

The Means of Pleasure

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In an October 1993 lecture, Felix Gonzalez-Torres limited his remarks to the dispassionate recitation of a protracted inventory of statistics about worsening social conditions during the years of the Reagan and Bush administrations. He delivered this performance against the backdrop of a projected formal portrait of the flamboyantly wealthy family from the 1980s television series *Dynasty*. Each time Gonzalez-Torres changed the slide, the same image reappeared as if it were stuck in the projector, a stubborn picture that would not go away. It was a fine example of Bertolt Brecht's theory of Epic Theater.

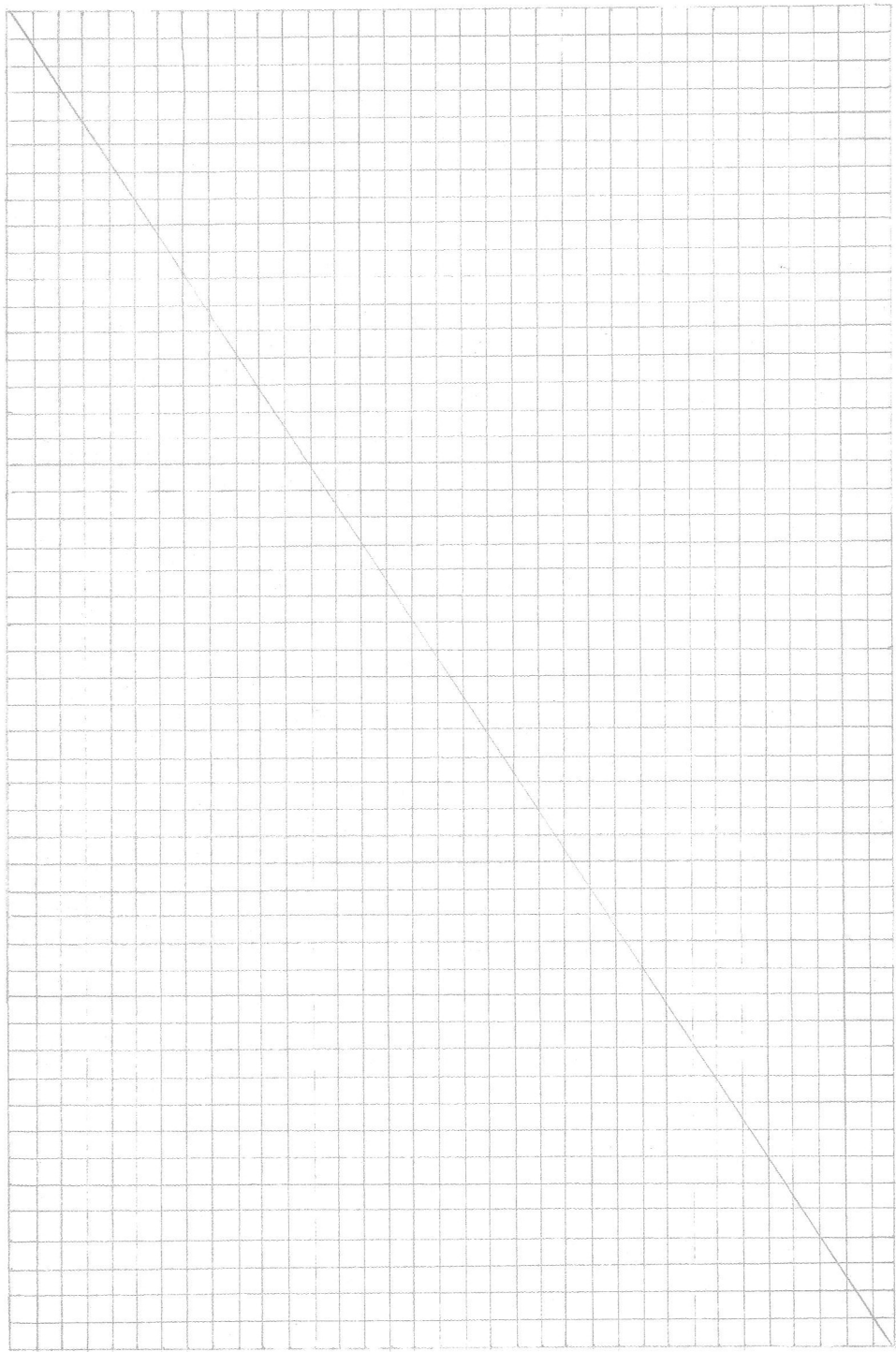
Brecht (1898-1956) developed the concept of Epic Theater throughout his career. As a Marxist writing in the aftermath of World War I, through Nazi rule, and after World War II, Brecht advocated a politically committed theater that would respond to the social conditions of the time. In a 1930 essay, "The Modern Theater is the Epic Theater," he contrasted the narrative Epic Theater with the Dramatic Theater. Epic Theater turns the spectator into an active, thinking observer rather than a passive receptor carried away by the plot into escapist empathy. The goal of Epic Theater

