

## *The Spirit of the Gift*

*Charles Merewether*

What is given in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres?  
I remember standing in a museum in front of a stack  
of sheets each covered with the same photograph of  
the sea. At some point, a woman took a sheet from the stack, carefully rolled  
it up, placed it under her arm and moved on. People looked slightly perplexed,  
and then another went to the stack and did the same. Finally I too went over.  
Yes, an image of the sea, I said to myself, how beautiful, the wide open sea,  
as I remembered my days spent overlooking the Pacific Ocean from my  
window. I looked up, someone smiled. I returned the smile and then left with  
the gift beneath my arm.

As I walked away, I thought of how strange it was that this work would  
soon disappear, except for a label marking its absence. But it was the image  
of the sea that had more deeply impressed itself upon me. When I returned  
home, I discovered there was nothing but the sea. But in its sheer plenitude,  
its openness, I found myself as if consumed, already in another place, in  
another time. The work of Gonzalez-Torres brings to us this possibility,  
this possibility to participate in the meaning of the work. Such is its generosity.

And yet in saying this, let me first take stock of what we have in hand,

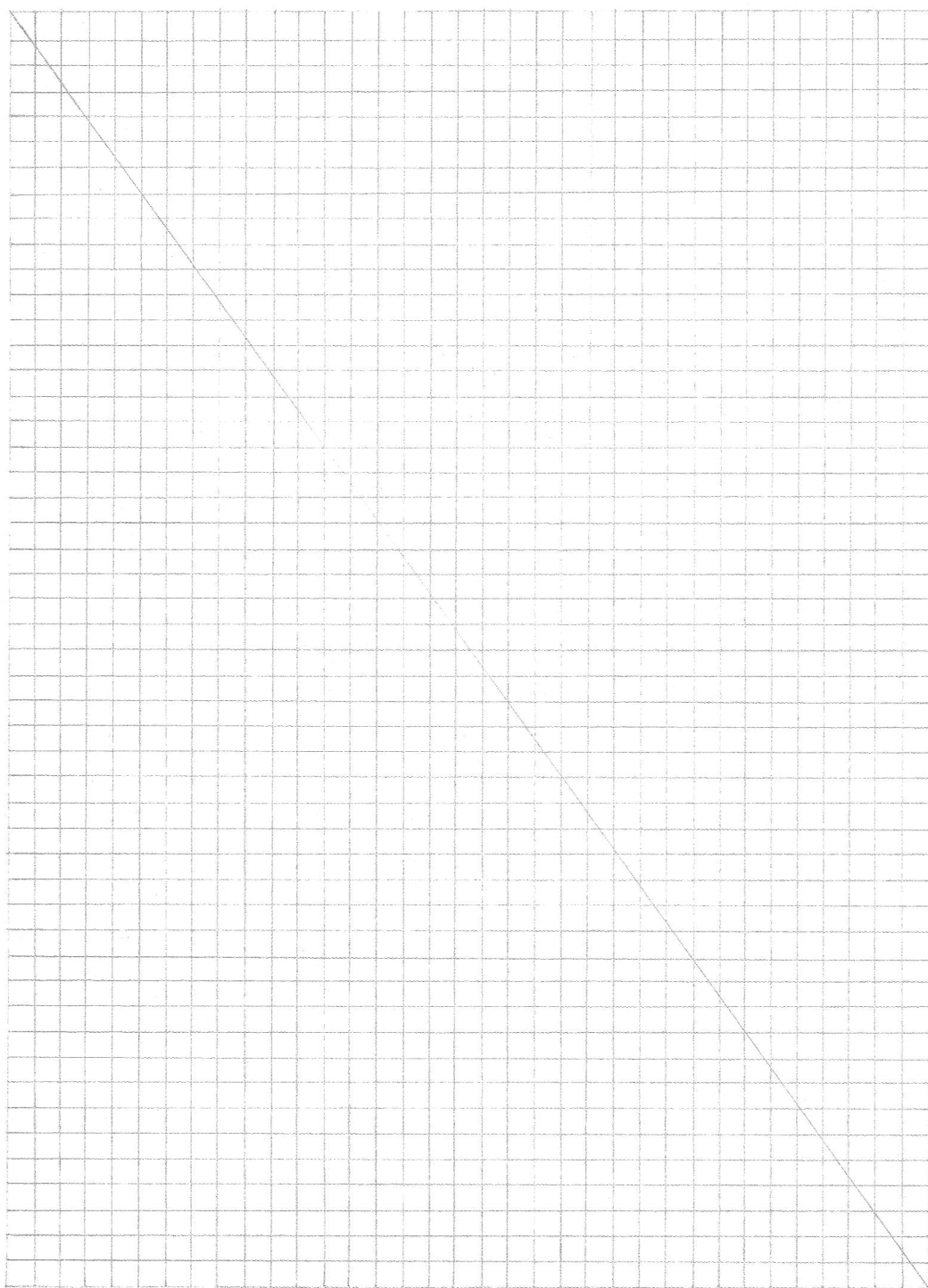
before framing it too quickly. For while what Gonzalez-Torres had made for the exhibition, and for those who took one or more, represented nothing but a simulacrum of the work of art, the sheets as given obtained a special value, a value which we as audience invest in symbolically. As such they each constituted a form of gift.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Gift-Exchange*

