

ART AND ETHICS IN
THE TIME OF SCENES

**The Decision
Between Us**

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6: Unbecoming Community

A heap of candy is piled up in a corner. Each piece is wrapped in its own monochromatic cellophane wrapper, and it is through the literal accumulation (from the Latin verb *accumulare*: “heaped up”) of these pieces that a polychromatic pyramid is presented in contrast to the smooth and stark white surfaces of the walls and floor (plate 4). Walls and floor so immaculate in their surface that by way of what we might describe as an architectonic of aesthetic intuition, we immediately recognize this heap of candy as a work of art, exhibited in a modern art gallery.

Anyone familiar with the work of the American, Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres will recognize the above as a description of one of his candy pile installations, in this case, a work titled “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), 1991. Obviously, this work does not convey the physical appearance of Ross through a representational and figural form of commemoration, but as Jean-Luc Nancy has pointed out, the portrait, or *ritratto*, is always the presentation of the subject in retreat.¹ With this work by Gonzalez-Torres, then, we are presented, if not with an image, then with a scene of this retreating portrait (*ritratto*).

As a scene of retreat, the work sustains—rather than puts to rest via a memorializing image-form of final return and remembrance—this sense of loss through an inoperative praxis and technique in which an endless supply of readymade pieces of candy is presented and offered for the taking, such that those who encounter the work are invited, or at least offered the decision, to partake in its infinite withdrawal, and thereby come to share not in the completion of the

work, but rather in its incompleteness. So too with Gonzalez-Torres's installations of large sheets of paper, neatly stacked directly on the floor of the gallery, and forming a(n) (often monochromatic) rectangular form, in which anyone who finds the work "inviting" (in the sense of welcoming, enticing, and intimately accessible) may complete the work by taking a sheet of paper.² With Felix's candy spills and carpets, and his paper stacks (plates 5 and 6), the work of art is extended toward and opens up a space of decision, a space that is sustained in its very incompleteness. An incompleteness that, as the infinite opening and sharing of the work's multiplying finitude and division, might be described as *in-finishing*, a term we have inherited from Jean-Luc Nancy.³ In its hyphenated form, *in-finishing* is to be read, at once, as the sense that the infinite is finite (i.e., actually rather than virtually infinite), and as the infinite opening of finitude, right at its limit (and never-ending end).

Depending upon the particular gallery installation, the invitation to take a piece of candy is either more or less pronounced. For instance: by a particularly hospitable museum guard or via a wall label simply printed with the words "Please take just one," or in many instances without any sign or indication whatsoever. This varying and oscillating degree of explicitness and ambiguity is indicative of any invitation, and the invitation to partake in this work is as inoperative as is any invitation, given that, as Jacques Derrida notes,

an invitation leaves one free, otherwise it becomes constraint. It should [*devrait*] never imply: you are obliged to come, you have to come, it is necessary. But the invitation must be pressing, not indifferent. It should never imply: you are free not to come and if you don't come, never mind, it doesn't matter.⁴

Which is to say that an invitation opens up a space of decision and leaves one free: free to decide, as in the case of the work by Gonzalez-Torres, to touch, to take one piece or more than one piece of candy, to eat it or to save it, or perhaps even to give it to someone else, and to let them decide what to do with it—accept it, eat it, keep it, or give it to someone else, in turn. I have a small collection of pieces of candy from various installations of these works, given to me by friends as souvenirs of their encounter with the work. Hence, these small, inadvertent gifts are *symbols*—in the full etymological sense of the word—

of the separation that is shared between us, a shared-separation that is the very spacing of any relation, of which friendship is perhaps one of its most acutely felt forms.

The invitation that is offered by Gonzalez-Torres to partake in the work—to take part in its presentation and spacing of decision—does not operate by way of an imperative, obligation, or necessity, yet at the same time its non-insistence is not indifferent, since it does not imply that if you don't partake in the work by taking a piece of candy, it doesn't matter. For I wish to contend that it does matter that pieces of candy are taken, and in ways that extend beyond simply transgressing a whole series of equally written and unwritten taboos concerning one's relation to a work of art on display in a gallery. What we might call the decision of participation is in rapport with the decision of invitation. Yet as I have suggested and will develop further in what follows, this is a rapport between audience and artist that will forever remain incommensurable, given that the offering and the partaking are mutually inoperative.

These works bear this tremendous aesthetic, ethical, and existential import, to the precise extent that they remain irreducible to the aesthetico-economic categories of the gift, communal substance, the artistic fragment, the souvenir or keepsake, and the readymade, as well as the commodity and the fetish-object/image.⁵ Which is to argue that these works bear the potential to actualize an ethics and politics predicated upon non-appropriative, non-obligatory, non-reciprocal, and non-redemptive modes of being-together in relation to others, to things, and the scenes that are staged between and around them—all the while undermining any number of prior critical estimations or attributions of the works' utopian impulse, intention, or effect. In this way, Felix's candy piles and paper stacks are scenes for partaking in a sense of existence, created through a shared exposure to the incommensurable relations between and around places, things, you, me, us. A sense of existence that, following Nancy, is not reducible to either the gift, desire, and their reciprocal relation structured in terms of fullness and lack. This is part of the reason why I have deliberately chosen to use the words *offering* and *partaking* rather than *giving* and *taking*, in order to name the aesthetic gestures that, in their inoperativity, present and sustain the work as already-unmade. For with Felix's candy piles and paper stacks, the

artist is not the giver of a gift and the so-called viewer is not the taker (or recipient) of a desired object (or gift).⁶ Quoting Nancy in his discussion of gift and desire as part of his thinking of sense, we might say the partaking and offering of Felix's work is "neither desire nor gift, but rather, the following: that the desire of the gift [e.g., through the figure of the "audience"] should desire essentially not to appropriate its 'object,' and that the gift of desire [e.g., through the figure of the artist] should give that which cannot be given and should give no 'subject' of an 'object.'" ⁷ While it is impossible to be entirely free from this economy of gift and desire, or what Nancy aptly names "on-totheoerotology,"⁸ Felix's work is an invitation "to think sense as the in-appropriative encounter of desire and gift, as the excellence of the *coming* of the one *toward* the other."⁹ Which is not only Nancy's way of defining *offering*, but as such is the name for the specific form taken by Felix's invitation.

In his italicization of the words *coming* and *toward* in the quotation above, we might then find a correspondence between Nancy's notion of an "in-appropriative encounter of desire and gift," and the inoperative exigency of the invitation. However, there is a disparity between Nancy's offering and Derrida's invitation, one that lies in the difference between Derrida's emphasis on the "to-come" of (a certain messianic) future-oriented temporal *coming*, and what I have been discussing as Nancy's more spatial-oriented *toward*, which is doubly open-ended in its absence of indicating toward *whom*, or *what*, or *what end* the invitation or extension is being extended. Such that the kind of invitation as offering in Felix's candy and paper works is "not presented [like a gift] but extended toward, left to the discretion of a chance and/or decision whose agent or actor [passing through the gallery] neither desires nor gives but merely exists."¹⁰

In their in-appropriative offering and partaking—beyond the gift and desire—Gonzalez-Torres's candy pile and paper stack installations are scenes of chance and incommensurable encounters and decisions around and between an incalculable number of some-ones and some-things—irreducible to subjects and objects.

Through this inoperative praxis, not only is the traditional notion of the artist/author undermined—whether thought in terms of the au-

thor as creator or the author as producer—two principal aesthetic paradigms inherited from Marcel Duchamp are reversed, at once and in relation with each other; namely, the readymade, and the notion that “the audience completes the work.” But before we venture further in that direction, we might remind ourselves of the principal means by which Duchamp, through his invention of the readymade, radically shifted and disrupted the discourses and practices of art, artist, artistic production, and the work of art. No doubt this will be utterly familiar to most readers, but its rehearsal is warranted and worthwhile here, since I want to argue that Gonzalez-Torres went several steps beyond Duchamp, and rendered his (Duchamp’s) workless work doubly inoperative.

