

NANCY PRINCENTHAL

FELIX GONZALES-TORRES

Multiple Choice

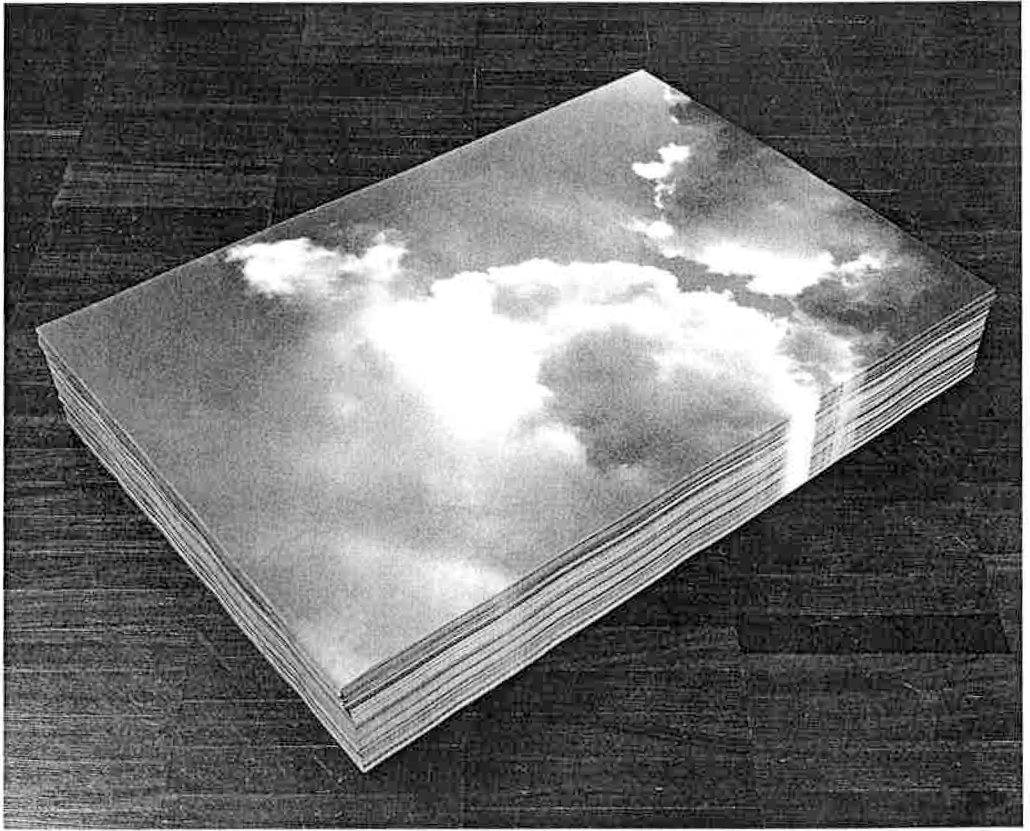
Sometimes saying what Felix Gonzalez-Torres sculptures are helps name their meaning: Puzzles. Spills. Curtains (as spoken in film noir). The themes thus invoked are, roughly, the enigmatic game of representation, the accidents of social exchange, and, as a subtext in even the most insouciant work, death both remote and insuperably near. Often, the work bears its own script, as in the recent "portraits" or earlier photostat caption pieces that recite events and dates in incantatory alternation: "Bitburg Cemetery 1985 Walkman 1979 Capetown 1985 Water-proof mascara 1971 Personal Computer 1981 TLC." But as broadranging as are the references in such citations, Gonzalez-Torres's work is intensely personal. It refers, however obliquely, to his own history (which began 37 years ago in Cuba) and sometimes to his now-deceased lover's, and it refers with unexampled precision to the condition of love itself. At the same time, the work is, in material terms, utterly devoid of an inner life; indeed, radical exteriorization is its primary mechanism. Gonzalez-Torres has no studio, and produces work only for consumption—for public exhibition or private commission. In many cases, it can literally be eaten (the candy spills), or otherwise taken home for free (the stacks of printed sheets). Sometimes, it gives viewers only their own images (the paired mirrors). The viewing end, the consuming end, is where the work gets private. And between privacy and publicity, between the personal and the shared, all of its prodigiously complex meanings take shape.

