

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Jigsaw Puzzles

DEBORAH CULLEN

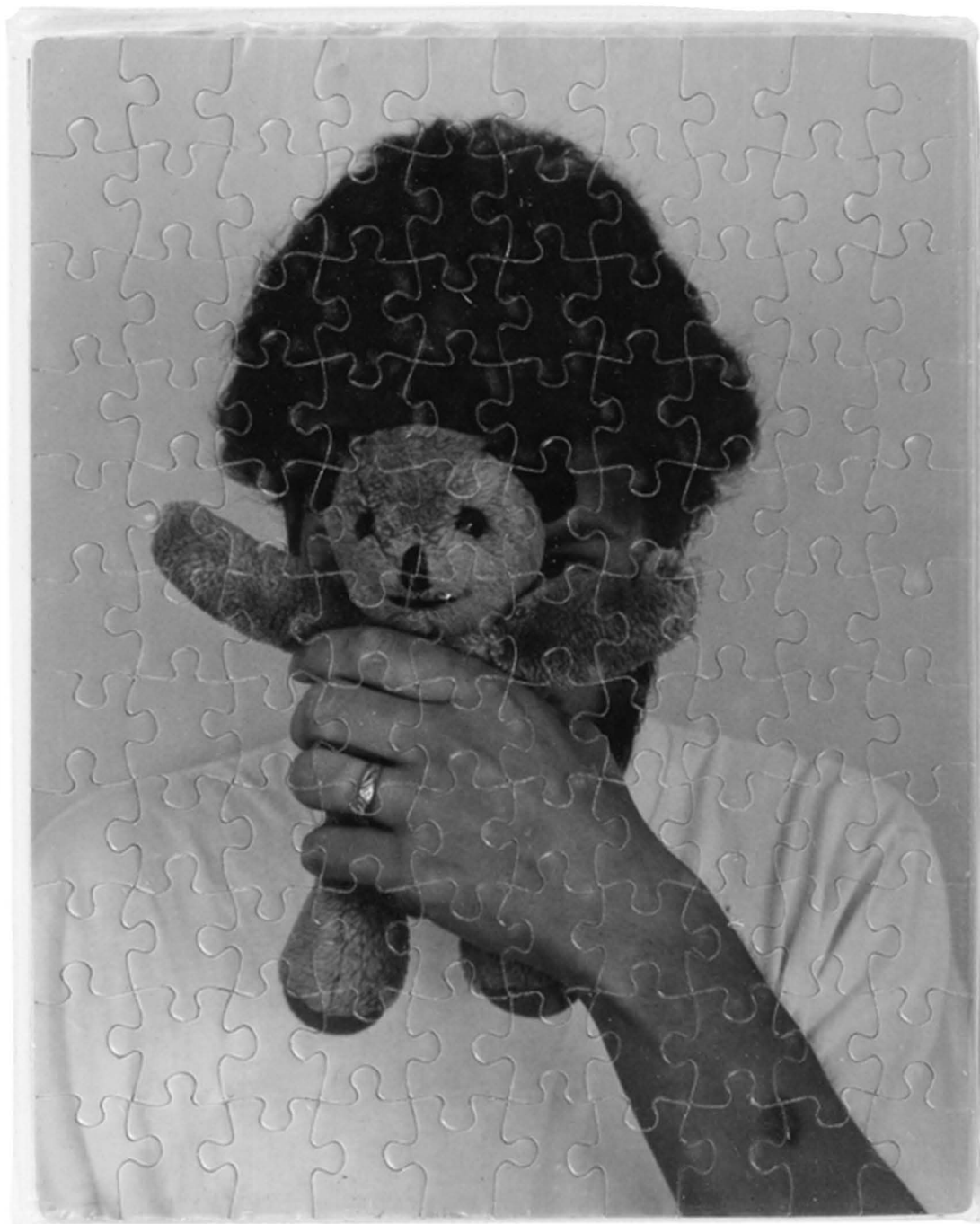
One of the most important things that Felix Gonzalez-Torres accomplishes in his work is the clearing of a meaningful space in the present for memories of the past... He uses individual memory as a tool to counter the artificial separation of the 'personal' and the 'public,' a distinction that works in practice to delegitimize whole categories of lived experience. And he uses it to work against the process of suppression and exclusion through which the powerful write the story of the past.