We note that by defining the readymade as an index of a rendezvous or encounter between himself and an industrially manufactured commodity about which he had no interest, aesthetic or otherwise, and as a trace of his act of choosing the anonymous object, Duchamp shifted artistic practice from making to selecting, and thus toward an act or praxis that is not the work or *poietic* production of the work of art (*oeuvre*), but rather the *désœuvrement* (borrowing a term from Maurice Blanchot)—that is, a workless praxis that is nothing more (or less) than an art of the gesture. Given that any form of praxis effects a transformation or reconfiguration of the doer, the doing, and what is done, Duchamp’s readymades rendered workless the notions of artist, art making, and the work of art, and if not by putting them completely out of work, certainly by putting them radically into question, and *as* questions. Duchamp’s gesture dissolved the notion of work, yet as Octavio Paz pointed out in an essay on Duchamp’s readymades, from around 1970, this “an-artistic” gesture remained an artist’s gesture, and not just any artist’s gesture, but specifically that of Marcel Duchamp. As Paz writes,

If the object is anonymous, the man who chose it is not. And one could even add that the “readymade” is not a work but a gesture and a gesture which only an artist could realize and not just any artist but inevitably Marcel Duchamp.¹¹

This persistence of the signatory is no doubt ironic, given that, as Paz goes on to explain, “The act of Duchamp uproots the object

from its significance and makes an empty skin of the name: a bottle-rack without bottles."¹² So while it can be said that Duchamp's workless gesture renders the readymade object anonymous and useless, it must also be noted that the very same gesture runs the risk of being perceived as being invested in the author, deposited in the object, or retained as though a medium or technique—all of which would draw the readymade back into the discourse of artist, work of art, and *poietic* production. So we might take Paz's words as cautionary when he writes, "The transition from worshipping the object to worshipping the gesture is imperceptible and instantaneous: the circle is closed."¹³ Indeed, in our thinking of an art and aesthetics of gesture—including the gestures of offering and partaking—we will want to keep the circle open, and as this study has argued, the way to do this is by maintaining a sense of the worklessness and inoperativity of artistic and aesthetic praxis, which, in the history of art, might be said to have been inaugurated by Duchamp and the invention of the readymade. Yet in order to do so, one must also put into question and perhaps resist the other Duchampian aesthetic paradigm mentioned earlier—namely, that "the audience completes the work."

There is no other artist I can think of whose work is more consecrated to the putting into question and undoing of this notion of completion than Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In the installations of candy piles and paper stacks, Felix's work retains Duchamp's notion of the readymade as index of encounter and trace of selection, but extends this encounter, decision, and selection so that it now includes the so-called audience, and therefore is no longer limited to the artist's gesture of choosing. In turn, the decision to accept the offer and to partake in the work by withdrawing a part of it not only opens up the space and event of decision beyond that of artistic intention, the index of the moment of encounter lies not (or not only) in the presentation of the object as readymade, but also, and perhaps more subversively, in the readymade's withdrawal and erasure. Hence, two primary Duchampian principles are reversed, and Duchamp's own workless work is rendered doubly inoperative. For by partaking in the incessant withdrawal and disappearance of the work—by taking a piece of candy or sheet of paper—the audience can be said to in-complete the work, a partaking that, due to the work's always already

yet never complete withdrawal and disappearance, is a partaking in the work as already-unmade.

The work can be understood as already-unmade in an even more simple, intense, or perhaps a priori sense, if we consider that due to the way in which its presentation relies upon multiple acts of withdrawing and disappearing, such that one can go so far as to say that its very existence and survival depends upon this retreating aesthetics, notions of original plenitude prior to withdrawal, and ultimate emptiness in the wake of the final piece having been taken, are two notions that are conceptually, but as we shall see, materially, impossible.

The work exists at no moment prior to its withdrawal, and you can never be in any way confident that you are the first one to take a piece from the pile, or a sheet from the stack. We might say that withdrawal is a priori or originary, and that it is this that makes the work (perhaps any work in terms of its origin) inoperative, which is also to say already-unmade. In other words, the work only exists in its never-ending loss, a finitude that is infinite to the precise extent that Gonzalez-Torres indicated that the quantity of candy shall be an "endless supply" and to the precise extent that any number of those who encounter the work partake in its withdrawal, by taking candy or paper, each piece or sheet singular in its finitude and in relation to the incessant disappearance of the work. The praxis and technique of the work lie in what Nancy describes as the "absence of beginning and 'exhaustion of ends.'"¹⁴

Felix's pieces of candy and sheets of paper (*singuli*) are not fragments of the work of art, but parts outside of parts (*partes extra partes*), in which no one piece of candy nor the totality of pieces constitutes the work. Gonzalez-Torres clearly specifies this in the certificates of authenticity that accompany the purchase and ownership of the work.

While we already recognize many of the ways in which the work disrupts a strict market economy of art and its commodity-form, the work of art, we also do not want to overlook the fact that, like any work of art, those by Gonzalez-Torres are also bought and sold. Yet in the case of the purchasing of one of his spills or stacks, the buyer does not acquire a given amount of candy or paper, but rather a

certificate of authenticity and ownership that briefly outlines the aesthetic-material and ethical-social conditions and dimensions of the work's manifestation as an installation.

As part of a long-standing tradition in modern conceptual art dating back to Duchamp, but more extensively deployed by so-called Conceptual artists in the 1960s, a Felix certificate is the material item that the purchaser receives when buying one of his candy spill or paper stack works. Purchase, then, is made of a concept and a set of instructions and parameters that initially outline the way in which to materialize and exhibit the work. In this regard, we might say that the work's most consistent form of evidentiary archival certitude is little more than a piece of paper. The certificates include information on the paper or candy that Felix had used in creating each work the first time. For instance, the weight and color of the paper, as well as a precise description of the content and formatting of whatever text and/or image(s) is (are) to be printed on each of the sheets (that is, if they are to have something printed on them), and in the case of the candy spills, the brand and/or kind and vendor of the candy. However, the certificates make considerable allowance for variation when they state, "If this exact paper is not available, a similar paper may be used," and "If this exact candy is not available, a similar candy may be used." These contractual terms clearly express that the manifestation of the work does not require the identical replication of its original form, but rather can follow a logic of similarity in which the degree of sameness remains—within the terms of the contract—forever unstipulated.

This is immediately followed by what we take to be the most important statements of the certificates' contractual language. The first speaks to an aspect that we have already encountered—namely, that "a part of the intention of the work is that third parties may take individual sheets of paper from the stack" (or pieces of candy from the pile). The second, that "these individual sheets [or pieces of candy] and all individual sheets [or pieces] taken from a stack [pile or spill] collectively do not constitute a unique work of art nor can they be considered the piece." So, for instance, if you were possessed by a hubristic impulse and were to take all of the candy piled up in the gallery, you would not have a work by Gonzalez-Torres, and in turn and

more modestly, if you were to take just one piece, you also would not have a Gonzalez-Torres. In other words, the work operates beyond the logics and limits of the work of art as a single entity, whether reducible to its synecdochal fragmentation or totalized in its accumulated amassing of parts. Which immediately raises two inextricable questions: if the sheets of paper and pieces of candy do not equal the work, then what does the work consist of, and, in a reversed logical relation, if the sheets of paper and pieces of candy are not the work, then what are they exactly—in other words, what is their status and destiny as things?

In their offering of an endless supply of pieces of candy or sheets of paper, and the decision to take a piece, sheet, or part, Felix's candy and paper installations are scenes of an infinite offering and partaking of finitude. An overflowing offering and a partaking in withdrawal that in their mutual excess are two forms of fulfillment that at the same time are the impossibility of converting finitude into finish (i.e., transforming the piece into a fragment, and then the fragment into a whole/work). If to take a piece of candy is not to take the work or even a part of it, then to partake in the work can only mean to "take a part" that is not a part, and thereby to share not secondarily and through a mode of participation,¹⁵ but primarily and through shared-separation, which, as we understand, is semantically borne by the French word *partager*, meaning "to share, to divide." It is this semantic double meaning that I wish to retain and make evident in my use of the English word *partaking*.

The work—its praxis and technique—exists neither in author, audience, or produced object, but rather in the gestures of offering and partaking, and more precisely, in the inoperative offering of an invitation (it too being inoperative, as we have seen) to act in a way that remains to be decided (to take, to keep, to eat, to transmit, to share-out) and to partake in the withdrawal and disappearance of the work, and thereby also to partake in sustaining the *worklessness* of the work, through a shared exposure to the exposition of art as vestige. These gestures of shared-separation are the inoperative aesthetic, ethical, and political praxes and techniques of those anonymous some-ones withdrawing those equally anonymous readymade some-things and thereby partaking, not in the destruction, reduction, or shattering of

the work into fragmentary pieces, but in what Nancy at one point describes as “the in-finite explosion of the finite”—*in-finishing*.¹⁶

