzalez-Torres and Kosuth, "A Conversation," 358.
- 28 Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview by Tim Rollins," 10, emphasis added.
- 29 Gonzalez-Torres and Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 234, 234; originally published as "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Être un espion (Interview)," *Art Press*, January 1995.
- 30 Gonzalez-Torres and Nickas (1991), 86.
- 31 Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview by Tim Rollins," 22.
- 32 Cited in Ligon, "My Felix (2007)," 22.
- 33 Gonzalez-Torres and Nickas (1991), 89.
- 34 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 32–33.
- 35 Marx, *Capital*, 3:1017.
- 36 Ibid., 3: 1018.
- 37 James, Dunayevskaya, and Boggs, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, 64.
- 38 Ibid., 46.
- 39 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 36.
- 40 Ibid.

- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid., 37.
- 43 Email correspondence with Caitlin Burkhart, Project Coordinator of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation on June 19, 2017; hereafter cited as “Burkhart email.”
- 44 Gonzalez-Torres and Storr, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” 233.
- 45 Gonzalez-Torres, “Letter from Felix Gonzalez-Torres to Ross Laycock, 1988.”
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Marx, *Capital*, 1:256.
- 48 Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 20.
- 49 Gonzalez-Torres and Joseph Kosuth, “A Conversation (Interview),” 76.
- 50 Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 21.
- 51 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*.
- 52 Berardi, *The Uprising*, 105–06.
- 53 Ibid, 105.
- 54 Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*; Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*.
- 55 Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 43.
- 56 Gonzalez-Torres and Kosuth, “A Conversation,” 349.
- 57 Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 26–27.
- 58 Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 27.
- 59 Marx, *Capital*, 1:198.
- 60 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 164.
- 61 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 27–45.
- 62 Luxemburg, “Social Reform or Revolution,” 142.
- 63 Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, 291. See also Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.
- 64 Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, 291.
- 65 Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 100.
- 66 On the certificates of authenticity see Deitcher, “Contradictions and Containment”; Kwon, “The Hidden Injury of Class.”
- 67 Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 13.
- 68 Marx, *Capital*, 1:873–940; Federici, *Caliban and the Witch and Revolution at Point Zero*, 138–48.
- 69 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.
- 70 Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 14–15.
- 71 Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 21.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Ibid., 13.
- 75 For an overview of the relationship between the market and the rise of the painter, see Phillips, *The American Century*, 305–24; Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 9–10.
- 76 Felix Gonzalez-Torres et al., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 12.
- 77 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*; Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*
- 78 Bowley, “Art Collectors Find Safe Harbor.”
- 79 Gonzalez-Torres and Kosuth, “A Conversation,” 348.

- 80 Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 18.
- 81 Muñoz, “Teaching Minoritarian Knowledge, and Love,” 120.
- 82 Cruz, “The Means of Pleasure,” 17.
- 83 Marx, *Capital*, 1:177.
- 84 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 81.
- 85 Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations*, ms. 89.
- 86 *Ibid.*, ms. 102.
- 87 Walcott, “Black Queer Studies,” 143.
- 88 Gonzalez-Torres and Robert Nickas, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World (Interview)” (2006), 45.
- 89 Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 24.
- 90 Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*; Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 154–58.
- 91 Moten, *In the Break*, 14.
- 92 Marx, *Capital*, 1:201. The “natural” development of the division of labor was also understood by Engels to be historical; see his *The Origin of the Family*.
- 93 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 33–34.
- 94 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 95 Gonzalez-Torres, “Practices.” See chapter 5 for more on the NEA debates and Gonzalez-Torres’s critique of it.
- 96 Gonzalez-Torres, “1990: L.A., ‘The Gold Field,’” 148.
- 97 See Gonzalez-Torres, “Practices,” 133.
- 98 *Ibid.*
- 99 Marx, “On the Jewish Question.”
- 100 Gonzalez-Torres, “Practices,” 133.
- 101 Doyle, *Hold It against Me*, 20.
- 102 Gonzalez-Torres, “Practices,” 133.
- 103 *Ibid.*
- 104 Althusser, *For Marx*, 99; emphasis in original.
- 105 Gonzalez-Torres, “Practices,” 133.
- 106 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
- 107 Burkhardt email.
- 108 Gonzalez-Torres and Storr, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” 233.
- 109 Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 68.
- 110 Cited in Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 117. See also Jones, *South of Pico*, 166–72.
- 111 Muñoz, “Teaching Minoritarian Knowledge, and Love,” 120.
- 112 Gonzalez-Torres and Storr, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” 233, emphasis added.
- 113 *Ibid.*
- 114 *Ibid.*, 233.
- 115 Marx, *Capital*, 1:469–70. This reproduction of class hierarchy becomes exacerbated by a “separation of the workers into skilled and unskilled” labor (*ibid.*, 1:470).
- 116 Graeber, *Revolutions in Reverse*, 35–36.
- 117 Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 27.
- 118 Luxemburg, “Social Reform or Revolution.”

- 119 James, Dunayevskaya, and Boggs, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*.
 120 Cardenal, *In Cuba*, 20.
 121 *Ibid.*, 21.
 122 *Ibid.*
 123 *Ibid.*, 78.
 124 *Ibid.*, 79.
 125 *Ibid.*, 85.
 126 Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 310.
 127 Quiroga, “Unpacking My Files,” 155.
 128 *Ibid.*
 129 *Ibid.*, 157.
 130 Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 310.
 131 Gonzalez-Torres and Storr, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” 233.
 132 Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled Biographical Sketch.”
 133 Goldstein, “Untitled (Ravenswood),” 38.
 134 Gonzalez-Torres, “1990: L.A., ‘The Gold Field,’” 68.
 135 *Ibid.*
 136 *Ibid.*
 137 *Ibid.*, 69.
 138 Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 183.

CHAPTER 4. EIKO’S ENTANGLEMENTS

- 1 Rothfuss, “Naked (2010),” 254, emphasis added.
- 2 Candelario, *Flowers Cracking Concrete*, 4.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 4 Lepecki, “Reciprocal Topographies,” 49.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.
- 7 Vazquez, *Listening in Detail*, 67.
- 8 Eiko relayed this during a conversation at her Manhattan apartment with Karen Shimakawa and I on April 27, 2017. I began writing and thinking about Eiko with Karen and we presented a co-written paper about *A Body in Places* in Tohoku, Japan, at Performance Studies International in 2015 and in Miami for the Association for Asian American Studies in 2016. Many of the ideas in this chapter are indebted to my collaboration and thinking with Karen. I proceeded solo here (with her permission). She and I continue to think and write about Eiko together.
- 9 Candelario, *Flowers Cracking Concrete*, 31.
- 10 Carbonneau, “Naked,” 25.
- 11 Candelario, *Flowers Cracking Concrete*, 37–42; Eiko Otake, “Nothing Is Ordinary.”
- 12 Philbrick, “Eiko in Place,” 14.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 15 *Ibid.*