The work for which Gonzalez-Torres is best known are the paper stack pieces he has made since 1989. These are generally offset sheets, printed on one side or two, and exhibited in piles measured by height rather than quantity, though they number at least in the hundreds. What is most radical about them is that they are there for the taking; visitors are most welcome to help themselves, and become instant art collectors. In order to maintain a fairly constant height, the stacks are periodically replenished during the course of an exhibition. The first were a pair both called *Untitled (Monument)*. One said, simply, "Memorial Day Weekend," the other "Veteran's Day Sale." Together, they introduced an ongoing commentary on the relationships between cut-rate retail activity and art production, between those civic values rehearsed in textbooks, and those expressed in daily life. The comparatively prolix and widely reproduced *Untitled (Death by Gun)* (1990), included in the 1991 Whitney Biennial, shows faces and brief biographical

sketches of 460 people killed by gun in one week in the United States. *Untitled (The End)* (1990) consisted of blank white sheets banded with black, *Untitled (NRA - National Rifle Association)* (1990) of red sheets banded with black. Some stacks are of sheets printed on both sides, as in one pairing a tiny ad printed in *The New York Times*, pleading "Give a City Child a Break: Give to the Fresh Air Fund," with, on the reverse, a *NYT* report of the Pentagon's claim that its germ warfare research is safe; spliced inconspicuously onto this article is an eight-line item about a Jim Bakker defector whose testimony was challenged because he had "sold his soul." There have been stacks of black-and-white photographs of clouds (*Untitled [Aparición]*, 1991), or of water printed edge to edge, in which there is a congruence between the imagery of drift and its literal replication, as visitors take one only to reveal its twin beneath. And there have been stacks that bore no printing at all, being articulated only by their position: a black stack paired with a white one, or four white ones arranged on a larger blue sheet, to produce a recessed blue cross.

There is scarcely a theoretical issue now on the table that these pieces don't engage, including, in addition to those concerning market mechanisms, the constitutive pressures of historical and economic context in general, and of sexual and ethnic identity politics in particular. As throughout Gonzalez-Torres's work, there is often the broad stroke of humor. But the stacks also emerged for deeply personal reasons: referring to his lover's illness with AIDS, Gonzalez-Torres said in a 1991 interview, "The idea of pieces being endless happened at that point because I was losing someone very important."¹ A couple of years later, he expanded, "I was also interested in giving back to the viewer, to the public, something that was never really mine to start with—this explosion of information, which in reality is an implosion of meaning." And, again, it was "about trying to be a threat to the art-marketing system, and also, to be really honest, it was about being generous.... Freud said that we rehearse our fears in order to lessen them. In a way this 'letting go' of the work, this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day right in front of my eyes. It's really a weird thing when you see the public come into the gallery and walk away with a piece of paper that is 'yours.'"²

It is not news that the political is personal. But the

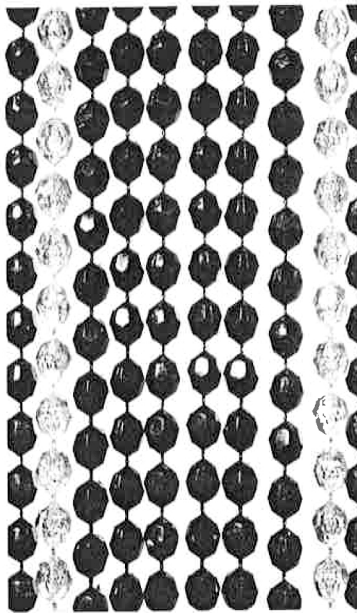


Untitled (Aparación), 1991, ideal height: 8 x 29.75 x 44.88 inches, offset print on paper. Collection Fundación Cultural Televisa, S.A. Mexico City. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photo Peter Muscato.

reinsertion of individual emotional history into the kind of cultural critique explored under the sign of Althusser, Benjamin, Brecht, or Foucault—to cite theorists hailed by Gonzalez-Torres himself—is tricky enough to be both unusual and truly provoking. Surely the condition of similitude that Foucault elaborated in his discussion of Magritte (and elsewhere) is relevant to Gonzalez-Torres's stacks: in contrast to resemblance, Foucault wrote, "The similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obey no hierarchy, but propagate themselves from small differences among small differences. Resemblance serves representation, which rules over it; similitude serves repetition, which ranges across it. Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must return to and reveal; similitude circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar."³ Gonzalez-Torres embraces this vision, but hasn't sworn over to it his emotional and intellectual prerogatives. The simulacrum is a medium of social exchange, his work says, with more strength and flexibility than it's usually credited with.