In 1925 Marcel Mauss published his essay “The Gift” on the pre-capitalist institution of gift-exchange.<sup>2</sup> He outlined how it informed the aesthetic, moral, economic, religious, and material dimensions of communal life in various cultures. This structure of gift exchange then provided the basis for the development of the later economic organization of capitalism. Regulated by laws of contract, interest, debt, lease, credit, etc., social exchange became governed by concepts of private property and ownership, the private sector and public sphere. This created an order governed by an economy of calculated expenditure and utilitarian exchange.

In exploring the practice of gift exchange, Mauss discovered an extraordinary instance of it in the custom of ‘potlatch’ amongst the Kwakiutl Indians of the American Northwest. Not only did the production and consumption of goods constitute the foundation of social exchange, but the giving of gifts and the obligation to return the gift engendered rivalries and struggles for power. The obligation of worthy return is imperative, an expenditure without reserve. But power is not gained by the acquisition of goods, but the power to lose. Rather than a principle of conservation, it is one of expenditure, and in the demand to not only meet but exceed the gift-giving lies the threat of destruction and war.

However, while gift-giving inaugurates a certain obligation, it is also incalculable, and always in excess of exchange as governed by laws of accounting (the balanced books) and utility. Yet if the giving of the gift is done without





reserve and there is no profit to be had, is there not a different economy at work? The gift must appear as anything but a gift; it must be forgotten. As Derrida notes: "For there to be forgetting . . . there must be a gift. The gift would also be the condition of forgetting."<sup>3</sup> Detour and deference on the one hand, and separation and abandonment on the other. This paradox characterizes Derrida's concept of 'difference,' in which Freud's distinction between the pleasure principle (the ego's instinct of self-preservation) and the death instinct (expenditure, irreducible usage of energy) govern social life.<sup>4</sup> Does not then expenditure, whether it be in the political economy of capitalism or in the libidinal economy of the unconscious, always already entail a condition of sacrifice and loss? There is a sense of giving over oneself. A gesture of generosity that experiences loss without reserve. The art of Gonzalez-Torres addresses the paradox of the gift in contemporary society, a life in which eros and thanatos are inseparable, in which one person's gift is another's poison, yet life without giving oneself is no life at all.

### *In the Presence of Others*

To give back meaning to people is a way of going public, of turning memory, autobiographical memory, into the memory of others, a sharing of experiences, one's life. Such are the large and small events of daily and collective life, of the private and public world of commemoration and ritual, binding together persons, collectivities, communities, nations.

A piecing together of memory, as if the different fragments shared might make whole again something lost. Over a period of some four years (1988-1991) Felix Gonzalez-Torres made a series of jigsaw puzzles. They were based on both personal and found photographs. Family portraits, landscapes, friends, lovers, love letters. While acknowledging the impossible restitution of the past except through its traces, the jigsaw puzzle offers the possibility of making sense of fragments of memory, of that which is forever

absent. As a work of art, this double movement shares the remains of private and intimate experiences, without the foreclosure of language. What is important is the recognition of an/other, the desire to correspond, of giving oneself to the subject of address. The time spent on the subject of one's desire, the erotics of letter writing, the folding of sheets, the slipping between the envelope, arriving.

