

The Past Recaptured

Russell Ferguson

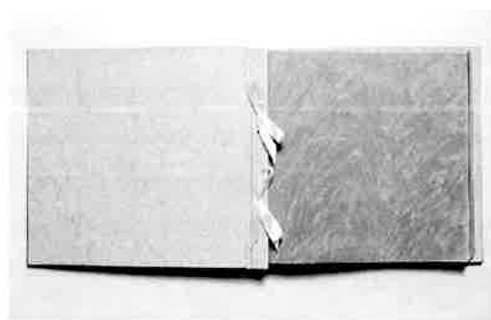
One of the most important things that Felix Gonzalez-Torres accomplishes in his work is the clearing of a meaningful space in the present for memories of the past. He shapes memories — his and ours — into works of art that offer not only the pleasures and consolations of reflection, but also the possibility of transforming the present. He uses individual memory as a tool to counter the artificial separation of the ‘personal’ and the ‘public,’ a distinction that works in practice to delegitimize whole categories of lived experience. And he uses it to work against the processes of suppression and exclusion through which the powerful write the story of the past. Gonzalez-Torres recognizes memory as fragmented and uncontrollable, and that these qualities in no way diminish its power. On the contrary, the most intimately personal and unstructured series of recollections has within it the capacity to disrupt apparently much more powerful public histories, and to bring forth alternatives. In looking back, we find the resources to change the present, and thus to help create the future.

As Gonzalez-Torres has said, “We have an *explosion* of information, but an *implosion* of meaning.”¹ In Walter Benjamin’s terms,

The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience. In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand.²

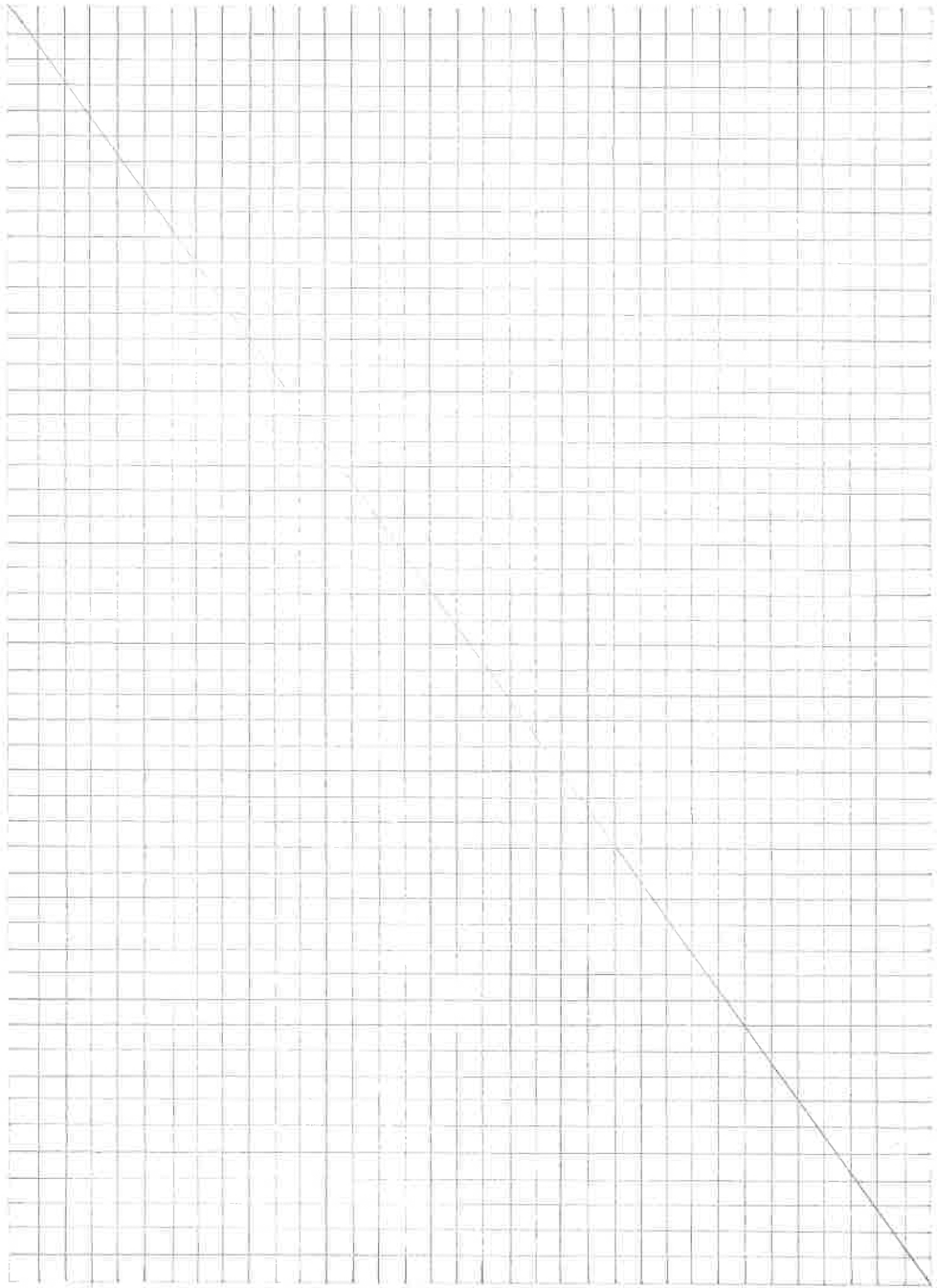
Throughout Gonzalez-Torres's work it is possible to see his struggle with the information explosion, and his attempts to reshape this huge mass of material through its relationship with his own lived experience. He seeks, that is, to leave the mark of his hand on it, and thus to convert it from information into story; to give information meaning, and to rescue it from atrophy.

