

*subversive beauty:
new modes of contestation*

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When Keats wrote the lines, “A thing of beauty is a joy forever, its loveliness increases, it will never pass into nothingness,” he attributed to beauty the subversive function of sustaining life in the face of deprivation, unrelenting pain and suffering.

In the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres beauty is also a life force, affirming the presence of intense intimacy, closeness, our capacity to know love, face death, and live with ongoing yet reconciled grief. Unlike Keats, Gonzalez-Torres insists in his work that beauty is not best expressed or contained in the enduring art object; rather in the moment of experience, of human interaction, the passion of remembrance that serves as a catalyst urging on the will to create. The art object is merely a mirror, giving a glimpse that is also a shadow of what was once real, present, concrete. It is this invitation to enter a world of shadows that his work extends.

Shadows become the location of our destiny, outlining the shape of past, present, and future possibility. Whether expressed in the enfolding blackness that serves as a background for signs of decontextualized history — seemingly random but connected events; in the photographic image of a

once inhabited but now vacant bed; or in a pattern of birds' flight among gray clouds, in Gonzalez-Torres's work there is always the insistence that elegance and ecstasy are to be found in daily life, in our habits of being, in the ways we regard one another and the world around us. It is sacrilege to reserve this beauty solely for art.

Taking the familiar, the everyday, the mundane, and removing it from the realm of domesticity, Gonzalez-Torres's work disrupts boundaries, challenges us to see and acknowledge in public space all that we have been encouraged to reveal only in private. Bringing us face to face with our emotional vulnerability, our lack of control over the body, our intense longing for nurturance (the bits of candy we are allowed to take and suck remind us of our engagement with the world of the senses), this art restores the primacy of our bond with flesh. It is about exposure and revelation. It indicts the audience. We are witnesses unable to escape the truth of what we have seen.

Jet black backgrounds provide the perfect blank screens for the projection of our individual understanding of realities named yet undefined by the printed text. When we see photographs of a billboard that reads: "People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969" we are not innocent onlookers asked to escape into a world of the artistic imaginary. Here in this moment of testimony art returns the gaze of the onlooker demanding an interrogation of our individual

subjectivity — our locations. Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events.

All the pieces by Gonzalez-Torres that make use of 'date lines' resist consumption as mere artifact by the inherent demand that audiences participate, that



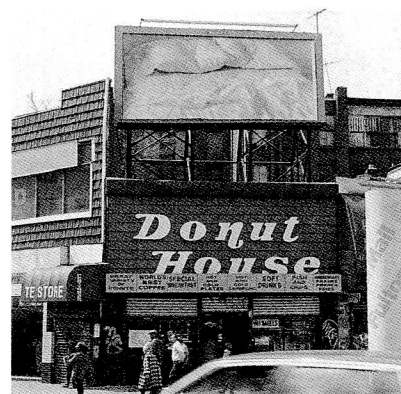
Untitled (Strange Bird), 1993

we make ‘sense’ of the world mirrored here. As counter-hegemonic art, it requires that we identify not with the artist as iconic figure or with the beautiful art object, but rather that we identify ourselves as subjects in history through our interaction with the work. This is not art that subliminally subjugates, coercively enralls or enraptures. It welcomes our presence — our participation.

The presence is made more manifest by the spaces left vacant in the work itself that leave room for us. This was most evident in the photograph of the unmade bed, rumpled, marked by the imprint of missing bodies, that loomed large on billboards throughout New York City (*Untitled*, 1991). This image taunted us with remembered connection. Where the body of love could be, where the intimacy of lying close could be seen, there was only absence. Each individual looking into that vacant space must come to terms with what is not there. Once again Gonzalez-Torres gives us art that is not meant to usurp, stand in for, or replace experience.

This art returns us to experience, to memory. What we feel and know with our senses determines what this absence means. There are many ways to “read” this image. Those who come to it with autobiographical details from Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s life can see projected here the loss of his lover, the impact of AIDS, the power and pleasure of love and loss, the anguish of grief. Yet for the masses of viewers who saw this work without such intimate details, this black-and-white image of an empty bed is a shadowy place to be entered not through empathy with the artist, but by way of one’s own relationship to loss, to absence, to leaving-taking, to remembered grief.

Inviting audiences to remember moments of closeness and separation, this image is a passage linking the particular losses we experience with a culture

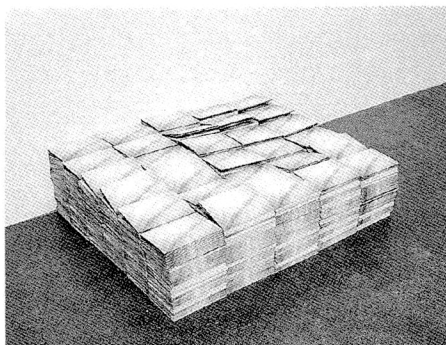


Untitled, 1991

of collective grief. All our diverse losses, unnamed sorrows, undocumented deaths can find expression as we gaze upon this bed where living bodies might lie together, leave their mark. We confront an absence that is also a trace leading back so that we can bear witness to the intimacy that was present. Although the bodies are gone, memories sustain the experience, allow the feelings these bodies generated — the warmth and passion — to be revealed, recalled, recorded.

In the stillness of this image can be heard the sounds of lives content, fulfilled. It is that aura of satisfaction that this image embraces, resurrects, bringing to life a vision of hope and possibility. The absence in this image is not meaningless death. What we see is a pedagogy of mourning that teaches us to understand that life well-lived shapes the nature of our journey, our passage, from the moment we are born to the day we die.

There are intimations of immortality in this work and the work that follows, a sense of eternity that extends from this image into the more recent images of dark clouds where solitary birds fly. Gonzalez-Torres gives us a passport with no place for irrelevant details, where we were born, in what country, dates or numbers. A passport of dark clouds, of birds in flight, moves us to a space beyond history, a space of mystery where there is no record, no documentation, nothing to recall. What is captured here is a moment of utter oneness where the experience of union, of perfect love, transcends the realm of the senses. No boundaries exist. There are no limits.



Untitled (Passport II), 1993

In the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres this call for reunion is a political moment, an act of resistance. Once we embrace his vision of the collapse of public and private, the convergence of the individual and the collective, we open ourselves to the possibility of communion and community. The beauty of that union

is celebrated in Gonzalez-Torres's work. Yet as the signs, symbols, 'date lines' tell us, that union will not come without struggle and sacrifice, without active resistance against those forces of domination that seek to shut down our agency, our will to be self-actualized. Gonzalez-Torres's art declares that to be political is to be alive — that beauty resides in moments of revolution and transformation even as his work articulates "new modes of contestation."¹ In grappling with subversive beauty, with aesthetics of loss, Gonzalez-Torres insists that our lives be that space where beauty is made manifest, where the power of human connection and interaction creates that loveliness that "will never pass into nothingness."

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