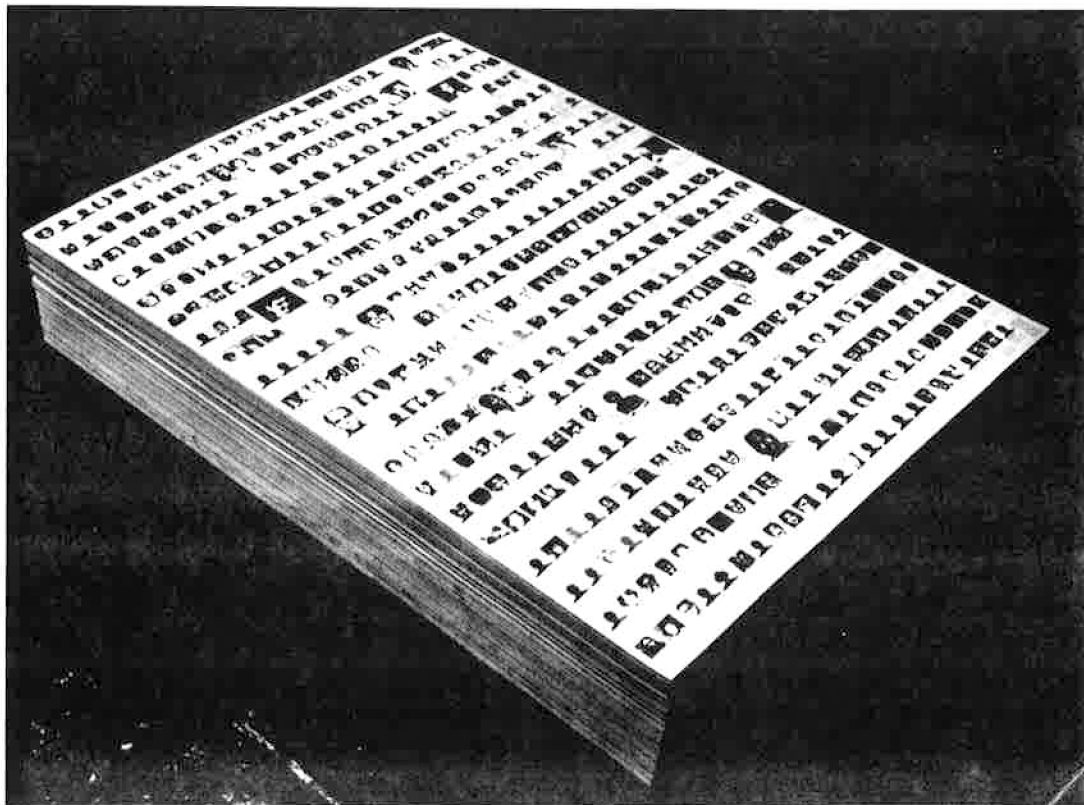

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"UNTITLED (DEATH BY GUN)" BY FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES by *Deborah Wye*



Many PCN readers who visited the recent Whitney Biennial may now have offset printed sheets from Félix González-Torres' *Untitled (Death by Gun)* (1990) on the walls of their homes or offices. They may have, as the artist hoped, taken a sheet from the 9-in.-high stack that sat, slablike, on the floor of the Whitney galleries. If so, the message of González-Torres' prints will have been spread widely, just as messages were disseminated by printed artworks historically, as far back as their origins in the 15th century. When *Untitled (Death by Gun)* became depleted, it was recreated by reprinting the image, thereby establishing an endless edition that allows for limitless distribution.

The sheets of *Untitled (Death by Gun)* display the names, ages, and most of the faces of 460 people who died in one week in America by gunshot, with the circumstances surrounding each death. (Four additional deaths that week were reported later.) The image was appropriated by González-Torres from a page of *Time* magazine because of his own interest in the subject of gun control. With no additional commentary by the artist, the details of the deaths have their own sobering effect on the consciousness of the viewer. After taking a sheet and reading it, anyone would find it impossible to feel indifferent toward the issue of death by gun. González-Torres told me that, by chance, some members of a United States Congressional Caucus on a sight-seeing tour of the Whitney Biennial may have taken sheets, at just the moment they were debating the "Brady" bill for gun regulations.¹

González-Torres was born in Cuba in 1957, moved to Puerto Rico when he was 11, and now lives and works in New York. He is best known for his conceptually based sculpture, photography, and printed works, and for his involvement with social and political issues. One earlier printed work was a commemorative billboard on gay rights, mounted in 1989 in Sheridan Square near the site of the 1969 gay uprising at the Stonewall Bar. (A small-scale silkscreen of the billboard was also issued.) González-Torres is also a member of Group Material, an art collaborative dedicated to cultural activism that mounts exhibitions in public spaces, museums, and galleries.

Untitled (Death by Gun) is one of some 20 paper stack pieces that González-Torres has created since 1989. The artist has said that his idea of having viewers take part of the piece away with them—a strategy he also uses in his cluster sculptures of candy, gum, and fortune cookies—derives from several impulses, among them: the desire "to give information and meaning back to the people" since so much information is devoid of meaning, an interest in the "re-contextualization of information" as it leaves one place and occupies another, a preoccupation with the "intersection of private and public," and the hope for a better understanding of "disappearance, loss, and regeneration."

Minimalism is an important factor in the formal makeup of González-Torres' stacks.

Conviction and authority emanate from their direct, blocklike format. Yet absoluteness, potentially derived from their geometric shapes, is compromised (or "contaminated," in the artist's words) by the irregularity of the edges of imperfectly aligned sheets, breathing a kind of animism into their presence.

The Conceptual Art underpinnings of his stacks are also evident, with their focus on information and viewer involvement. González-Torres' approach to the medium of print itself is conceptual. He chooses print, and offset in particular, because it makes the functioning of his artwork possible. While his desire for dissemination goes to the very roots of printed art, at the same time, *Untitled (Death by Gun)* and many of his other stacks play havoc with print conventions as they have evolved in the contemporary period. Traditional print techniques are not used; an attachment to their formal properties or a special dexterity with the printmaking craft does not draw González-Torres in that direction. He does not come to printmaking from painting, which might predispose him to particular visual effects that translate into the traditional printmaking mediums. His goals do not require any of the new and complex technical processes. Also, *Untitled (Death by Gun)* functions in stark contrast to the concepts of rarity and preciousness, often the result of limited editions and complex techniques, that have become sought-after attributes of prints. Offset printing, in contrast, is easy and inexpensive and therefore a logical choice for an edition of endless copies.

Public display is another area that differentiates *Untitled (Death by Gun)* from other contemporary prints, particularly in the museum or gallery context. The sheets are not exhibited in frames, with mats and behind glass, which ultimately obscures the physical attributes of printed paper. The viewer is allowed to touch and, in fact, take a print in utter disregard for the usual conventions surrounding artworks. At the Whitney Biennial, some viewers were startled to see others help themselves to sheets from *Untitled (Death by Gun)*.

All of these issues underscore González-Torres' stacks as "printed art" as opposed to simply "prints," a distinction that more readily opens up the print mediums to use in experimental artmaking.² Forgoing the enormous technical developments in printmaking because they are not appropriate for the function of his artwork, González-Torres has at the same time gone back to the origins of printed art in its function of disseminating a message. In so doing, he has made the kind of radical aesthetic statement that is not often found in contemporary prints.

¹Interview with the artist, June 1991.

²The term "printed art" was used by Riva Castelman in *Printed Art: A View of Two Decades*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1980.

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One 45x33-in. sheet from *Untitled (Death by Gun)* taken from the Whitney Biennial June 1991. Courtesy PCN, New York.