During 1991 Gonzalez-Torres produced a series of billboards depicting an empty double bed with the imprint of its occupants left on the sheets and pillows. In the 1986 case of *Bowers versus Hardwick*, the Supreme Court ruled that the right to privacy did not cover certain sexual acts, especially homosexual acts. The bed is once again a legislated and contested space.<sup>5</sup> Between the folds Gonzalez-Torres uncovers an agency of repression, whereby taboos are not only constructed but also broken by the State. The State exercises a moral authority over the individual by determining what should be a private matter and what should be public. As Gonzalez-Torres has suggested "our intimate desires, fantasies, dreams are ruled and intercepted by the public sphere."<sup>6</sup> In these terms, he intimates that the transgression may be committed by the State as well as by the individual.

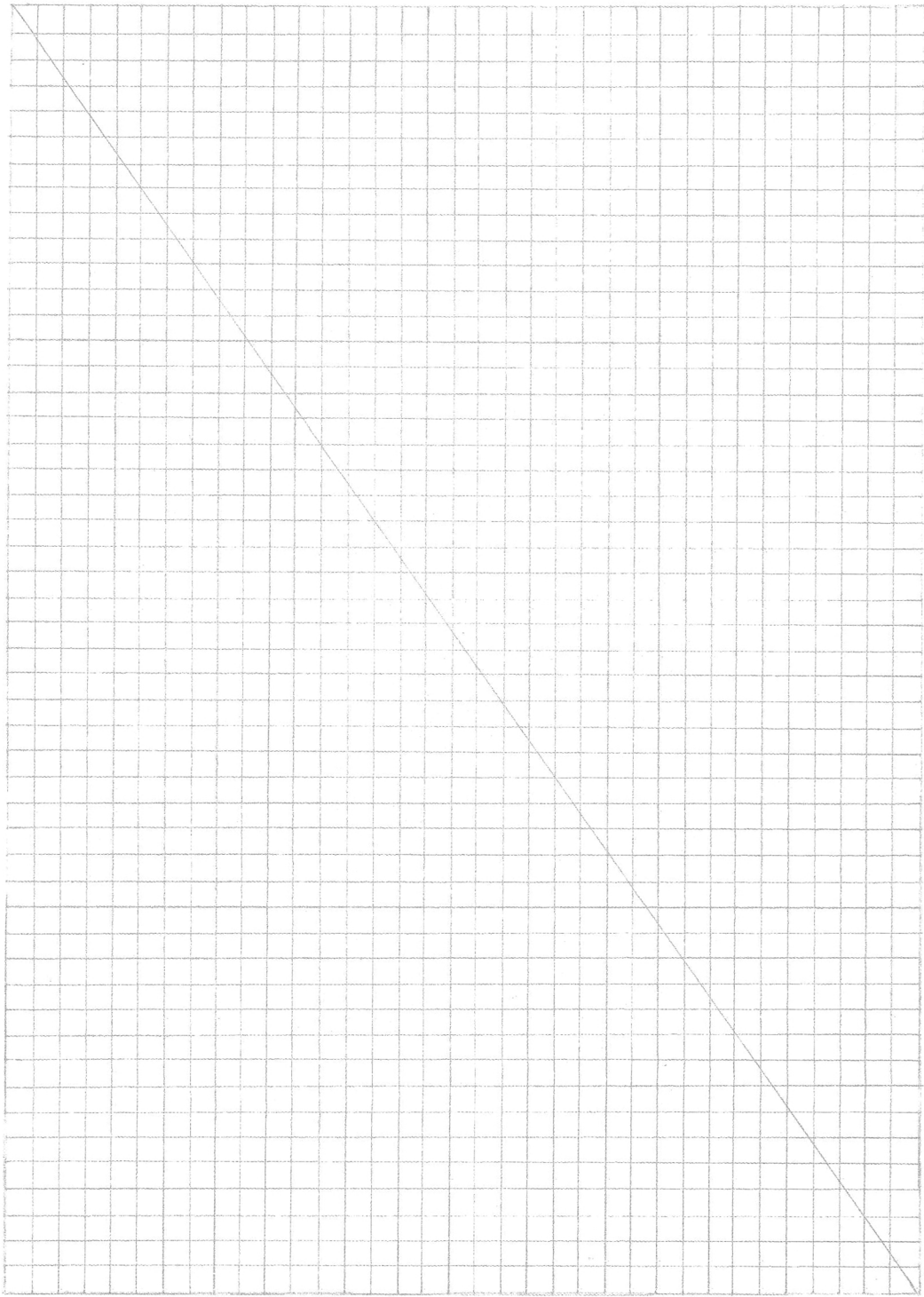
Perhaps there is another staging here, the testimonial rather than the confessional or psychoanalytic. The making known in public what has remained unacknowledged experience, such as homosexual love — that which could not be spoken of — has been the object of suppression or prohibition and therefore hidden from view, privatized. Coming out. The slipping in and out of the public sphere. What are and who draws such lines?