A recent work by Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Album)* (1992) is simply a photo album. Purchase of this piece is, however, only a step towards its completion, because it is incumbent on the owner to continue the process by filling the album with his or her own photographs. While the album form does suggest a kind of narrative closure, the narrative will be different in each version of the work. It also remains open to revision at any time, just as the subjects of Gonzalez-Torres's date line portraits remain free to add to or delete from the list that provisionally represents them. *Untitled (Album)*



Untitled (Album), 1992

expresses in the most direct way two themes central to Gonzalez-Torres's art: the importance of personal memory, and the invitation to the work's viewers to participate in the construction of its meaning.



The relatively little that we really remember of our lives is only the visible summit of an iceberg of forgotten feelings and events. Here and there jagged peaks break through a surface that continues to freeze over. Gonzalez-Torres is constantly aware of this structuring absence. Even the form of his titles — always *Untitled*, followed by a parenthetical (and thus conditional) identifier — acknowledges that we are offered not an autonomous object complete in itself, but only a fragment taken from a life that continues outside our temporary relationship with it as a viewer, a life that cannot be separated from the context in which it is lived, and that will always spill over any boundaries we might try to draw around it. All the work is therefore in a sense one work, *Untitled*, a work that can never be complete. By constantly moving back and forth, pausing at different points of remembered experience, Gonzalez-Torres avoids the sentimentality that could so easily accumulate around a more directly autobiographical project. He offers instead a constantly changing series of potential readings, always surrounded by a wide open space which the viewer is invited to fill. The space is open not just because memory is fragmented, but because it, like the work itself, has a social context. We are challenged to complete the work by making the commitment of our own memories.