—Russell Ferguson, 'The Past Recaptured,'
in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*

Between 1987 and 1992, Felix Gonzalez-Torres created approximately fifty-six jigsaw puzzles. This is an important series in his body of works, and yet in the volumes of writing on his tragically short but creative life, it is one of the least discussed forms.¹ W. G. Sebald's practice is extremely resonant with Gonzalez-Torres' work.² In the puzzles, particularly, many concerns of both the artist and author converge: the photograph as fragment of reality versus its pretension of plentitude; the fluidity between the public and private realms; and the nexus between memory, history, loss, and photography.

In his jigsaw puzzles, Gonzalez-Torres utilized photographic images (primarily black or brown and white, although a select few contain blue or some color) affixed to cardboard, which were commercially cut into standard jigsaw puzzles, and then encased in plastic Ziploc-style baggies. In exhibition, they are held delicately to the wall by four small map pins. Their iconography ranges from intimate snapshots to appropriated mass-media reproductions of both newsworthy and trivial images. The personal is presented alongside snatches from daily papers of record, leveling individual memory of private moments with historical events and quirky mass-media obsessions. Small pieces—generally between 7.5 x 9.5 and 10.5 x 13.5 inches—the puzzles demand close viewing. Yet their blurry lack of detail forecloses any sense of satisfaction. What appears realistic at first glance becomes abstract, pixilated splotches as the viewer draws near. Large-grained and poor quality, they only become more difficult to read at close range.

The jigsaw puzzles deem memory a fragile construction, fragmentary and piecemeal, and frozen at particular instants recalled through the photographs. They allude to the imminent potential of the past's disintegration. Their shattered surfaces grip together in



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled"
(Shield), 1990. C-print jigsaw puzzle
in plastic bag, 7.5 x 9.5 inches,
edition of 3, 1 A.P. © The Felix
Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York.

tenuous reconstruction; like sugar cubes, they threaten to crumble and fall to the bottom of the bag in an illegible jumble in shades. The puzzles tantalize, offering the possibility of making sense of the fragments of memory. Across the series, however, the selected images of random private and popular views defer any notion of a coherent history or whole of either personal or public record.

Sebald's major fictions are similarly illustrated with photographs drawn from various resources including his own archives and found, public images. Just like Gonzalez-Torres, the author discursively and mnemonically utilizes both private and appropriated photographic images. The visual elements embedded within his narratives are remarkable for his kindred combination of disparate and even disjunctive images to locate the personal against the grain of an overarching record of the past. Sebald's novels, indeed, have been seen as attempts to 'ghostwrite' silenced and suppressed voices and histories.

In their severing of the image from any informational label, Gonzalez-Torres and Sebald are analogous. Gonzalez-Torres' titles are given as 'Untitled,' with an occasional clue in parenthesis beyond. Considering the sources of the jigsaw puzzle works, he very deliberately severs the image from the text of which it was surely drawn—the handwritten place and date of the photo album or the explanatory or identificatory caption from a newspaper page. Likewise, Sebald does not caption his illustrations. Even further, some of Gonzalez-Torres' puzzles are simply images of words, cropped from their context. These include fragments of typed or handwritten letters to or from the artist, as well as carved or printed words on books, gravestones, monuments, and the like. This interest played out later on in Gonzalez-Torres' important photographic series, 'Untitled' (Natural History), 1990. This suite of thirteen photographs depicts the inscriptions on the façade of New York's American Museum of Natural History, memorializing Teddy Roosevelt. The words, such as 'patriot' and 'naturalist,' are represented as they can be seen today: the wall's surface streaked and stained, some with benches placed beneath, litter and leaves scattered on the patio below. The words, which indicate authority and monumentality, are, in these untitled photographs, signifiers of an unknown, historically distant figure.