This critical construction may also be used for the candy spills Gonzalez-Torres has produced during the same period. As with the stacks, the mounds of individually wrapped candies, which range from modest to over a thousand pounds, are both ephemeral (they are meant to be consumed) and eternal (as conceptual art works, they can never really go away); they are about mortality, specifically in the age of AIDS, and about redemption in art. But the spills are also antiformal complements to the rectilinear stacks—they are what Barry Le Va's scattered ball bearings and felt wares to Donald Judd's galvanized iron boxes. The comparisons, by Gonzalez-Torres's own testimony, are not idle. "I love formal issues," he has said. "And, yes, someone like me—the 'other'—can indeed deal with formal issues. This is not a white-men-only terrain, sorry, boys." But as with his appeal to theories defying conventions of originality, his ardor quite radically transforms its object. "Minimalist sculptures were never really primary structures," he continues. "They were structures that were embedded with a multiplicity of meanings."⁴ One of them, he freely admits, is authority, of which he avails himself with open irony. "It's almost like being in drag," he recently said.⁵ The candy spills, then, are consummate Process art, full of unimpeded chance and the lucid expression of the physics of gravity and

entropy. But they also, in Robert Nickas's words, make Gonzalez-Torres "probably the first artist to get viewers to put part of a work in their mouths and suck on it."⁶ The glittering piles of silver-wrapped chocolate Baci or Luden's cough drops or the gold-wrapped candies of *Untitled (Placebo - Landscape - for Roni)* (1993) are extravagantly, preposterously, even tragically appealing—sugarcoated pills with a vengeance. "Beauty is a power we should reinvest with our own purpose," Gonzalez-Torres says,⁷ putting a distinctive spin on the anodyne in public art (a category in which he pleads the stacks and spills). But he also keeps in plain sight beauty's propensity for cruelty.



above *Untitled (Blood)* (detail), 1992, size varies, plastic beads and metal rod, installation view, Galerie Jennifer Flay. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

right *Untitled (Placebo - Landscape - for Roni)* (detail), 1993, dim. var., 1,000 lbs. of gold candies. Private collection, Germany. Courtesy Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot. Provided by Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photo Andre Morain.

The stacks and spills similarly redefine the dynamics—the sweet temptation—of owning art. "Collecting gives egotism the accents of passion, which is always attractive, while arming you against the passions that make you feel most vulnerable," writes Susan Sontag.⁸ By selling title to the spills and stacks, Gonzalez-Torres puts the collector's fervor to the severest test. Taking away the identity that accrues from having a unique object to display, he rather ruthlessly exposes the simple desire to acquire (or, somewhat more benignly, to patronize). But Gonzalez-Torres has no patience with critics who question his involvement with the art market, or his desire to work within the institutional mainstream. In the face of every political piety, he insists, "I love the art world. It's very caring. That's where I work, that's where I live, that's my community." In any event, he sees no viable alternative. "I'm not about to romanticize the margins," he says. "There's nothing out there."⁹

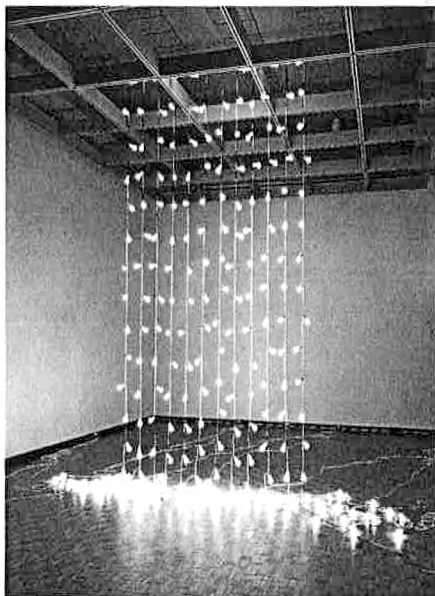
The political difference between his "public" pieces and the limited edition multiples is, then, substantial but not extreme. One of Gonzalez-Torres's recent formats is curtains, which he has made of colored beads or sheer fabric. Hung over windows or doorways or mid-room, they are, like the spills, unabashedly sensuous, and in some cases shamelessly tacky. They risk a laugh, even a snicker. Again, they are essentially conceptual pieces that operate, on the literary dimension, as Janus-faced metaphors for barrier and breach, concealment and exposure, as well as being pictorial surfaces, volumetric sculptures, and performative art works activated by the passage of viewers, or of air. At once purely optical and richly tactile, the curtains are, to borrow the language of semiotics, both opaque and transparent. And, like all of Gonzalez-Torres's work, very personal, and increasingly so. Several of the candy pieces are measured to the weight of