is to stimulate the viewer to make a decision on what is presented and to motivate action.¹ To this end, Brecht proposed distancing strategies that would emphasize the artifice of the theater, including requiring actors to address the audience directly, inserting songs, choruses, and rhymes in plays, and using text as part of stage sets.

Gonzalez-Torres has acknowledged the importance of Brecht's writings to his own working method. The formal restraint of his work parallels Brecht's austere style of presentation and forces the viewer (initially at least) to approach his works on an intellectual level. Yet the practice of concealing radical content under an acceptable, even beautiful, veneer is as central to Gonzalez-Torres's strategy as it was for Brecht.

The goal of empowering the audience is foremost in Gonzalez-Torres's mind, as his work provides only clues and gaps that encourage viewers to construct meaning. His is an art of blank spaces and things left unsaid. In the stacks of prints in endless editions that contain text, isolated phrases such as "Nowhere better than this place" and "Somewhere better than this place," or paragraphs from newspaper articles, exist incomplete on sheets of paper. The series of 'portraits' are lists of important dates and events in the particular 'sitter's' life to which other viewers bring their own memories. The blank areas above the running text in many of these portraits and in the stacks in which the sheets have only an evocative color, such as the red *Untitled (National Front)* (1992), demand signification. In the recent works made of single or multiple strings of light, whoever exhibits one can install it at will. His titles are only hints, often *Untitled* with the most revealing information following in parentheses.

Along with the intellectually active relationship viewers have with his work is a physical engagement that confronts the conventions of how an artwork functions. Gonzalez-Torres's formal strategies are intricately tied to the content of his work. In *Untitled (Welcome)* (1991), viewers must lift the neatly piled rubber welcome mats to find the photographs and mementos hidden underneath. The authoritarian, Minimalist forms he employs in this work,



as well as the stacks and carpet-like candy installations, function as decoys for vulnerable works that disappear as each viewer takes a sheet or a piece of candy. To eliminate these works is to complete them, and yet they are endlessly reproducible. What is original is not unique; a sculpture is an edition of prints; an installation is ingestible. Gonzalez-Torres relates this formal deception to his homosexual orientation and the idea of 'straight-acting'— of appearing to be 'normal' but actually being the 'other.'² Onto the clean, apparently neutral, veneer of his essential forms, he adds complex life issues relating to gender, sexuality, love, and mortality. Thus, what appears to be a 1960s beaded curtain is *Untitled (Chemo)* (1991), and a work that consists of thirty-one small grid paintings hung in a row is *Untitled (31 Days of Bloodwork)* (1991). In the age of AIDS these titles take on ominous connotations.

The dispersal of information is an important aspect of Gonzalez-Torres's work, most obviously in the stacks and the public billboards he has produced. In Brecht's play *Galileo*, the astronomer and physicist who proved the Copernican theory that the earth revolved around the sun publishes his radical studies in the vernacular Italian rather than Latin, in order to spread the potentially liberating news more widely. Gonzalez-Torres similarly wants his work to exist beyond the art world. Aligned with this purpose is what Susan Tallman has referred to as "the element of commercial subversion" in his work.³ The owner of a stack or candy installation shares it with a voracious public, particularly when the works are exhibited in a public space, and the buyer of a billboard acquires only the right to refabricate it and install it outside. Gonzalez-Torres is also planning future works that will circulate publicly in the form of advertisements for local museums in ethnic neighborhood newspapers (in their respective languages), and as installations of strings of lights along public streets.