This is also what makes the work something other than a communal substance such as the Christian sacrificial gift, and its fragmentation, dissemination, and consumption in the form of the Eucharist. For each piece of the latter, given, taken, and eaten in the sacramental ritual of Communion, is theologically defined as the whole body of Christ and not simply a part. Which means that whole corporeal presence is believed to be present in the infinite division, fragmentation, and dissemination of the body of Christ. It is precisely this sense of wholeness in each and every part that renders the Eucharist a *corpus mysticum*. A sacrificial gift of death that—like the body of Christ of which it is believed not to be a symbolic representation but the very presence of the body in its wholeness—is a transiting of the transcendent into the immanent (incarnation) and of immanence into transcendence (resurrection, redemption). Whereas pieces offered and partaken of, in the Gonzalez-Torres works—especially the possible alimentary consumption in the case of the candy works—are not claimed to contain the entirety of the work, but as I have discussed, are non-fragmentary parts devoid of any sense of wholeness that could be given or desired. So, as Nancy has written, “On this account, art appears as a eucharist (the ‘gift of a grace’) that remains in broken fragments, that consists in their fragmentation. A eucharist without communion. A eucharist that would be the deconstruction of the eucharist.”¹⁷ As he goes on to point out, if the art of religion is deconstructed, so too must any religion of art, including in the sense of aesthetics and the work of art as something other than in terms of the offering, gesture, and vestige that Nancy has argued are what remain in the wake of this venturing beyond the limits of the “aestheticotheological.”¹⁸

Indeed, as Nancy has noted, “Art has hitherto been considered, in all possible ways, in terms of both ‘creation’ (*poiesis*, genius and so on) and ‘reception’ (judgment, critique, and so on). But what has been left in the shadows is its befalling and devolving, that is to say, also its chance, event, birth or encounter.”¹⁹ It is this “befalling and devolving” of art—of its presentation as already-unmade—that all of my work has been dedicated to thinking and writing. An aesthetics of withdrawal, loss, and disappearance that opens up and sustains,

through a separated gesture, spaces of sociality structured in their shared exposure to finitude and the outside, including as the praxis, sense, and scene of decision.

With the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, we return to some of the same kinds of questions regarding number, being-with, and the non-evidentiary praxis of the already-unmade that were discussed in the first two chapters of this book. We recall that in that first chapter, "Name No One Man," it was argued that through erasure and the with-drawing of drawing in Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, an incalculable number of "men" are drawn together into a space of shared anonymity, which in turn was taken to be a scene of pleasure and the sociality or being-with of shared-separation. Here the pleasure of drawing lies in the emptying out of drawing, such that Rauschenberg has left the space of drawing—but also sociality—not empty but unmade. The title of that chapter is intended to enunciate a tension between the sense of absence (no one there) and of multiplicity (no one as in not only one) that structures the work and the scene of shared-separation that it aesthetically presents. More specifically, it is meant to point to the ways in which multiplicity is irreducible to the numerical and other forms of calculation.

In a somewhat unexpected yet entirely apropos way, these same issues were raised by John Cage in his "26 Statements re Duchamp," from 1963, in which at one point he resorts to metaphors from arithmetic and mathematics in order to describe three of the principal artists and achievements in twentieth-century art, and a fourth that at the time was, according to Cage, anticipated and yet to be fulfilled. Cage writes, "Duchamp showed us the usefulness of addition (moustache), Rauschenberg showed the function of subtraction (De Kooning). Well, we look forward to multiplication and division. It is safe to assume that someone will learn trigonometry. Johns."²⁰

As you might expect, I want to suggest that when it comes to that artist who will show us the "usefulness" and "function" of multiplication and division, we need not wait any longer. Indeed, since the late 1980s / early 1990s, and his first installations of paper stacks and candy piles, Felix Gonzalez-Torres has offered us just that, and fulfilled the collective anticipation expressed by Cage for the work that would succeed Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*; Rauschenberg's *Erased*

de Kooning Drawing; and following Cage's reference to "Johns," what we might imagine to be any one of Jasper Johns's *Numbers* paintings.

In Felix's stacks of paper and piles of candy, "multiplication" might be said to take the form of the endless supply of readymade objects, and "division" is threefold: (1) the ongoing act of taking these things; (2) the dividing up of parts; and (3) the shared-separation that is the relation of those who decide to take part in the infinite withdrawal of the work's finitude. Which is also to note that Gonzalez-Torres's aesthetic praxis and technique of multiplication and division at the same time rely upon addition and subtraction.²¹ Thus, we are led to consider the ways in which the replenishing and withdrawing of candy and paper is more than a simple matter of addition and subtraction, or perhaps even how such endless acts of shared subtraction can generate "the in-finite explosion of the finite"—which is to say, shared-separation as the spacing of sense in all directions at once.²²

In turn, in "The Confronted Community," Jean-Luc Nancy's relatively recent essay dedicated to Maurice Blanchot and their encounter and conversation on the question of community, Nancy reminds us that his seminal essay "La Communauté désœuvrée" (The inoperative, workless, or unoccupied community) was originally published in the spring of 1983, in an issue of the journal *Aléa*, under the theme "La communauté, le nombre" (Community, number), as designated by the editor Jean-Christophe Bailly. As Nancy describes it, "The perfectly executed ellipse contained in this statement [Community, number]—where prudence rivals elegance, in the manner that was Bailly's great art—gripped me as soon as I received the call for papers, and I have never ceased to admire its aptness."²³

Indeed, the aptness of the statement is the way in which it writes the tension between community and number, a tension that structures all of the various ways in which we think about the relations between the *common* and the *numerous*. These are the terms by which to understand how the innumerable—in the form of each piece of candy being taken from the pile by anonymous some-ones—is a partaking in the infinite withdrawal and retreat of finitude or, as Nancy has put it, of "infinitely singularizing the ends."²⁴

Just as Nancy enables us to imagine "the perfectly executed ellipse" as drawing the single orbit traced by the two foci of community and number in their mutual and constant distance from each other, so

too do we once again in this study imagine the ellipsis to be the writing or drawing of the infinite withdrawal of finitude (the extending out of the point or period) and hence also finitude's infinite opening up. In other words, the ellipsis—especially when in the form of three consecutive dots at the “end” of a sentence—is the means by which, in writing, one gestures to the outside of the text and underlines that outside as the text's “intrinsic exteriority” (to quote Derrida).

To this praxis of *ex-scription*, as Nancy has come to theorize and name it, he has also assigned the name *creation*—yet creation in a wholly a-theological and anti-productivist sense. For instance, as when he writes,

If “creation” means anything, it is the exact opposite of any form of production in the sense of a fabrication that supposes a given, a project, and a producer. . . . The idea of creation, is above all the idea of the *ex nihilo*. . . . The world is created from nothing [*ex nihilo*]: this does not mean fabricated with nothing by a particularly ingenious producer. It means that it is not fabricated, produced by no producer, and not even coming out of nothing (like a miraculous apparition), but in a quite strict manner and more challenging for thought: the nothing itself.²⁵

In other words, since the source, reason, principle, and ground of the world is nothing, it is this nothing itself from which creation comes (*ex*) and toward which it goes (*ex*), and it is this outside and opening from nothing that is written as *ex nihilo*. As the withdrawal and retreat of any given or readymade ground, creation is not the *poietic* production or work, and/or the asymptotic relation to ends (as in certain weak versions of ontologies of “becoming”), whether this is in terms of “process” (absolutely infinite production/work, Marx) or “progress” (ultimately finite production/work, Hegel). Rather, *creation is to be understood as the inoperative praxis of the already-unmade*.²⁶

Which is also to say that the sense of existence and its place is neither readymade (and oriented toward yesterday) nor yet-to-be-made (awaiting its time in the future), but already-unmade “here and now every moment” at each time and in each decision, as Nancy has said.²⁷

It is in this way that Nancy has argued that existence is always created, yet not by some distanced and detached creator or author (God),

but solely by existents in their very existence. Such that, as he states in a section of his essay "Being Singular Plural" titled "The Creation of the World or Curiosity," "Existence is creation, our creation; it is the beginning and end that we are. This is the thought that is the most necessary for us to think."²⁸

On a number of occasions Felix expressed a commitment to just such an a-theological ethics and politics, and a sense of responsibility tied to an immanent sense of things. For instance, in an interview with fellow artist Tim Rollins, in 1993, Felix stated:

I have a problem with the cultural traps and constructions of God. I think that it is a good excuse for us to accept any situation as natural, inevitable. Once we believe that there is no God, that there is no afterlife, then life becomes a very positive statement. It becomes a very political position because we have no choice but to work harder to make this place the best place ever. There is only one chance and this is it. If you fuck it up this time you've fucked up forever and ever. . . . Once you agree that there is not any other life, that there's nothing except here—this thing, this table, you, me—that's it. That becomes a very radical idea because you have to take responsibility to make it the best.²⁹

While clearly divorced from a belief in transcendent existence ("no afterlife"), Felix's notion of responsibility is clearly ameliorative ("to make this place the best place ever") yet in a way that is not to be understood as the pursuit or actualization of an absolute Idea or ideal. This is evident in the way in which Felix uses the word *ideal* in the certificates of authenticity, in which the responsibility to manifest a candy pile or paper stack is described in terms of an "ideal weight" and "ideal height," respectively. Here the word *ideal* is meant to signal that the works are malleable. Meaning that *ideal* must be understood as referring to a measurement of weight or height that should be considered when installing and maintaining the work, but only in the sense of providing a parameter to be interpreted and negotiated by the owner when manifesting the work, and not as an impracticable framework and unattainable end.³⁰ Here, the ideal is measured by a sense of perfection and suitability specific to the decision of the

person(s) manifesting and maintaining the work, and therefore, we can think of the ideal in the same way that through the work of Gonzalez-Torres we have come to think of the infinite: not as potentially but as actually ideal—the ideal-in-act. Which is a situation (or scene) that, as Felix said in the statement above, is not “natural, inevitable,” neither given nor yet-to-come, but is to be created and sustained (decided), here and now, when and where all forms of common measure no longer apply or exist. Except perhaps in terms of “some,” such that the expressions “some candy” and “some paper” in their indetermination would most properly describe and determine the ideal weight and ideal height of a candy pile or paper stack, respectively.