Gonzalez-Torres' well-known portraits (1987–1994), in fact, were a series in which he used the word as image. Beneath a blank black or white space that serves as a placeholder for an image, the portraits consist of captions which run in a fragmented, stream-of-consciousness style, generally along the bottom of the sheet or space. Words are interspersed with dates, offering a chronology that again combines mainstream historical flash points alongside very personal references. They do not describe but rather conjure, through a parsimonious but allusive snapshot of data. In these works, too, inclusion and exclusion are at play.

Perhaps the most directly kindred work linking W.G. Sebald to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' photographic-artistic practice is an actual book that the artist illustrated in 1990, for New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, entitled *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*.³ For this project, the artist spread uncaptioned images, created by himself as well as by other artists, throughout the book, not always in clear relationship to the texts at hand. The images are not identified on their respective pages, nor numbered with figure or illustration numbers. There is a complete 'Illustrations'

page, however, identifying the works at the back of the book. As Russell Ferguson has pointed out, part of this project was ‘related directly to the book’s own potential authority.’⁴ Gonzalez-Torres and Sebald could both be said to be concerned with the authority of a singular text or image in the writing of history.

Finally, while Gonzalez-Torres’ work is not directly autobiographical, there is a certain nostalgia to his endeavor which also links his project to the author’s, particularly Sebald’s ruminations on his mother’s image and other moments of loss. Latent subtexts concerning migration, departure, displacement, and nomadism are pervasive in Gonzalez-Torres’ work as a Cuban exile first in Puerto Rico and later in the U.S. Gonzalez-Torres produced occasional works that were, in a sense, mere receptacles to be filled over time with mementos, by either the artist or the collector.⁵ The idea of gathering tokens which culminate and resonate, are sifted through and handled, was later developed into his well-known ‘souvenir’ works, such as the poster stacks and the candy spills, which the viewer is invited to carry off. In this regard, one has only to imagine Sebald rummaging through his collections of images.

These observations have been inspired by my organization of the exhibition, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Early Impressions*, curated by Elvis Fuentes, at El Museo del Barrio, New York (Feb. 24–May 21, 2006).

1 Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born on November 26, 1957 in Güaimaro, Cuba. In January 1970, he left Cuba for Madrid, Spain, where he spent three months before moving to Puerto Rico, where he lived until 1979. At that time, he received a fellowship to study at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, where he received his BFA in 1983. In 1981 and 1983, he attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. In 1987 he received his MFA from the International Center for Photography, New York. Gonzalez-Torres was part of the artists’ collective Group Material from 1987 to 1991; he moved to Los Angeles in 1990 to teach at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia. From 1988 on, his work was exhibited internationally. In 1995, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, organized a traveling retrospective. Gonzalez-Torres died in Miami on January 9, 1996 of AIDS; he is considered one of the most influential contemporary artists.

2 W.G. Sebald (also known as ‘Max’) was born in Bavaria, Germany in 1944 and died in England in 2001, in an untimely car accident. A professor of European literature, a student of history, critic and translator, Sebald emerged as an internationally recognized fiction writer in the mid-1990s. His three major works are *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), and *Austerlitz* (2001).

3 Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, images selected by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge: MIT, 1990).

4 Russell Ferguson, ‘Authority Figure,’ *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York: Steidl Publishers, 2006). I am grateful to Michelle Reyes, Director of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, for providing me with a pre-press version of this paper. Ferguson eloquently analyzes Gonzalez-Torres’ inclusion of the Teddy Roosevelt photographs in this project.