Brecht believed that writers should use various 'cunning' means in order to distribute information. In "Telling the Truth: Five Difficulties," an essay that has appeared as the appendix to *Galileo*, he describes the obstacles that writers encounter when trying to spread their ideas in a hostile environ-

ment. He lists Confucius, Lenin, Lucretius, and Shakespeare as examples of writers who have used metaphor, allusion, and beauty as shrewd devices to spread a social message.⁴ Brecht himself used music, song, and humor to communicate with audiences and proposed that “the use of opera as a means of pleasure must have provocative effects today.”⁵

Like Brecht, Gonzalez-Torres uses both didactic and pleasurable devices in his work. In *Untitled (Death by Gun)* (1990), a stack of prints that lists all the gun victims in the United States during a one-week period, he is perhaps at his most didactic. *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991) is an example of a work that is provocatively pleasurable. The glistening, silver-wrapped sweets beckon viewers to take a piece, but the satisfaction is fleeting, like a fake pill or an unfulfilled promise.

Gonzalez-Torres believes unabashedly in using beauty, that recently discredited aspect of art, for political ends. He believes that “aesthetics is politics . . . a set of cultural and social values. . . . The problem with political art is that it had a look which was too easy to dismiss. We should rescue beauty and pleasure.” He thus wants to “repossess beauty for our own ends and reinterpret it for our own purposes.”

A strong romantic impulse runs throughout Gonzalez-Torres’s oeuvre, and the most beautiful of his works have a wistful, melancholy quality. *Untitled (Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein’s Grave, Paris)* (1992) is a photograph of the flowers at the grave of the famous lesbian couple. Two long, diaphanous curtains of pale blue fabric that hang and gently move across a window is *Untitled (Blue Curtains)* (1989-91). The most personally emotional imagery has paradoxically appeared in his most public works, the billboards. *Untitled* (1991) is a black-and-white photograph in soft focus of an unmade empty bed



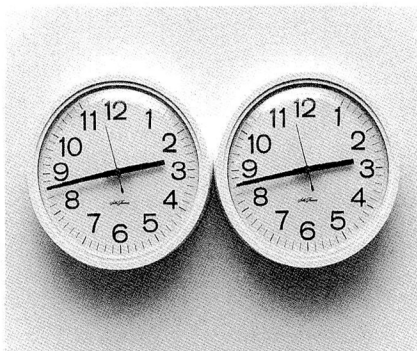
Untitled, 1991

with the indentations of two bodies apparent. Installed throughout New York City, this intimate image raises the issue of public scrutiny of private behavior and also functions as a memorial for those who had once lain there. The recent series of billboards with images of birds in flight depict one or two coupled birds that appear small and adrift in an immense, cloudy, sometimes stormy, sky.

There is a sense of absence and mourning in these beautiful, foreboding images — the melancholia that the linguist Julia Kristeva eloquently describes as a “sad voluptuousness, a despondent intoxication. . . .”⁶ In her essay, “Beauty: The Depressive’s Other Realm,” she asks:

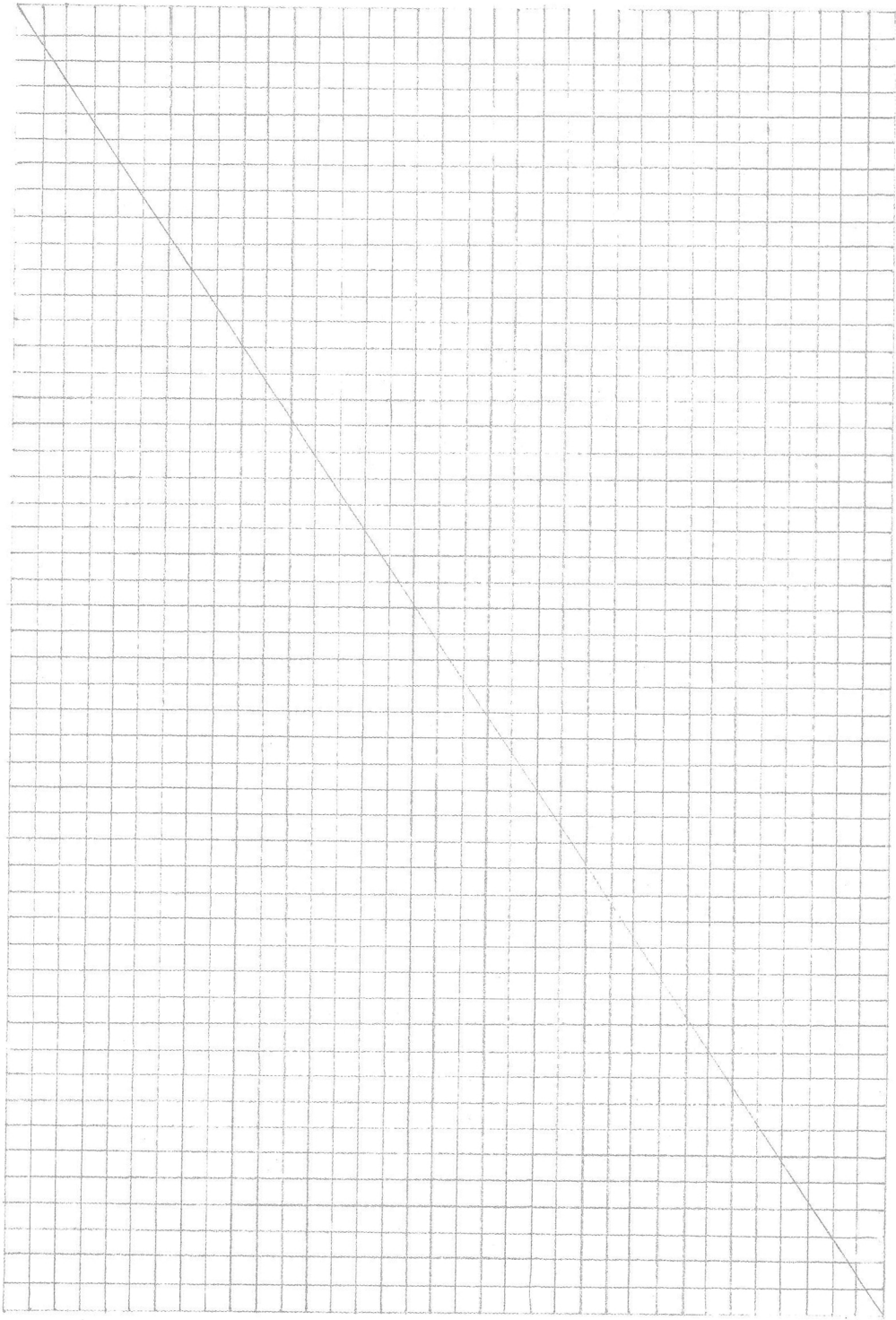
Can the beautiful be sad? Is beauty inseparable from the ephemeral and hence from mourning? Or else is the beautiful object the one that tirelessly returns following destructions and wars in order to bear witness that there is survival after death, that immortality is possible?⁷

Kristeva posits the beautiful object as a healing mechanism, an “Artifice . . . [that] replaces the ephemeral . . . beauty emerges as the admirable face of loss, transforming it in order to make it live.”⁸ The ephemeral or fleeting sense of time recurs throughout Gonzalez-Torres’s oeuvre, a poignant example being *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1987-90), a work that consists of two identical, generic wall clocks that have been set at the same hour. Inevitably and



Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1987-90

imperfectly, one will cease working before the other. In *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* (1991), twin vertical mirrors hang to the floor, side by side, and allude to the Greek myth of Orpheus, who descended into the Underworld to rescue his love, Eurydice. The one condition for her release was that he not look back at her until they

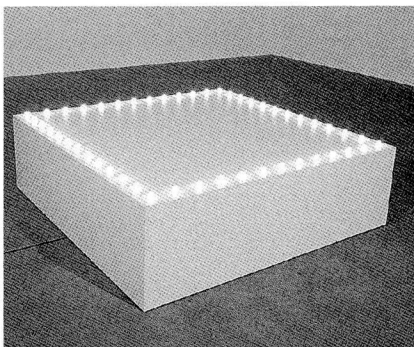


were free, but Orpheus succumbed to the temptation and lost her forever.