friends, giving the spills a secondary life as portraits; the curtains, too, have literal subjects, announced by subtitles: *Blood* (for a curtain of red plastic beads), *Chemo* (for white ones), *Lover Boy* (for curtains of sheer blue fabric). Figurative ghosts that haunt the curtains' manifest abstraction, these subjects play across their surfaces like reflections caught in a mirror. And in fact mirrors are another motif in Gonzalez-Torres's recent work, where they appear in pairs, and suggest, like the twinned clocks of *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1987-90), the near but never absolute reciprocity of "perfect" love.

Along with beads and fabric, Gonzalez-Torres has made a curtain of a dozen strings of bare light bulbs, suspended at regular intervals from ceiling to floor, where they collect in an irregular pool of illumination. Called *Untitled (North)* (1993), it is one of a series of sculptures in which strands of bare bulbs dangle from the ceiling or are slung in casual swags across the wall. Even more delicate and fugitive than the curtains, the light garlands vary in configuration from one installation to the next, suggesting conditions for various exhibitions as much as subjects in themselves. Gonzalez-Torres had also made a series of jigsaw puzzles from cardboard-mounted C-prints, displayed in plastic bags, that relate to the curtains and lights in some respects. The photographs range from a fragment of a newspaper article to a childhood snapshot of the artist and his sister, but each suggests the instability of representation, its vulnerability to fracture and partial loss. And also, of course, the gameplaying in which all contemporary art participates, the crucial importance of the right fit between image and practice, object and context.

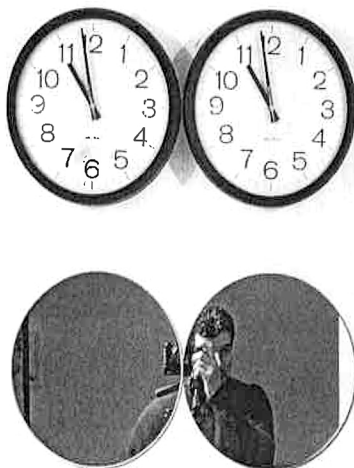
The curtains and light pieces and puzzles, like the great majority of Gonzalez-Torres's work, are created in series (each of the puzzles is, further, produced in editions of three). Occasionally, however, he has produced work that is unique, or atypical within a series. While almost all the stack pieces are infinitely



Untitled (North), 1993, dim. var., 22 light bulbs, 12 light strings, extension cords, porcelain. Courtesy Milwaukee Art Museum. Provided by Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photo Efraim Lev-er.

below top *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987-90, commercial clocks, ed. 3, 13.5 x 27 x 1 inches. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

below bottom *Untitled (March 5th) #1*, 1991, 2 mirrors, 12 x 25 inches. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



viewer's attention; that constitute, in large measure, the experience of art.

The very guardedness of these sculptures suggests, by contrast, the generosity and openness that are far more characteristic of Gonzalez-Torres's work. Despite his current success, Gonzalez-Torres remains committed to teaching, because he believes it to be a form of social activism: his course at New York University is called "The Social Landscape." It is in an interdisciplinary program, and is not just for aspiring artists; Gonzalez-Torres has the students read theory, but they must also keep a journal of current events. When he is asked to speak at art institutions, he talks about social issues, reviewing statistics on spending for the military and for social service programs, and discussing the lasting damage of the Republican years. He does not show slides of his own work. It is in precisely the same spirit of social activism that he makes public billboards, which bear images and messages that range from iconic photographs to the display of uneditorialized data. Probably the most widely seen (and reproduced) is a black-and-white photograph of a rumpled empty bed, its pillows snuggled together and still bearing the impressions of two heads. Shown at

24 commercial billboard sites around New York City in conjunction with an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1991, this image is unusual for its plain sadness, which softens the offense of airing dirty linen in public—or, conversely, challenging public scrutiny of private practices. Other billboards have been more barbed: to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion, he installed one at Sheridan Square with a line of text printed in white at the lower margin of a huge black expanse, in the manner of his caption photostats: “People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969.” A white-on-red poster installed on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx declares, in English and Spanish, “Health Care is a Right...No Excuses.”