Some is the indeterminate name for the indeterminate measure and value of the singularity of whatever thing, and the name for the indeterminateness of the thing—in the singularity of its multiplicity—as “whatever.” To manifest the piles and stacks with some candy and some paper (some-things) is neither to deny the determined concretion of the thing, nor to posit the determined signification of the thing, but instead to affirm that whatever, in the indeterminateness of its singularity, is always some-thing of which there is always more than one. As Nancy defines it in his essay “The Heart of Things,”

“Whatever” is the indeterminateness of being in what is posited and exposed within the strict, determined concretion of a singular thing [piece of candy], and the indeterminateness of its singular existence.³¹

In other words, the piece of candy is some thing of some things: an indeterminate thing (whatever) of an incalculable many (*partes extra partes*). As Nancy further points out, the indetermination of whatever thing—of “some”—is also its free necessity, and by inviting us to partake in the work by taking a piece of candy or sheet of paper for free, and to take it as nothing other than some piece or some sheet, Felix offers us the decision to take responsibility for this free necessity, which is also the free necessity of that very decision. By entering into this space of decision, we are exposed to the anonymity of ethical existence, in which every one in its singularity is equal to every other one: the some of someone. The *some* of one that is not the name, or perhaps as Nancy has suggested, *some-* as the name before the name

and quite properly and literally before the one. The pro-nomination or fore-name of someone, yet here not even the first or personal or given name of someone (as in the German word *Vorname*).³²

Within the logic of the work, including the terms of its certified contract, with its lack of insistence on the need to use an exact type or kind of candy or paper in the material installation and presentation of the work, the very availability of Felix's paper and candy is always open to a freedom of indetermination, in which it is "some candy" or "some paper" before or beyond its having to fulfill the need for a specific identity and (brand) name. Furthermore, this indeterminate availability and this available indetermination of whatever is commensurate with those anonymous some-ones, us, whomever, to whom the invitation to take is extended. Which is to say that the invitation and decision to partake in the work offer an experience of sharing in the taking of anonymous some-things by anonymous some-ones.³³ In this regard, the work is without proper destination, it operates without an intended audience, prescribed outcome, or imagined point of arrival or completion. As Nancy states in his essay "The Sublime Offering," offering is the destiny of art, and the destiny of art is to be without proper destination. This is what, in the invitation that he extends through his work, Felix offers. In offering "some" candy or paper, Felix's work offers us anonymous some-ones something(s) to think about, including what we might refer to as the destiny of that piece of candy or that sheet of paper that we have decided to take.³⁴

As Nancy has argued, the relation between the numerous, community, and being-together never lies in a thing (for instance, in the form of a common substance, figure, or identity), and it is this *no-thing* that the *nihilo* of *creation ex nihilo* refers to. Here, the *nihil* is not reducible to either the One or to zero—that is, neither to absolute unity nor to nihilism (which is perhaps even less than zero)—but is to be thought in terms of multiplicity. Which is also to say: in terms of the numerous distinct from number, and thus multiplicity distinct from multiplication. An innumerable, incalculable, and incommensurable multiplicity—what in English is perhaps most aptly expressed as "a lot of."

So I want to suggest that what is shared between artist and audi-

ence—that is, what is offered by Felix’s work and partaken in by those who encounter it—is not a readymade commodity, an object of exchange or symbolic communion, a gift, or even a souvenir, but rather a decision to sustain this scene (or spacing) of decision, through the incessant withdrawal and retreat of finite readymade things.

It is a sustaining—by sharing together—in the separation between us. A spacing out of nothing (and to nothing) that thereby is the *nihilo* (nothing) from which ex-istence is sensed and takes place as opening and outside (*ex*). In other words, creation. What remains is not a thing, but the “*ex*” of *creation ex nihilo*, and as Nancy has said, something like a gesture. Gesture in the sense of a partaking in the “extra” of *partes extra partes*, by taking a part or piece that is not one part of a greater whole (i.e., a fragment) but a singular multiplicity or, again as Nancy has named it, a vestige.

As we shift our thinking and language from fragment to gesture, let us note that there is no such thing as a fragmentary gesture. Every gesture is the infinite index of finitude, or what we might take Nancy to mean when he refers to the “infinite in act.” Prior to any signifying function, a gesture is first and foremost the index of spacing and the incommensurable relation or shared-separation between here and there. A gesture signals (it gestures to) the “there is” (*il y a*) of existence and its sense, as here, now, this. At the same time, a gesture is a grasping of what is not (or no longer) possessed or what can be given. We might say that the mode of having or giving particular to the gesture is a grasping of that which is slipping through one’s fingers. In other words, distinct from substance and property, the propriety of the gesture is wholly in-appropriable, and this in-appropriability is precisely what the gesture gestures toward.

At the same time, we might thus speak of an “emptying” of gesture (as in the *kenosis* of the divine), all the while affirming that there is no such thing as an empty gesture in any absolute sense. Like Nancy’s definition of the image (discussed in chapter 1), a gesture is “the empty place of the absent as a place that is not empty.”³⁵ In turn, there are no static gestures, but rather all gestures are moving, they are the transiting and transmission, the rhythm and emotion, of existence.

In his “Notes on Gesture,” Giorgio Agamben tells us that according to the ancient writer Varro, gesture is neither acting (*praxis*) nor making (*poiesis*), but carrying on or sustaining.³⁶ In the context

of our discussion, then, we might further specify gesture to be the shared-sustaining of the spacing of the “with” (of being-together) as already-unmade. As I suggested above, gesture is the very spacing of shared-separation. Thus, gesture—as *ars* and *teknē*—is mediality without means (i.e., process—whether infinite or finite) and without ends (i.e., completion, finish). Which is to say that gesture is the deconstruction of what Hannah Arendt referred to as the “unending chain of ends and means.”³⁷ Gesture is the spacing or what Agamben describes as “the sphere of a pure and endless mediality,” and, as he goes on to say, “The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability,” another name for which is *art*. We might now understand that such phrases as “the gesture of art,” “the art (or aesthetics) of gesture,” and “the separated gesture” are pleonasm: expressions that even in their limitation to two terms, use one word too many.

From the sheet of paper as space of withdrawal and scene of shared sociality, to the unexpected encounter or rendezvous with the passerby, stranger, or intruder, to the scene staged by the body in its relation to other bodies and things in their common retreat, to the exposure to loss and the force of finitude, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work can be perceived as the convergence of all of the major questions and themes of this book. In a statement that would seem to describe not only his work but mine as well, Felix at one point stated, “[This work] constitutes a comment on the passing of time and the possibility of erasure or disappearance, which involves a poetics of space. . . . [It] also touches upon life in its most radical definition, its limit: death.”³⁸ Given our discussion throughout the book, here we can understand Felix’s invitation as an offer to partake, not in a communal substance, but in a shared exposure to the inappropriability of death and our incommensurable relation to it. Which is quite simply to say that “what” is offered through the work is a sense of sharing in that which cannot be shared either here or elsewhere. A sharing in non-sharing or sharing-out that finds its most unavoidable and irreducible example in life defined in terms of finitude or, as Felix said, “in its most radical definition, its limit: death.”

Just as death’s irreplaceability cannot be subsumed within an economy of exchange, so too can death not be shared, and re-

mains an impossible experience for each and every one of us, in the singularity of our finitude (what Nancy refers to as “the last burst of singularity”³⁹). However, “dying”—as “within” existence and thereby intimately tied to life, and therefore distinct from death—can be shared. In terms of our existential finitude, or what Heidegger referred to as “beings-toward-death”—that is to say, as creatures that in living are always also dying—it might be said that dying is what we most share in common, and it is this that defines our coexistence. Life, meaning: sharing-dying, and as that which can neither be given nor taken (i.e., exchanged, replaced, substituted for by another). There is, then, outside of onto-theology, no gift of death, and therefore, there is no “gift of life” either. *Neither life nor death is given.*

There is only birth/existence and death/existence, and the singularity of each birth and each death, including in their incommensurable relation, is, as discussed in chapter 2, the evidence of intrusion as ontological force. Which might partially explain why each of us, while “present” at the instant of our own birth and death, cannot bear witness to either, and that the relation that we hold to the singularity of our own birth and death is inescapably one of non-knowledge. The instant or event of birth and of death is truly that of the each time just this once, and this is what it most shares with decision, such that we can speak of the decision of existence. The singularity of existential finitude is that which is infinitely decided—each time, just this once. Therefore, no one can die in my place or make a decision in my place, if that death or that decision is to remain mine. The relation between one death and another death remains incommensurable, and thereby no one’s death is granted more privilege than another’s, and it is this infinite incommensurability that we share in the singularity of our finitude.