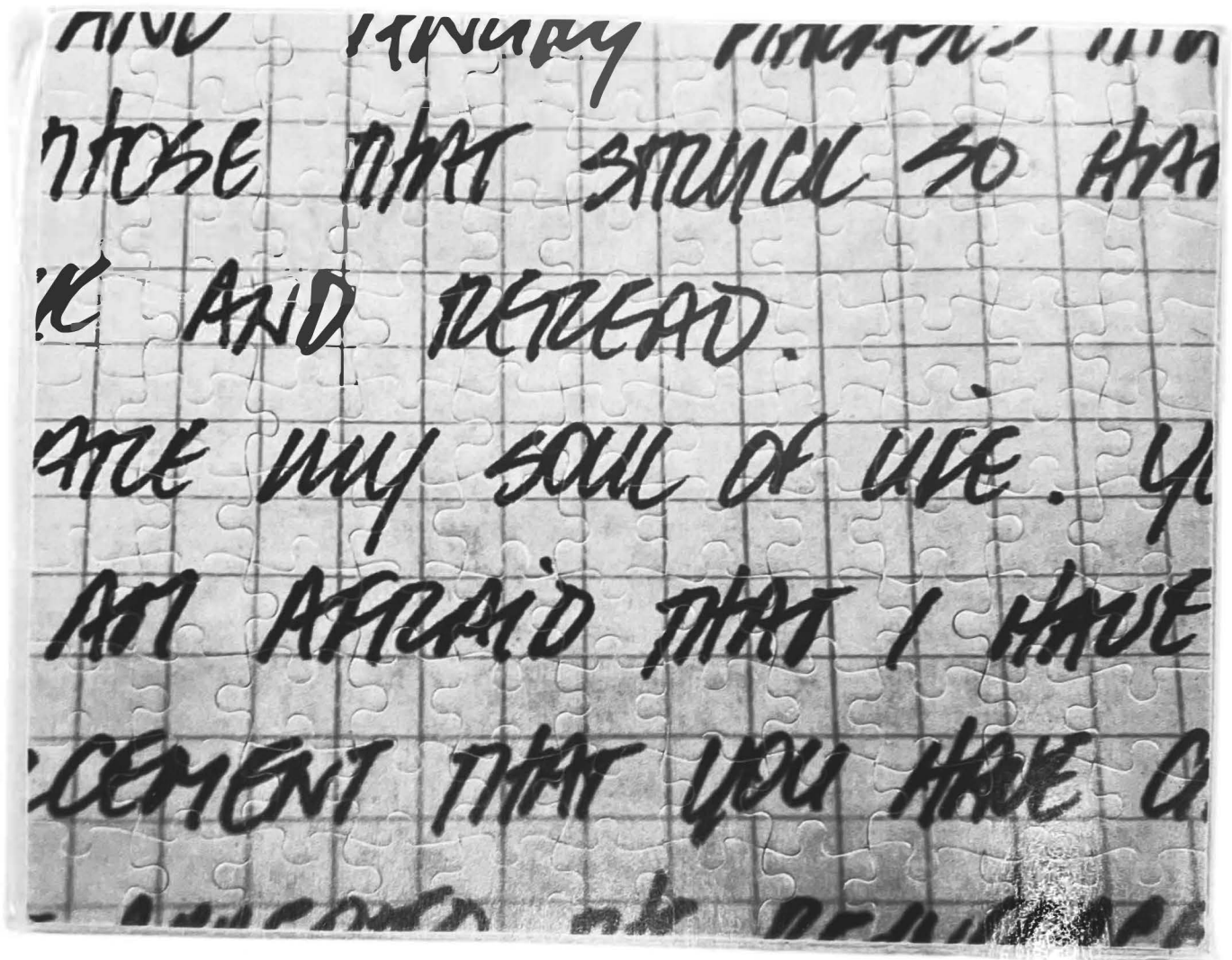
5 These would include a metal first-aid kit (1990) of papers, photos, and a small alarm clock; a wooden box (1991), much like an office filing tray, with papers, photographs, magazines, postcards, and other small objects; and an editioned album (1992) created to hold photographs.