But the majority of the billboards are as ambiguous as they are iconic, simple black-and-white photographs, shot by Gonzalez-Torres, that are wide open to interpretation. In one, a bird dives in a blur through a cloudy sky, in another a man’s shadow is cast on a gauzy curtain. *Untitled (For Jeff)*, which appeared in Stockholm in the winter of 1992-93, shows a man’s outstretched hand, palm forward, fingers slightly curved toward the viewer. The gesture is caring, benevolent; it is a symbol of outreach, but could also be seen as one of supplication. It offers, and solicits, a handout. In reality, it happens to be the hand of a man who nursed a friend of Gonzalez-Torres’s through his final illness, and whom Gonzalez-Torres here celebrates for his kindness, devotion, and capability. But that is not information given by the work itself, which performs a fairly spectacular balancing act between disclosure and implacable silence. For the most recent billboard project, offered as a multiple through the magazine *Parkett*, Gonzalez-Torres has turned his camera down, to record his own sneaker-clad footprints in the sand. While acknowledging the quiet despair in this image, he hopes to regain his optimism, for teaching, and ultimately art-making, are impossible without it.

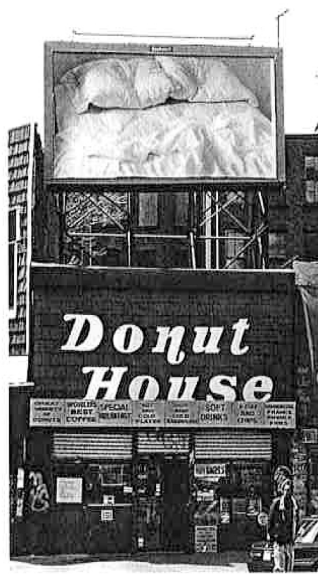
Of the many artists who have availed themselves of public billboard space, the most provocative have generally been interested in examining public rhetoric and its expression of institutionalized authority: Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Les Levine have used billboards this way. Gonzalez-Torres speaks, instead, in a language taken from somewhere between frank conversation and poetry. It is a moral language, and often answers to social exigencies in plain and challenging terms. But it is familiar with the most intimate experiences of human connection, and loss. In a series of essays on how the mandate for common cause in public culture has eroded, the sociologist Richard Sennett speaks about “the conscience of the eye.” From an utterly remote perspective born in the formal and phenomenological analysis of modern art, Rosalind Krauss borrows an equally elastic term, “the optical unconscious.” Sennett argues that in a long descent from a pre-Christian,

democratic ideal, culture has come to be impelled by a pursuit of inner knowledge rather than awareness of others; “*Unity*,” he writes, “has lost its moral meaning.”¹⁰ Krauss’s discussion turns on the “carnal constitution” of the field of vision, of a visibility that is ultimately “invisible to itself,”¹¹ whatever the conceptual program guiding its expression in art. Between the eye’s conscience and its unconscious—between the politics it participates in and its bodily engagement with pleasure and fear—Felix Gonzalez-Torres negotiates the conditions of his art. He only makes it look simple. ■

Nancy Princenthal is a free-lance critic who lives in New York.



left *Untitled*, 1989, billboard, Sheridan Square, 18 x 40 feet. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



right *Untitled*, 1991, billboard, Dekalb Ave., Flatbush, size var. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

NOTES

1. Interview with Robert Nickas, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World,” in *Flash Art* 161 (November-December 1991), 88.
2. Interview with Tim Rollins, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press/D.A.P., 1993), 13.
3. Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 44.
4. Rollins, 21.
5. Interview with the author, New York, March 11, 1994.
6. Nickas, 89.
7. Interview with the author.
8. Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 108.
9. Interview with the author.
10. Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 117.
11. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 140.