This is what Derrida identifies as the “secret” of death, meaning: absent of ontology, epistemology, and phenomenology.⁴⁰ It is this secret—the secret that belongs to no one and remains inappropriable—that cannot be shared. This is the “nothing” that is most intimately shared in the distance between us, and that offers us the sense of our coexistence as separated—the secret that is a secret about nothing and a sharing that shares in this nothing that is kept secret between us. As Derrida reminds us, one meaning of the Latin *secretum* is “secreted away,” as in that which is withdrawn from view and

made separate (and therefore is more precisely not “shared-in” but “shared-out”). It is this withdrawal and separation that is the secret that remains between us, and that marks our coexistence as finite beings.

Gonzalez-Torres’s work—especially the candy and paper—certifies, exhibits, and opens up an access to the indeterminateness of finite existence and thereby affirms that finitude, as the “determined concretion of a singular thing” (Nancy), is already offered to the world as unmade. By presenting finitude as that which is infinitely shared-out, in and as its incessant withdrawal and retreat, he thereby also affirms that this is the way in which we come to partake in the world’s infinite finitude, as the very sense of the world. If we then want to continue to speak in terms of Felix’s offering, we might say that he offers up the taking place of the finitude of existence as that which neither he nor anyone else can offer (and perforce, take away, appropriate, sacrifice). Felix Gonzalez-Torres performs the inappropriation that is the appropriating event of finite existence.⁴¹ Following Nancy, we might say that Felix, like all of the other artists and writers discussed in this book, has set himself the task of presenting scenes of aesthetic, ethical, and existential exposure to “the infinite absence of appropriable sense”⁴² and this is the spacing/decision between us.

The “infinite absence of appropriable sense” is one way of describing the finitude of existence (existence’s in-appropriability, since it is infinite and belongs to no one). In turn, *sacrifice* would be one of the names for the attempt to appropriate the sense of existence by appropriating its finitude for the purposes of redemption—in other words, by turning existence into what earlier I briefly discussed as a gift of death. Rather, as Nancy states at the end of his essay “The Unsacrificeable,” “Existence isn’t to be sacrificed, and can’t be sacrificed. It can only be destroyed or shared.”⁴³ Yet in “The Indestructible,” which we might take to be the companionate essay to the aforementioned, Nancy states that “destruction attacks *sense* rather than *life*.”⁴⁴ How are we meant to reconcile these two statements, seemingly at odds with each other? In order to do so, two steps are necessary: (1) to understand what Nancy means by “sense” and its relation to existence, and (2) to understand the distinction that he seems to be making between “existence” and “life.”

In Nancy’s philosophy, including any ontology that we might as-

cribe to him, there is no existence that exists separate and apart from sense, and vice versa, there is no sense that lies separate and outside of existence. For Nancy, for there to be existence is for there to be sense, and to think existence without sense is not even nonsensical—it is the very abandonment of sense and therefore of existence. Yet there is no inherent or proper sense to existence, just as there is no sense that is wholly unified. Rather, sense is always already separated from itself, and this is how it comes to “make” or to “have” sense. Which is to recall our previous discussion regarding the notion that separation is sense’s most proper sense—a division that is the spacing “across,” “between,” or “through” which sense “has” something to sense (to touch) in the first place.

The “originary” of sense is sense sensing itself as self-separated, but in this impropriety of sense’s proper sense is the opening and making room for its being shared. For like any instance of sharing, separation is the act and spacing by which sharing happens. We also come to share in things because we remain separated from each other in the singularity of our finite existence. Sharing is, then, as Nancy has taught us again and again, always a sharing-separating, and thereby an affirmation (if we can put it this way) of the fact that existence (the world, you and me, and us) consists, in its singular finitude, of many things, at once separated and therefore capable of being shared, together.

Thus, the sharing of this separation is the praxis of our coexistence, of the shared sense of being-together, as singular plural some-ones, incommensurable in being irreducible to any one single common measure and sense. So when Nancy states that destruction attacks sense rather than life, he means that destruction is the attempt to reduce the spacing of separation—that is, of sense—into pulverized unshareable pieces. This is exactly what he says when, further in “The Indestructible,” he writes, “Once we’re left with broken structures, dislocated joints, displaced pieces, there is no longer any sense.”⁴⁵ It is in this way that we can begin to understand Nancy’s statement about existence as that which can only be shared or destroyed. For just as much as the sense of existence is—ontologically speaking—shared, then without the shared-separation that is its spacing and sense, existence is effectively destroyed. And so, as Nancy goes on to argue, “Destruction strives not simply to annihilate being, but to shatter the

very structure [spacing of shared-separation, its sense] that renders it possible, reaching into its origin and its end, tearing from it its very birth and death."⁴⁶

Rather than the force of intrusion, as discussed in chapter 2, which, in its sustaining of the incommensurable relation between life and death is the ontological force and form of being and of existence, the force of destruction is the appropriation of birth and death, not in the forms of life or of death, but of their reduction to the (oftentimes bureaucratic) status of "alive" or "dead."⁴⁷ In part, we take our cue from J. M. Coetzee, who, in an early version of his recent novel *Diary of a Bad Year*, wrote, "Whether the citizen lives or dies is not a concern of the state. What matters to the state and its records is whether the citizen is alive or dead."⁴⁸ By placing in permanent suspension any definitive mark of the work's beginning or ending, absolute plenitude or absolute annihilation, Felix Gonzalez-Torres's certificates of authenticity and ownership operate opposite the archival logics of the birth certificates of the state-sanctioned maternity ward and the death certificates of the county morgue—that is, those pieces of paper by which the state attempts to certify and authenticate the origins and ends of human existence and resist its "infinite absence of appropriable sense."

Yet Felix's certificates should not be understood to merely document the intended and invited participation in the work's disappearance, postproduction, but also to certify that destruction lies at the very origin of the work, both in the sense of the originary force of the work's existence, and as a technique that Felix appropriates, ready-made. Here is the way Felix expressed this:

This work originated from the fear of losing everything. This work is about controlling my own fear. My work cannot be destroyed. I have destroyed it already, from day one. The feeling is almost like when you are in a relationship with someone and you know it's not going to work out. From the very beginning you know that you don't really have to worry about it not working out because you simply know that it won't. The person cannot abandon you, because he has already abandoned you from day one—that is how I made this work. That is why I made this work. This work cannot disappear. This work cannot be destroyed the same way other things in my life have disap-

peared and left me. I destroyed it myself instead. I had control over it and this is what has empowered me. But it is a very masochistic kind of power. I destroy the work before I make it.⁴⁹

This statement is truly astounding in its admission to an exposure to finitude, loss, and disappearance, and its aesthetic, ethical, and existential appropriation, that although spoken in terms of control and empowerment is also recognized as specifically masochistic. There are a number of important things to note here. First, when we read Felix as saying that he has destroyed the work, we should not understand this in terms of any kind of actual practice or process of destruction. This is the case not only because Felix does not say that he first constructed the work and then subsequently destroyed it, but also because destruction is, by definition, the annihilating attack on what has been previously constructed, which effectively places destruction after construction, whereas Felix clearly states, and more than once, that he destroyed the work “already, from day one.” Which is to locate the work’s destruction at (and as) its very origin, and even prior to its construction.

Instead, we can only understand the originarity of destruction here as the praxis and perhaps even the technique by which Felix gives himself over—via a power that can only be described as masochistic—to the force of destruction as in the form of loss, disappearance, and death, which is at the very heart of things, in their self-separation and spacing as sensible and shareable things. Beginning there, Felix attests to the originarity of separation, and that this is what existence in its finitude is exposed to, already from “day one.” In turn, it is this exposure that is presented in the exposition and installation of his work, and it is this exposure that the work invites others to partake in, and to share-out, by taking a part or a piece (of candy, paper), and through this participation in the work’s exposition, to in part take responsibility for the work’s never-ending disappearance—its infinite expenditure. It is in this way that the work’s existence is (in a Heideggerian idiom) taken care of, by being sustained as that which is already-unmade, such that one can no longer properly speak of the being or the becoming of the work of art, but instead, must think the work of art, in its very worklessness, as unbecoming.