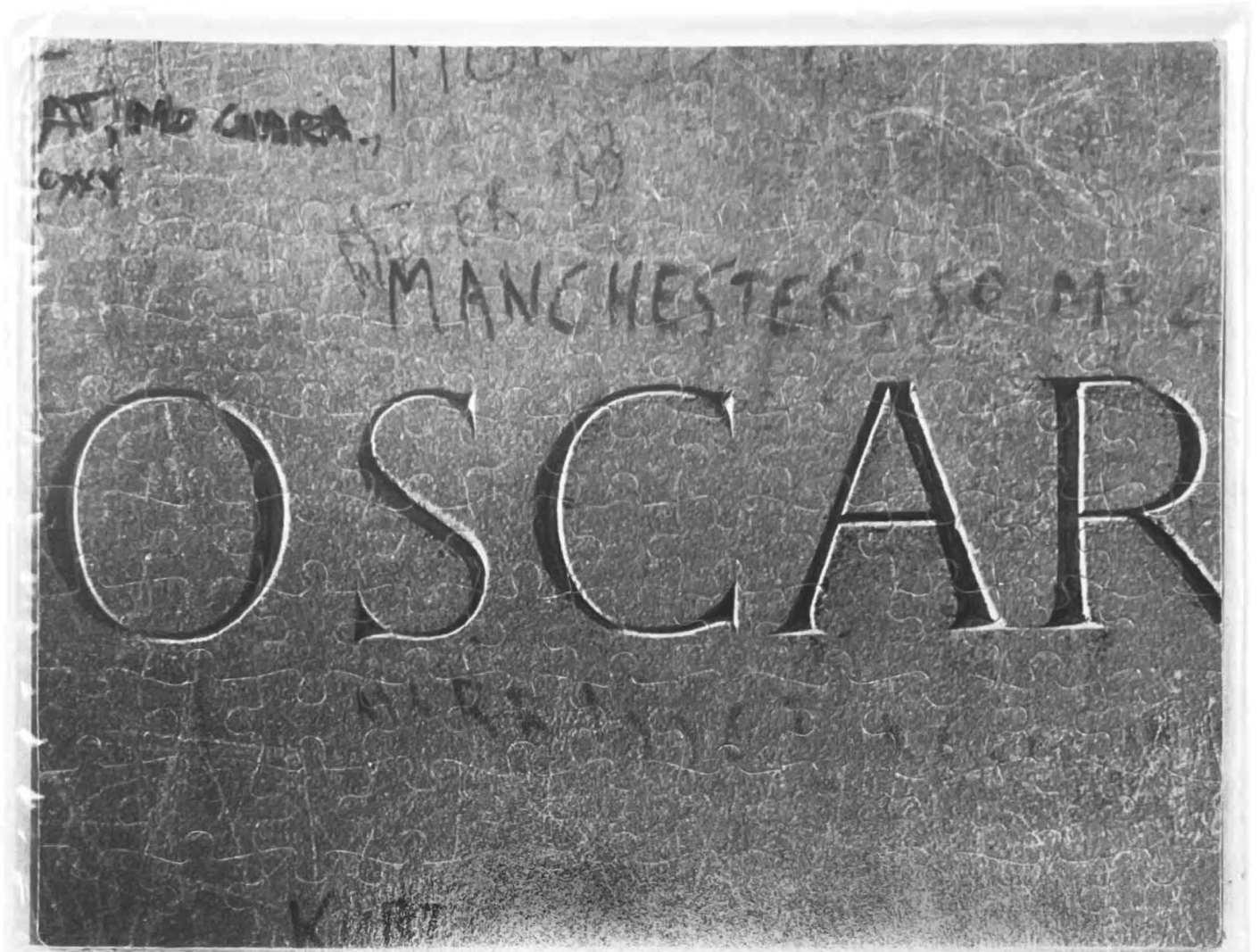
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled"
(Self Portrait with Sister), 1988.
C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag,
7.5 x 9.5 inches, edition of 3, 1 A.P.
© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Foundation. Courtesy Andrea Rosen
Gallery, New York.