By going public, appropriating spaces reserved for publicity, Gonzalez-Torres also challenges the privatization of property and the market place. The image opens up the borders that exist between the private and public sphere. Placed into the public realm, his work forces us to acknowledge not only the separation between the public and private, but that such distinctions serve to valorize certain interests and delegitimize others. Gonzalez-Torres leaves the unmade bed open for any viewer to invest it with meaning. And, as in

other work, this openness which allows for both a social critique and a personal interpretation makes for a recognition that the issue affects all of us in one way or another.

Gonzalez-Torres offers us a space structured by an experience of pain and of pleasure, loss or hope, memory and forgetting. Looking at the image of an empty bed disrupts the coarse textures of the urban street, breaks the anonymity of the crowd and draws us into the folds of intimacy, making us dream of tactile places and the sensorium of the body. Like the fragments of letters, the empty bed recalls the absent lover, the site of pleasure, the shared experience, the intimacy of companionship, of being with another. This openness towards the other, a recognition of difference in the production of both meaning and value, carries within it the idea of forming a community.

In 1989 the artist, with the support of the Public Art Fund, rented a billboard on the corner of Christopher Street and Seventh Avenue South in New York. It consisted of a pure black surface with a two-line inscription running along the bottom edge: "People with Aids Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969." The text punctures the resistant opacity of the black. It disrupts the rhetoric of neutrality quintessentially evinced by the late modernism of Minimalism. By bringing Minimalism into close association with advertising, subjectivity's site of deferral is exposed. Rather than the promise of transformation through consumption, the space for our imaginary projection, the black background forms a space for mourning the loss of a loved one to sickness, to AIDS. And the text also defies this site of erasure and repression. The narrative of the script unfolds the struggle of the gay movement that has not ceased.<sup>7</sup>



## *Minimal Gestures*

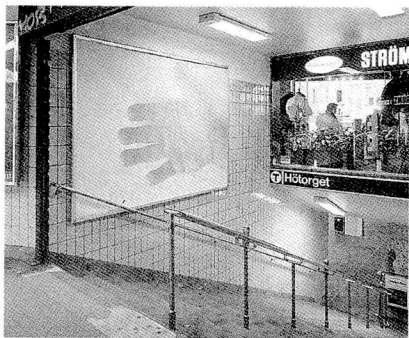
Reproducibility and repetition are not only fundamental tenets of modern capitalism and mass culture, but index the concept of seriality in Minimalism. Gonzalez-Torres repeats these gestures, but reinscribes their signification, in order to mark both the possibility of loss and the potential for renewal. As with the stacks, where each sheet taken recalls the disappearance of another, and equally the constitution of a community, so the billboard expresses the irreducible evidence of loss, but as much the capacity for hope and rejuvenation.

In a project for a new museum on the outskirts of Caracas, Gonzalez-Torres has proposed to use the same image both inside the museum and outside in the neighboring streets. Situated in a park opposite a high-security prison and in a neighborhood of local and immigrant workers, the artist will install a string of lights and a series of large billboards of an open hand.<sup>8</sup>

Such minimal gestures appear to replicate the industrial processes of capitalism in which the body is subject to fragmentation — the mind, the eye, the hand — and reification.<sup>9</sup> Workers become defined by their manual skills and their wage labor is transformed into an exchange value through consumption. In the 1960s, Minimalism reproduced the effect of this division through stressing the ‘objecthood’ of the work. Viewed as impenetrable, neutral, without relation to its viewer, the work conformed

to the alienation and anxiety of contemporary social life.