To locate finitude, loss, and disappearance at the beginning is

not to (sadistically) triumph over it, but instead to rid oneself of the worry, anxiety, and concern over its arrival, by understanding that in its never-ending ending, it is always-already present. This is how Felix's analogy to an interpersonal relationship proves to be especially instructive. Through it, he asks us to imagine what it might mean to acknowledge and accept (by one or both of the people involved), at the outset of the relationship, that it will not last forever, that it not only will reach an end in what we commonly refer to as the moment of separation, but that the relationship has finitude built into it, and from its very beginning. In a way that is as logical as it is seemingly paradoxical, this shared-exposure to finitude is what instills a sense of freedom, since the two (or more) people can proceed with the relationship, absent the anxiety or fear that it might, one day, eventually end, and (or) that the other person(s) might abandon you. For in this scenario, the relationship is understood to have never existed outside of the force of finitude and abandonment, and thereby is able to open up a space in which the question of ethical sociality can be confronted, a sense of being-together that would no longer operate through the modalities of destruction or construction, and would no longer be forced to answer to that most disagreeable, and indeed ethically compromised, of questions: where is this relationship going?—a sure sign that it is going nowhere. Which is another way of saying that it has been placed on the path of its inevitable destruction because of an insistence on constructing the relationship along a single determined path toward a common destiny without separation. But perhaps as we have now come to understand, all sharing is a sharing in separation, and so to place separation as that which exists only at the end of a relationship is not only to perpetuate the myth of coupled union and fusion, even more critically it is to deprive the relationship of the very "substance" through which it can even be said to be one that is shared.

So we now understand that to destroy the work would entail its no longer being shared. There are three ways in which this can be imagined, each of which the work effectively resists, and calls upon us to refuse: (1) by thinking in terms of original and/or ideal plentitude that the work is not only oriented toward but can in fact attain; (2) by positing a moment when the taking from the work, which had been ongoing, was made to cease, and perhaps permanently, as through an

arrest of participation; and (3) by imagining the absolute emptying out of the work through the taking of every last piece or sheet without subsequent replenishment.

Returning once again to Nancy's statement that "existence can only be destroyed or shared," we recognize in what he goes on to say a description of the offering and partaking of Felix's work:

This is the unsacrificeable and finite existence that is offered up to be shared: *methexis* [participation] is henceforth offered as the sharing out of the very thing that it shares: both the limit of finitude and respect for the unsacrificeable.⁵⁰

The inoperative praxis of partaking in infinite finitude of the work's offering—"offered as the sharing out of the very thing that it shares"—operates through the rigorous logic of any paradox, such that one can say that at the very same time that there is something *more* to take, there is at the very same time *less* to take than the time before. The relation between the two is incommensurable, and as Nancy states, "It is the incommensurable that measures us. The incommensurable measures each of our destructions, their impotence. Existence resists. None of which either prevents destruction or justifies it; rather, it marks its absolute limit."⁵¹ In other words, existence remains indestructible in its very incommensurability, as that which is without common measure, comparative term, or sacrificial and communal substance. As Nancy explains, based upon the formula first conceived by Bataille: the sovereignty of existence "is nothing; the *res*, the thing itself, is nothing, no actual thing; it is reality itself."⁵² Felix's invitation is an offer to partake in the incommensurability of existence as what can be shared or destroyed but never sacrificed, and as the praxis of *creation ex nihilo*, remains to be decided each time and in resistance to appropriation, identification, and signification.

As I approach the final section of this chapter, I want to pose the following question: is there an economy of the gesture? That is, in the reversal of aesthetic value inaugurated by Duchamp a century ago and extended by Rauschenberg and more recently by Gonzalez-Torres, in which art as inoperative praxis opens up aesthesis as a space of infinitely finite withdrawal and retreat—which is in part to

say, beyond use-value, exchange-value, and perhaps even exhibition-value in the more limited sense of that term—we might ask not only what it is that gesture sustains, but also what is it that sustains gesture?

Through my reading of Nancy alongside the paper and candy installations of Gonzalez-Torres, I would argue that what sustains gesture—and hence a shared aesthesis or sense of existence as already-unmade—is precisely this reversal of the relation and the value of production and all of its conceptual and material cognate forms, forces, and effects. This “reversal of the relation of production” is what Nancy has identified as Marx’s revolution. Yet as Nancy explains, “Marx’s revolution presupposed that this reversal was equivalent to a conversion of the meaning of production (and the restitution of created value to its creator).”⁵³ In other words, it remained committed to an economy of production, while as Nancy argues, “What we have begun to learn is that it is also a matter of creating the meaning or value of the reversal itself [i.e., creation as inoperative praxis]. Only perhaps this creation will have the power of the reversal” (i.e., *creation ex nihilo*).⁵⁴

So we might say that what sustains gesture is the very gap and separation of its spacing, the *nihil* or nothing from which creation happens, yet always as an inoperative praxis, “in excess or in deficiency with respect to its work,” and that comes to define art and the relation of enjoyment and pleasure to it, that in addition to, yet distinct from, both Kant and Freud, even Marx himself was aware of. As Nancy writes, “The work of art is always also a meaning at work beyond any meaning that is either given or to be given”⁵⁵ (readymade or gifted). As he goes on to write, “But opening without finality is never a work nor any product: it is the enjoyment of which Marx spoke, as enjoyment by human beings of what opens their humanity beyond all humanism.”⁵⁶

For Marx, but for others too, as we shall see, this sense of enjoyment and pleasure is found in naïveté and play, and in particular in those forms of naïve play that are without “a goal of mastery (domination, usefulness, appropriation)” and that “exceed . . . all submission to an end” belonging to childhood and the gestures, offering, and sharing of separation that would seem to be the specific *ars* and *teknē* of a child’s pleasure and enjoyment. For while Marx notes to-

ward the end of the introduction to the *Grundrisse* that “a man cannot become a child again or he becomes childish,” he immediately goes on to ask, “But does he not find joy in the child’s naïveté, and must he himself not strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage?”⁵⁷

It is this “effect of perpetual childhood freshness” (as Nancy describes it) that led Freud to resort to examples and scenarios such as the Mystic Writing Pad and the *fort/da* enunciation. Yet once we note that both of these forms of play are structured through techniques of erasure, withdrawal, disappearance, and the retracing of these acts of retreating and departure, we realize that there is a sense of loss intimately located at the heart of children’s play, and that this loss can be, nonetheless, a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Joining this insight with Marx’s own, we can understand what Nancy means when he writes that “perhaps art is the *infans* par excellence, the one who, instead of discoursing, fragments instead: fraying [*frayage*] and fracture of the access.”⁵⁸

It is precisely this fraying of the path and fragmenting of the course of things, including any discourse “which takes” or appropriates, that Roland Barthes described as his method of teaching in his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France in 1977. As he stated, “I am increasingly convinced, both in writing and in teaching, that the fundamental operation of this loosening method is, if one writes, fragmentation, and, if one teaches, digression, or, to put it in a preciously ambiguous word, *excursion*.”⁵⁹ *Excursion* (this word): which we take to literally mean “the course or path out,” this *excursus* as a fracturing and fraying of discourse and its appropriating gestures of fragmentation, and a gesturing that might also be the art and technique of partaking in departing, or sharing in separation. For Barthes, this is the work of the child at play, at the limit of praxis that is not invested in the object or perhaps even in the giver or receiver, but in the gesture of offering itself.

I should therefore like the speaking and the listening that will be interwoven here to resemble the comings and goings of a child playing beside his mother, leaving her, returning to her a pebble, a piece of string, and thereby tracing around a calm center a whole locus of play within which the pebble, the string come to matter less than the enthusiastic giving of them.⁶⁰

Like the child in Barthes's image and scenario, those who partake in the infinite incompleteness of the work of Gonzalez-Torres's candy piles and paper stacks partake in a gesture of offering, the meaning or sense of which does not lie in any one or all of the pieces of candy or paper, but in the offering itself, the offering of no-thing that is *res* (the thing), at once *res omnium* (thing for everyone) and *res nullum* (thing for no one).

Thus, we might say that this is an originary ambiguity that all gestures possess. Such that, as Maurice Blanchot explains, ambiguity is more essential than negation, since before the beginning (that impossible space-time) nothingness is not equal to being, but is only the appearance of being's concealment.⁶¹ Therefore, existence in terms of separated sense is more a matter of dissimulation than of negation. Such that we might come to understand that the separated gesture is not a matter of the dialectic, and that in its ambiguity and dissimulation, gesture gestures toward existence not as a question of being or becoming, but toward existence as unbecoming, which is to say already-unmade—and that the praxis, art and technique of existence, is inoperative. For if, as Blanchot argues, dissimulation is more original than negation and cannot be captured by negation, this is because existence has been already-unmade before it can be negated.