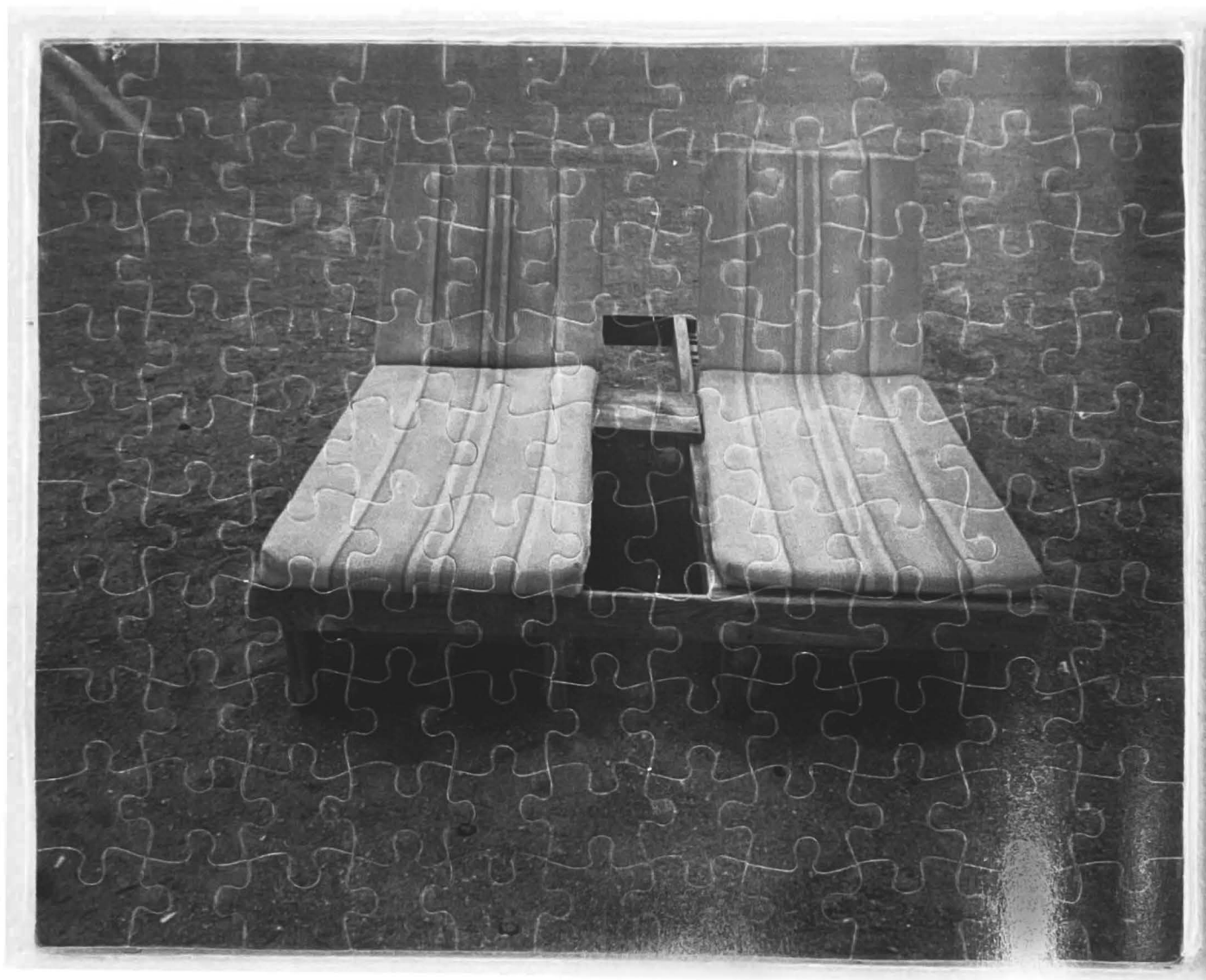
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled",
1987, C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic
bag, 8 x 10 inches, edition of 3,
1 A.P. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres
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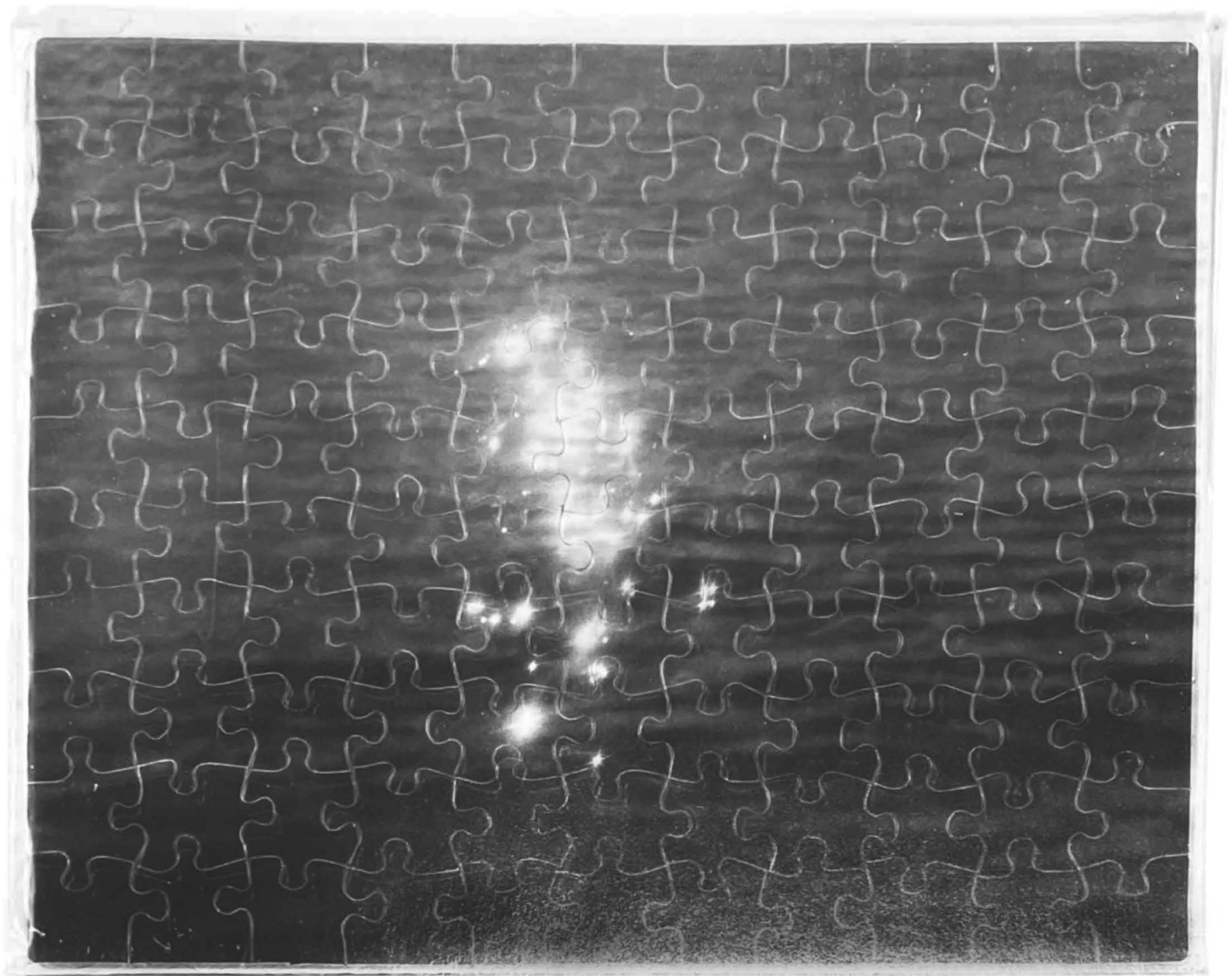
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled"
My Soul of Life, 1991. C-print jigsaw
puzzle in plastic bag, 7.5 x 9.5
inches, edition of 3, 1 A.P. © The Felix
Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled"
(Oscar Wilde's Tombstone), 1989.
C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag,
75 x 9.5 inches, edition of 3, 1 A.P.
© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Foundation. Courtesy Andrea Rosen
Gallery, New York.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled",
1991. C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic
bag, 7.5 x 9.5 inches, edition of 3,
1 A.P. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Foundation. Courtesy Andrea Rosen
Gallery, New York.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled"
(Key West), 1992. C-print jigsaw
puzzle in plastic bag, 7.5 x 9.5
inches, edition of 3, 1 A/P. © The
Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York.