An attempt to overcome the negative estrangement of Minimalism and the recuperation of Pop art by the very forces it sought to ironize through mimicry (i.e., the commodity and mass media), came initially from conceptual artists of the 1970s and 1980s. Dis-



*Untitled (For Jeff), 1992*

solving the object, they developed a critique of language as a mode of production. Focusing on the agencies of publicity, information, and bureaucracy, they viewed their work as a strategic institutional critique of the culture industry and its systems of communication and representation. And yet in mounting such a critique they left themselves radically purified, but without a subject or a form by which to critically disengage from the alienation produced by the cultural logic of capitalism. Their construction of freedom existed by virtue of their object of critique and therefore as a form of negative dialectics. While Gonzalez-Torres's work is clearly indebted to Conceptual art, he has striven to go beyond this quality of reductive self-referentiality.

In offering a hand, Gonzalez-Torres seeks to intervene in the public arena by reinstating its subject of address. And, in the context of its location and audience, the image assumes a different specificity. Rather than an object of investment (consumption), he brings back the subject of production (the worker) through the system of publicity and circulation (the advertisement, billboard), as the viewing 'body.' The string of lights and the image of the hand become signs of festive reunion and an artwork that inaugurates the opening of a museum, a symbol of cultural exchange and community.

The image of a hand embodies the slippage that occurs between production and reproduction as an economy of representation where signifier and significance have an incommensurate relation to one another. The paradox is an economy in which the surplus value of labor produces scarcity, poverty, and inequality, without the possibility of its transformation. The promise of such a transformation would be a democracy of shared surplus between unalienated and equal subjects, a different economy of the body, the promise of a life beyond utility, nonproductive expenditure, the eroticism of the gift.<sup>10</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres works here through the concept of the gift. He reconceptualizes the "sexualization of the commodity and the commodification of sexuality" as played out by Pop art.<sup>11</sup> That is, he postulates an economy of

expenditure in which the unfulfilled promise of freedom is embodied in the very slippage between the desire to consume and consuming desire, a desire without calculation.