When it comes to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, each of us, and the artist as well, is the young girl who succeeds the muses, the child who, as Nancy writes, "exposes art that consents to its own disappearance: not in order to be resuscitated but because it does not enter that process."⁶² For rather than the production of a product, the latter of which as Marx said "only obtains its 'last finish' in consumption,"⁶³ the inoperative aesthetic, ethical, and political praxis of Gonzalez-Torres and all of the other artists whose work this study has been dedicated to thinking—in which the notion of a final finish is rendered impossible—leaves us with the following question, which is also Nancy's: "What if art were never anything but the necessarily plural, singular art of consenting to death, of consenting to existence?"⁶⁴

The incalculable sharing-out of this non-dialectical double consenting (to existence, to death) is, for Nancy, the definition of art, and in its oscillating rhythm (blackout, gap, touch) is what I have referred to as the separated gesture of offering and partaking. It is also the

syncopated temporal and spatial gap and opening at the incommensurable heart of each encounter or rendezvous, including in those elements that go by “the names of art or love, friendship or thought, knowledge or emotion.”⁶⁵ So art, love, or friendship, not as the event or even the advent of chance, opportunity, or encounter, but as “an adventing without advent.”⁶⁶ Something like the rendezvous in and as its waiting, passing, and missing—not simply the incommensurable rendezvous, but the rendezvous *as* incommensurable, including that most incommensurable of rendezvous: the one “between” existence and death. Therefore, the consenting to both, at once, is the incalculable measure of art or love, friendship or thought, knowledge or emotion.

Just such a story of a missed encounter is conveyed by Jacques Derrida toward the end of his book *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, amid his persistent sense that he will never reach (touch) Nancy “precisely, in an appropriate, fitting [*apte*] way,” and therefore will “never get to it, to the truth, and . . . never touch the point of departure, not to mention the end.”⁶⁷ Yet, of course, it is precisely in this impossibility, and in Derrida’s telling of it as a story in writing, that the truth of the encounter, of touch, of friendship and of thought, is sensed and shared—including perhaps between Derrida and Nancy. Here is the story told by Derrida, or as he described it, “No, not even the story, then, but certain stories that are more or less anecdotal, of what touched me while I was trying to write ‘On Touching’”:

Thus, for example, this scene of friendship, of meetings, and *contretemps*; the *contretemps* at the rendezvous in 1992, probably. I remember one of our meetings, that of a missed rendezvous one evening at the Strasbourg airport on the eve of one of those innumerable colloquiums on the geophilosophy of Europe. Impossible to get in touch on the telephone. Jean-Luc is punctual and comes to join me after having missed me at the airport, and after I had already gotten to town; he is accompanied by our friend Jacqueline Risset, to whom I had just written to say (on the eve of that day), rather belatedly, how much I liked and admired, once again, *L’amour de loin* [*Love from a Distance*].⁶⁸

Written in an idiom that is linguistically, temporally, and spatially tensed seemingly to the brink of contradiction, Derrida’s anecdote

performs in writing the scene of friendship as missed rendezvous and encounter. It enacts the *contretemps* (the unexpected and unfortunate occurrence) that it seeks to describe, and does so in the literal meaning of the word, as the motion, act, or event out of, or against, time. For instance, Derrida remembers one of their “meetings, that of a missed rendezvous,” and also that he had written to their mutual friend Jacqueline Risset “rather belatedly” and yet “on the eve of that day” (and so earlier) and at the same time “once again”—therefore, a temporality that is at once before or prior to (“on the eve),” after (“rather belatedly”), and in reprise (“once again”). Derrida wrote to Risset to say “how much [he] liked and admired” her novel *Love from a Distance*—a title that aptly captures exactly what we are calling the incommensurability of being-with or shared-separation that defines friendship, art, and thought.

Further, Derrida uses the word *eve* not once but twice: in the sentence about Risset, and earlier when he speaks of “a missed rendezvous [with Nancy] one evening at the Strasbourg airport, on *the eve* of one of those *innumerable* colloquiums on the geophilosophy of Europe” (emphasis added; let us also not overlook the issue of number and community that appears here).

We might imagine that the most appropriate travel document to accompany one through such a series of missed rendezvous at the airport, chance encounters in the city, and other unexpected occurrences that seem to happen prior to, after, and once again is the one that Felix Gonzalez-Torres describes in a letter that he wrote to his gallery dealer Andrea Rosen, dated February 14, 1992 (Valentine’s Day)—its own expression of love, friendship, thought, and art from a distance (which may be the only place from which the intimacy of love, friendship, thought, and art can be expressed). Part of the letter reads:

The other day I was still thinking about this piece and how it fulfills me now even more. You know, the title: (*Passport*) is very crucial and significant—a white empty blank uninscribed piece of paper, an untouched feeling, an undiscovered experience. . . . A simple white object against a white wall, waiting.⁶⁹

The work that Felix is remembering, still thinking, and writing to his friend Rosen about is “Untitled” (*Passport*), (fig. 6) a paper stack

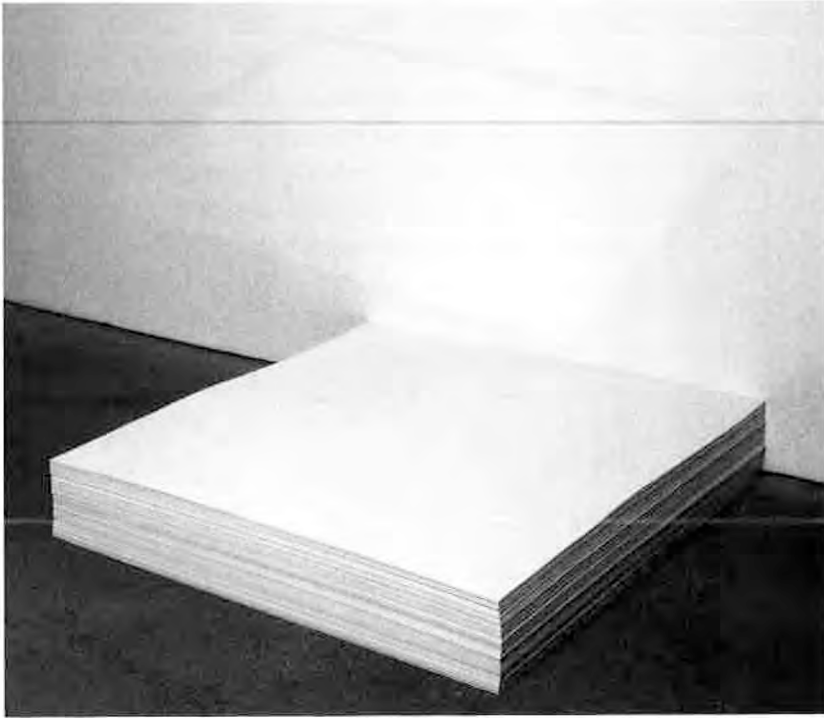


Figure 6. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (*Passport*), 1991; paper, endless supply; 10 cm at ideal height \times 60 \times 60 cm (original paper size) (4 in. at ideal height \times 23 in. \times 23 in. (original paper size). © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

from 1991 that consists of large monochromatic white sheets of paper placed up against a white wall. With these words about this work, Felix enables us to imagine how “a white empty blank un-inscribed piece of paper”—its description without punctuation marks—can be an ongoing source of thinking and fulfillment. And further, how such a sheet of paper, to the precise extent that it is empty blank and un-inscribed by signs and marks of identity, portraiture, address of origin or destination, and so on, can be the access and path out to “another place, to another life, to a new beginning, to chance; to the chance of meeting that other that makes life a moving force . . . and unexpected reasons for being”⁷⁰ and thereby serve as the invention of a new kind of passport for an excursion, the course of which is *to- or toward* that non-destinal destination that is simply outside. An excursion infinite in its finitude as I have discussed and as perhaps