This intimate invitation to the viewer profoundly distinguishes Gonzalez-Torres's work from the Minimalism to which the simplicity and regularity of its form has sometimes suggested comparison. While Minimalism does indeed require the presence of a viewer to articulate itself as art — hence Michael Fried's well-known hostility to the style on the grounds of its "theatricality"³ — the viewer of Minimalism is accepted only somewhat grudgingly, his or her role limited to that of witness to the art object's insistent claims to autonomy and anti-referentiality. Susan Sontag, in the context of her analysis of a much broader range of art and literature, has expressed the salient qualities of such intransigent work:

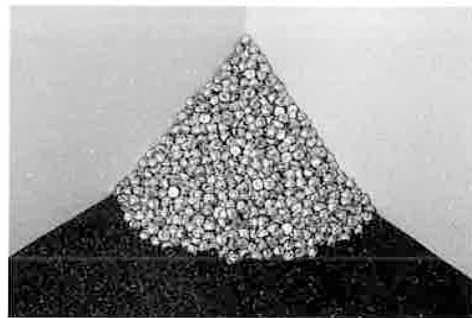
Silence is a metaphor for a cleansed, non-interfering vision, appropriate to artworks that are unresponsive before being seen, unviolable

in their essential integrity by human scrutiny. The spectator would approach art as he does a landscape. A landscape doesn't demand from the spectator his "understanding," his imputations of significance, his anxieties and sympathies; it demands, rather, his absence, it asks that he not add anything to *it*.⁴

Austere and reticent as Gonzalez-Torres's work can sometimes appear, its intent, and its effects, are quite different from the aesthetic articulated by Sontag. Gonzalez-Torres's art never *demand*s, but if it asks for anything, it is precisely the "anxieties and sympathies" of the viewer. To the extent that it deals with absence — which it does — it is an absence made up of specific losses, an absence filled with feeling. Gonzalez-Torres's decision to work with the formal vocabulary of Minimalism represents a quite conscious desire to weaken the rhetoric of power which has always surrounded that work by recasting its forms as vulnerable and personal. This is work that welcomes the viewer, not as a spectator, but as a collaborator. Rather than asking that you not add anything to the work, Gonzalez-Torres — partly by leaving so much unspoken — creates a situation in which to see the work fully you *must* add something to it: from yourself, from your own history.

This experience of reciprocal participation is heightened by the fact that in many of the pieces, the viewer can literally take part of them away. The work is thus constantly in transition, shrinking as the audience removes sheets of paper or pieces of candy, growing again as the stacks and heaps are replenished. The hard and unyielding surface of Minimalism becomes an open structure that depends upon an experience of generosity and mutual exchange.

Picking up and eating a piece of chocolate from Gonzalez-



Untitled (A Corner of Baci), 1990

Torres's *Untitled (A Corner of Baci)* (1990) establishes the intimacy of this exchange. Can you get closer to a work of art than putting it into your mouth? At the same time, this particular action establishes the centrality of memory in Gonzalez-Torres's work by restaging its most celebrated recrudescence: the scene in which the narrator of Proust's *Swann's Way* tastes a piece of madeleine dipped in tea:

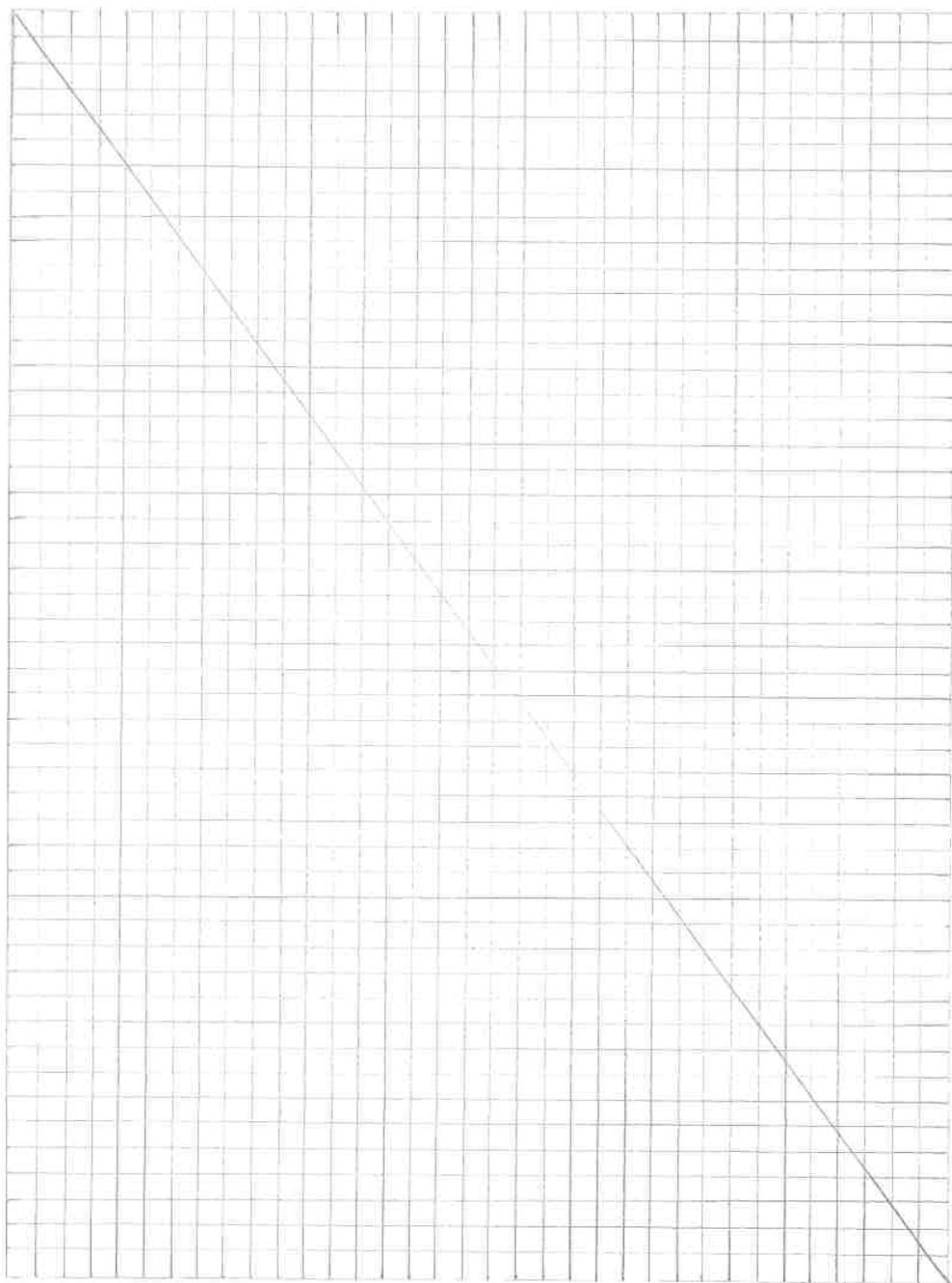
No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory — this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself.⁵

The subject here, as it is in so much of Gonzalez-Torres's work, is the memory of happiness. And this passage also evokes some of the multiple aspects of memory that Gonzalez-Torres puts into play in his work, beginning with its pure *pleasure*. Gonzalez-Torres is not interested in an art that would deny pleasure; he is not suspicious of beauty, elegance, or even



Untitled (Orpheus, Twice), 1991

sweetness. This last quality is made literal in the many pieces in which he has used chocolate or other candy as his medium. Most adults have become accustomed to thinking of candy as a guilty pleasure, to be indulged sparingly, but Gonzalez-Torres offers us shiny, guilt-free heaps



of it, calling up childhood fantasies from before we learned to impose limits to our pleasure.

Pleasure here is closely related to the *physicality* of memory: the “shudder” that runs through the body of Proust’s narrator is the physical manifestation of memory in the body. For Gonzalez-Torres, the body is always present in the work, whether it is in the specific weight of candy in *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), the weight, that is, of his lover’s body; or in the absence of one body in the elegiac *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* (1991), in which the viewer can see his or her body reflected in a full-length mirror, only to become aware of the empty space reflected in a second mirror hanging alongside the first. In this work, Gonzalez-Torres explicitly calls upon the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, in which Orpheus, the musician, must journey to the land of the dead to recover his lover, and who is there prohibited from looking back, a prohibition that he feels compelled to break. Even as Gonzalez-Torres implicitly positions himself here as Orpheus, the artist who cannot help but look backward, and who can no longer touch through the mirror’s glassy barrier, the title suggests that he is inviting someone else to join him; the second mirror can remain hauntingly empty, or it could perhaps be filled. The piece draws on the myth’s story of loss, but also disrupts it by invoking a longing for a couple who might be able to look behind them without each losing the other. It holds out the hope of intimacy.