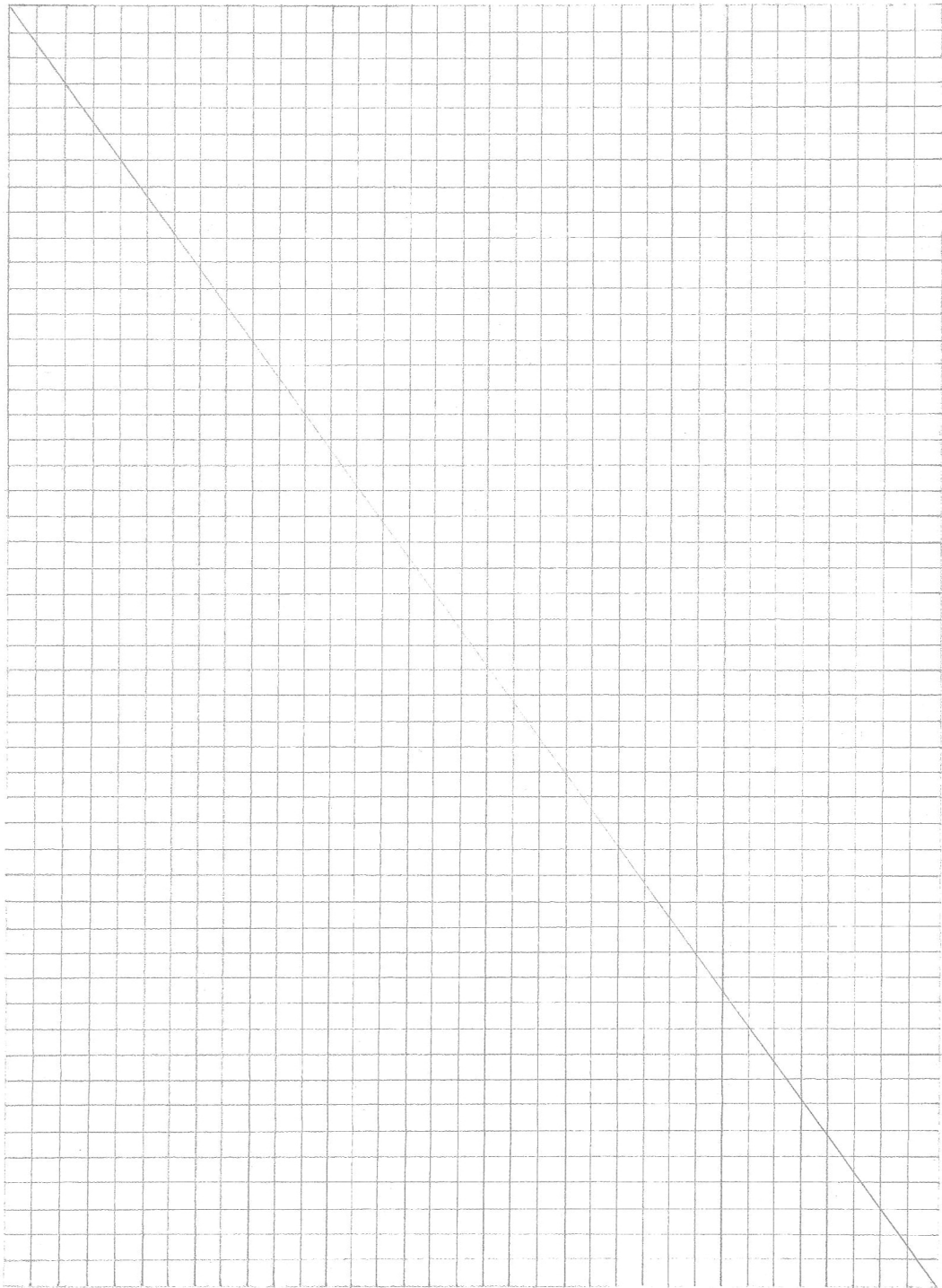
### *The Promise*

From 1990 to the present, Gonzalez-Torres has made a series of sculptures out of sweets. Laid out in mounds, they are there for the taking. Another gift, memories of childhood and the pleasure of candy. One such mound was called *Untitled (USA Today)* (1991), reminding us of the headline news with its daily rush of sound bites like the rush of sugar and the promise of instant gratification, renewed each day.

In a number of “sweet” sculptures, the artist returned to the subject of the body. While one work represented the weight of his father, another was based on the body weight of the artist himself and his lover. The consumption of food not only portrays or betrays the character of someone, but also the body’s dependence on blood sugar for both its energy and dispersal. Not only an eating away of the body, but a sign of regeneration, as in the symbolic eating of Christ’s body and the miraculous giving of life.

The economy of the body can be likened to the character of the gift. As Lewis Hyde suggests in his book on the subject, “When you give a gift, there is momentum, and the weight shifts from body to body.”<sup>12</sup> But then, too, in the economy of circulation around which Gonzalez-Torres produces his work, so does the work of art as art. Through consumption and reproduction, it undergoes permutation and change without reserve. Subject to constant circulation it remains always in excess of itself, slipping between a thing in itself and that for which it stands.

In *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991), the artist laid out in a rectangular form 1,000 pounds of glittering silver-wrapped candies. The title suggests not only the possibility of unqualified gratification, but equally the bittersweet





potential of duplicity and disappointment. Placebo can be defined also as “honeyed words . . . voice of the charmer, mouth-honor, lip-homage.”<sup>13</sup> A gift indeed, but like the ‘pharmakon,’ always with the possibility of being other than what it appears, not a remedy, but rather a poison. In such work, Gonzalez-Torres addresses not only the commodification of sweets as the object of erotic investment, but the poignant irony of consuming desire.

### *Parenthetically*

The operation of the parenthetical in the titles not only parodies the rhetorical masking of language in the public sphere, but discloses that which is suppressed. This doubling of title opens the boundaries of the public and private in order to reveal the presence of another scene, a secret filiation. It calls attention to an alternative reading, to the expression of one’s own subjectivity and the right to difference.

### *The Line of Fortune*

From 1988 on, Gonzalez-Torres has composed a series of drawings made of a single line running across a graph. In the earlier work the line ran upwards, and in the more recent down, as if charting the rise and fall of stocks, or sales of one commodity or another. The surplus value of labor, Marx might have called it, but the artist has chosen a different name, “Bloodwork.” The wavering line is not the abstract sign of market value, but of a different economy of fortune. By appropriating a minimalism of style, Gonzalez-Torres was reproducing the clinical character of medical charts of the body’s life. This was an economy of the body, with its line running upwards to indicate a healthy recovery, and down to mark its decline. And in reading such charts daily, so too the audience became its subject whose feeling of hope, of unho-