The conflation of the private and public realms is an area of much interest in recent art, and Gonzalez-Torres shares this concern. Writing about the relationship between the private and public in the work of the French writer Marguerite Duras, Kristeva states:

Political events, outrageous and monstrous as they might be . . . are assimilated to the extent of being measured only by the human suffering they cause . . . the mocked private domain gains a solemn dignity that depreciates the public domain. . . . As a result, public life becomes seriously severed from reality whereas private life, on the other hand, is emphasized to the point of filling the whole of the real and invalidating any other concern.⁹

Political events gain meaning only as they affect individual lives. The threat of Galileo's theories was not simply a matter of cosmic speculation but a challenge to the authority of the Catholic church and the feudal social structure of the time. As a monk tells the astronomer, his theories would rob his peasant parents of their comforting belief that they continually work the land as part of a higher order. "There is no eye watching over us after all,' they would say. . . . 'Nobody has planned a part for us beyond this wretched one on a worthless star.'"¹⁰



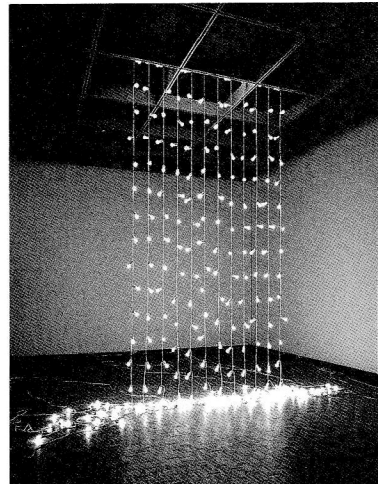
Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform), 1991

As a gay man, Gonzalez-Torres knows that public policy can have an immediate impact on his private life. The vulnerable body, where politics crystallizes for one whose marginal status is determined by what he does with it, is alluded to in several series. The earliest candy piles were based on a particular per-

son's weight. The constant depletion and rejuvenation of these and the stacks give them a life of their own, as does the replacement of the extinguished light bulbs in the light strings. The literal body makes an appearance in *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* (1991), a white platform with a rim of lights that was occasionally enlivened by a well-muscled male dancer listening privately to a walkman. A dancing couple has also performed under a canopy of light strings, again involved in their own music by virtue of a walkman with double earphones.

The light strings contain numerous references — light as a haven, a symbol of enlightenment or spirituality, and a source of warmth, yet as impermanent as the unending bulbs. Depending on how the viewer installs them, hanging from the ceiling, for instance, or outside, they can create a festival ambiance, or, lying on the floor, they can appear dejected, just a set of bare bulbs. *Untitled (North)* (1993) is perhaps Gonzalez-Torres's most optimistic installation, comprised of twelve strings of lights. The piece alludes to the Cuban habit of referring to any place north of Miami as *el norte*, and to the idea of such a place as one of aspiration. He has also thought of creating an outdoor installation of numerous lights and titling it *America*, which remains, to the immigrant that he is, a mythical place of fragile hope that must be maintained.

Brecht's goal was "to develop the means of pleasure into an object of instruction, and to convert certain institutions from places of entertainment into organs of mass communication."¹¹ Finding inspiration for his own work in the playwright's theories of a political theater, Gonzalez-Torres makes use of seductive forms and methods of public address to force viewers into a complicity with him in questioning established conventions



Untitled (North), 1993

and creating new meaning. Inspired by everyday events, personal biography, and the challenges of late twentieth-century life, Gonzalez-Torres's intent is to move viewers to a "place of beauty, freedom, pleasure."

¹ Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theater is the Epic Theater," in *Brecht on Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 37.

² All otherwise unattributed quotes are from a December 8, 1993 conversation with the artist.

³ Susan Tallman, "The Ethos of the Edition: The Stacks of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Arts Magazine* 66, no. 1 (September 1991): 14.

⁴ I am indebted to Tim Rollins for pointing out this essay to me.

⁵ *Brecht on Theater*, p. 36.

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁰ Brecht, *Galileo* (1940) (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1981), p. 84.

¹¹ *Brecht on Theater*, p. 42.