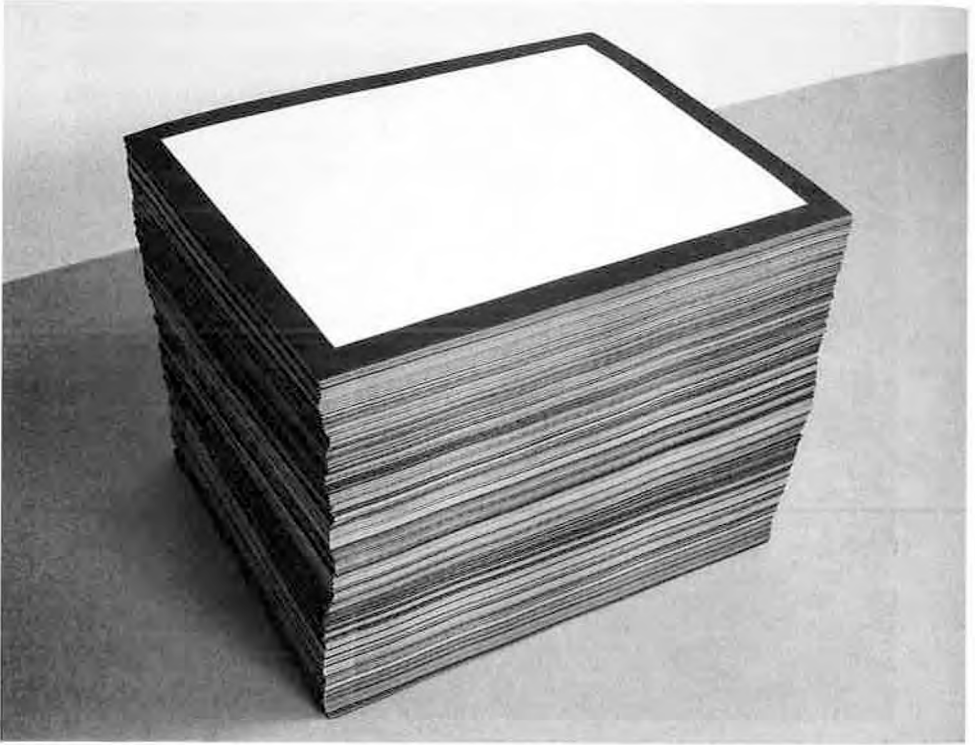


Figure 7. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (*The End*), 1990; print on paper, endless copies; 22 in. at ideal height \times 28 \times 22 in. (original paper size). © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

most explicitly named and offered by Gonzalez-Torres in another of his paper stacks, "Untitled" (*The End*), from 1990 (fig. 7).

Here, as some-one having partaken in some-thing that is infinite in its finitude and therefore bears the title *The End* as the only name proper for it, *there* one is at that open-ended place that, in its indetermination, is most properly and simply named *some-where*. At the end that is never-ending, with a passport without a name, we some-ones partaking in some-things find ourselves simply there, at the "some" of some-where, which at the same time, and in its anonymity, is not exactly nowhere. Or it might be both at once, as in the doubled white paper stacks, paired together, and aligned with a small space between them, from 1989–90, and simply titled "Untitled" (fig. 8). On the sheets of paper of one of the stacks is printed the phrase "Somewhere Better

Than This Place,” and on the sheets of the other stack, “Nowhere Better Than This Place.”

Rather than read the words *this place* as indicating, in each case, the place occupied by each of the two stacks, respectively, we might understand *this place* to refer to the space that is shared by both of them, and therefore does not designate the place of their own proper space, but the place that separates and divides them and that they at the same time bracket (parenthetically, as it were). Which is to say that *this place* might be taken to refer to the space between the two stacks of paper, a space of separation that is shared between them. In

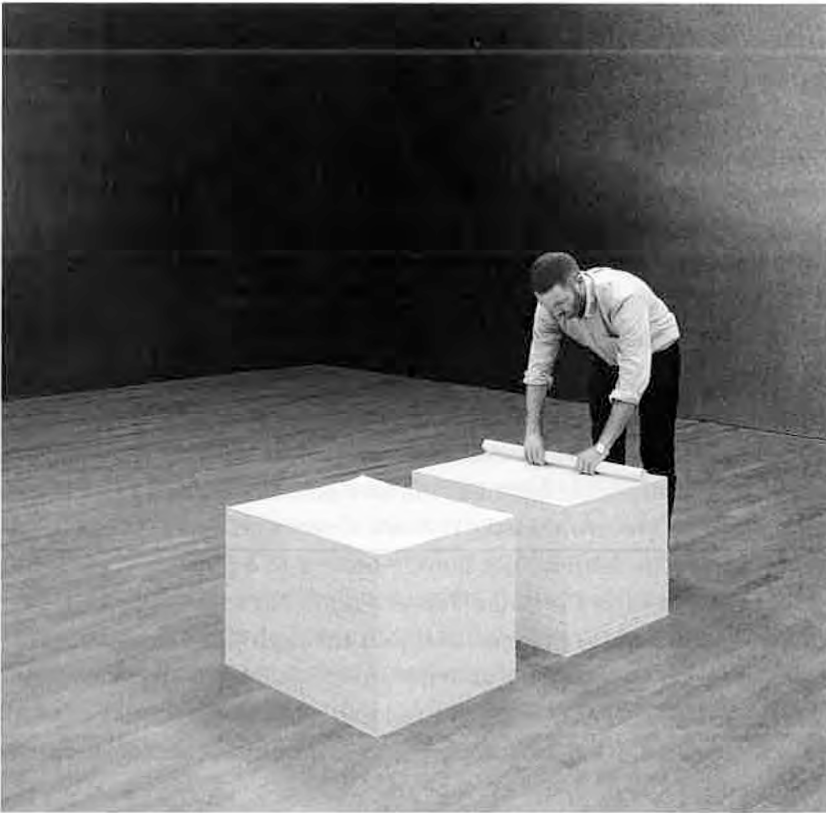


Figure 8. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled,” 1989–90; print on paper, endless copies; 26 in. at ideal height \times 29 \times 56 in. overall; two parts: 26 in. at ideal height \times 29 \times 23 in. (original paper size) each. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

their pairing and non-identical doubling, then, they do not so much cancel each other out as open up and stage the sense of there being “somewhere better than this place,” and there being “nowhere better than this place,” as equal. In our encounter with this work, we are offered the decision to take from one, both, or neither of the two stacks, and we can easily imagine that most people will reduce their decision to a choice between one of the two stacks and their respective printed statements of spatial contentment or discontentment. Yet by pairing the two stacks, Felix’s invitation is doubled, and we are offered the opportunity to take not just from one or the other stack, but from both. To do so is not only to refuse one’s decision being made reducible to the choice between one of only two options, it is also to sustain the aporia of (the space of) decision—impasse and passage, and without principle, at once. And not only the space of decision, including, as here, the decision of place (somewhere, nowhere), but of decision as this very aporetic place. Indeed, this work would seem to affirm that the ideality (if not idealism) of Felix’s work is aporetic, as though when talking about wanting to make this place better, one heard expressed the sense that there is somewhere better than this place and nowhere better than this place.

Somewhere and nowhere at once: this is where we are left, this is the place that remains. Somewhere better than this place without saying where, and nowhere other than this place, and so somewhere too. Jean-Luc Nancy, our principal guide throughout much of this study, once said that “beyond modernity is the time of things,”⁷¹ and on another occasion, following one of his own guides, he quotes Heidegger as saying that “we would have to learn to recognize that things themselves are places, and do not merely belong in a place.”⁷² This too is what I believe Felix Gonzalez-Torres sought for us to recognize: that things themselves are places, and that through this recognition, we find ourselves in the space of decision, including the decision about things and places, which are not reducible to the categories of work of art, audience, artist, gift, commodity, communal substance, ready-made, and in the end, not even of art.

In these works we are offered the chance to decide to take responsibility for partaking in, sustaining, and taking care of the in-appropriate space between us as no-thing and already-unmade. By

taking some-thing in its finitude as *partes extra partes*, and through a praxis of sharing in what cannot be shared (loss, death), to sustain this infinite sense of this finitude, as the decision of existence, a decision that lies (and must remain) in-finished, just between us. This would be to think infinite expenditure as the generosity and spaciousity of separation in and as its infinite finitude. A necessarily immeasurable giving and taking of inappropriable sense, which is nothing other than the generosity and spaciousity of freedom. For as Nancy makes clear, freedom is what measures itself according to the incommensurable, and the incommensurable is what we share, including as the decision between us. This is the decision that preserves this freedom (and in this way preserves itself), by offering existence in and as its withdrawal, of being drawn into the finitude of coexistence as infinitely shared-separation. This is the freedom that decision in its withdrawal offers, including as the decision to sustain this withdrawal, and it is this very decision that the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres offers, each time it is decided to accept the invitation to partake in the inoperative praxis of the work as already-unmade.

It is here that we might begin to understand that beyond modernity and the time of things, our time is the time of scenes. Our time, we innumerable and incommensurable some-ones with some other ones, some-where and with some-things—all of which can only be destroyed or shared. It is in this way that we are confronted not with a choice but with a decision, and a hypothesis of sorts: What if things, including works of art, ask of us nothing, nothing other than the ethical task of sustaining the separated-spacing that is shared between us and things, and invite us to decide not once and for all, but each time, just between us? Not in terms of being or of becoming, sameness or difference, wholeness or fragmentation, fullness or lack, but in terms of *unbecoming* as the name for the shared-separation that is the only source, sense, and pleasure of being-together.