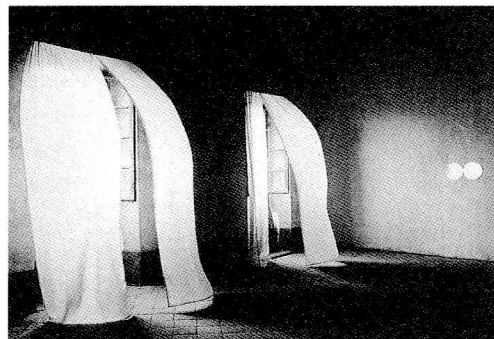
peable hope, rises and falls. Contemplation becomes affective, and knowledge is gained through the sensuousness of thought. I am reminded of Malevich's Suprematist drawings of 1915, straight lines soaring, seeking the liberated freedom of the sky, the space of the sacred, of transcendence from the earth-bound line of horizontality, the place of birth and death.

### *One to Another*

Two strings of lights falling together to the floor in the corner faintly illuminate the two walls before us, each covered by an image of a bird flying across the sky. And in the opposite corner where they meet, darkness.

There was little or nothing else in the gallery. That was the point, nowhere to turn, except perhaps the cheerful laughter of those working behind the desk. Different expenditures, we might say, a kind of forgetting. An image of the sky, the dream of flying free, a bird soaring, free falling, drifting, solitary. And the falling lights, *Untitled (A Couple)* (1993), illuminating darkness. They are frail in their singularity, but in falling to the ground they intertwine, gathering together in a shock of illumination as if, in union, they provide light, an optimism, a source of strength and celebration.<sup>14</sup> The lights become a symbol for the erotic expenditure of energy without measure.

Days of giving gifts, of watching with delight how the gift opens the desire of the beloved. Gestures of generosity, of spirit, a kind of expenditure, a risky business perhaps, because it is always an unconditional loss. The work of art, like the giving of the gift, always requires an/other, its cir-



*Untitled (Blue Curtains), 1991*

culcation demands an economy of sharing, a partition, a partner, and yet is always a departure, always a parting, a loss. Yet in marking the advent of giving as an openness towards the other, as a parting, it also serves to signal change. As in other work, the openness represents a refusal to foreclose meaning, and always the appeal for hope and desire for renewal.

Since 1991 Gonzalez-Torres has exhibited as work curtains installed against a window. As before there is a singularity of gesture, a minimum of signs. He leaves us with an image that assumes life through the movement of its flowing rhythms, billowing out and falling to rest, still, as if pausing before opening up again to the wind passing through. In *Untitled (For Ross)* (1989-92), the light radiates through the translucent blue curtains, shimmering across the floor to create an image of the sea moving before our gaze. A reflection, nothing more, and yet in filling the space, the curtains become a sensorial body; they offer themselves as in the giving of oneself to another.

Shortly after I began to write this essay, my friend Ian Burn died tragically while saving the life of a member of his family. I dedicate it to him.

My thanks go to Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Andrea Rosen for their generous and critical reading of an earlier draft and to the staff of Andrea Rosen Gallery for their assistance with materials and unending demands on their time.

<sup>1</sup> The sheets of Gonzalez-Torres constitute neither a part of the work nor a work of art in and of itself, except in kind. Rather the work exists first and foremost as a concept and only when in its complete and original form. And if the stack is already owned when exhibited, that which is shown represents a simulacrum of the original work.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (1925) (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Difference," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 18-19.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Umland, "Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres" (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November/December 1991): 86.

<sup>7</sup> See David Deitcher, "How Do You Memorialize a Movement That Isn't Dead?" *The Village Voice* (June 27, 1989): 93.

<sup>8</sup> The exhibition “Cuarta pared,” curated by Jesus Fuenmayor, will inaugurate El Museo del Oeste in March 1994.

<sup>9</sup> See the critique of Minimalism by Anna C. Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power,” *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 5 (January 1990): 44-63.

<sup>10</sup> These questions are explored in Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Andy Warhol’s One-Dimensional Art: 1956-1966,” in *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1989), p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Roget’s Thesaurus of Words and Phrases* (New York: Perigee Books, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> At the same time that this work was shown in the front room of Andrea Rosen Gallery, the series *Untitled (Bloodwork—Steady Decline)* (1993) was shown in the back. See also the sensitive review of the exhibition by Terry R. Myers in *Lapiz* (Summer 1993), p.84.