If *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* acknowledges that the look backward carries risks as well as rewards, it also recognizes the power of memory, its ability to reach beyond the disasters of the present, including even the shortness of life itself. Memory offers a path back to the other side of the line between life and death: it is all that remains after the disappearance of the body.

Proust explicitly links the surge of memory to the experience of *love*. For Gonzalez-Torres, too, the backwards look, as it also was for Orpheus, is a loving look. Like an enraptured lover who sits in a reverie, conjuring up image after image of the loved one, small gestures or turns of phrase, Gonzalez-

Torres sifts through his own experiences in search of the moments that separate themselves from the rest. In *Untitled (Still Life)* (1989), those were “Red Canoe 1987 Paris Blue Flowers 1984 Harry the Dog 1983 Blue Lake 1986 Interferon 1989 Ross 1983.”

Does that list constitute the ‘essence’ of a person, of a relationship? It cannot, and Gonzalez-Torres does not make such a claim. There is ultimately no essence, just an endless series of different glimpses of an achronological past that will not remain fixed. For Gonzalez-Torres (as for Proust), memory and identity are both always refracted through other people, through friends, lovers, and strangers as well as through newspaper articles, gossip, and political events. All become part of the intimate web spun between the artist, the viewer, and the world.

The fragility of such a relationship contributes to Gonzalez-Torres’s frustration with expectations that as a gay man, or as a Cuban-American, he should be producing work that is more assertive on behalf of those identities. He insists on the right to complexity, the right to a sense of identity that goes beyond rigid categories.

The text that ran along the bottom of Gonzalez-Torres’s billboard commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion (*Untitled*, 1989) is an example of the artist at his most ‘public’: “People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969.” But does that list qualify as an official history of the long struggle for gay rights? It cannot, of course, any more than the ‘personal’ dateline in *Untitled (Still Life)* can summarize a great love. But its power as a memorial lies precisely in the spaces between these markers: it makes no attempt to be comprehensive, and it leaves most of



Untitled, 1989

the billboard blank, available space for any viewer to add his or her own memories of twenty years of struggle. And even in this quite specific memorial, Gonzalez-Torres is looking back even further, to include Oscar Wilde alongside Harvey Milk, urging his audience to mix their living memories with a longer history.

Two years later, a second billboard project in New York presented only the image of an empty, unmade bed, unaccompanied by any text. For Gonzalez-Torres both billboards are part of the same continuum. The right to a place of pleasure and comfort, of dreams and reflection, is as important as a declarative claim to recognition. The absence of an explanation can be as powerful as any text, just as the absence of a lover's body can be as meaningful as its presence. By constantly re-inscribing his own memories and experiences in his art, Gonzalez-Torres asserts a changing and multifaceted identity for himself. This process is highly specific, but profoundly inclusive. Gonzalez-Torres invites us to recognize the complexity of our own lives and our own memories. His work insists that a breeze blowing through the curtains on a summer night, or a snapshot from an almost forgotten childhood, can carry as much weight as any event recorded in official history.

¹ In Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November/December 1991): 87.

² Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 159.

³ See Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 116-47. Fried objects to the element of *duration* involved in the perception of Minimalist work, in contrast to the (for Fried) desired situation, in which "at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest." (p. 145) Duration, a consciousness of time passing, is of course far more directly at issue in Gonzalez-Torres's work than in Minimalism. As I argue here, the awareness of past time intersecting with present experience is crucial to his work.

⁴ Susan Sontag "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969), p. 16.

⁵ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Modern Library, 1928), p. 62.

