

101 Spring Street
Judd Foundation
October 22 – December 18, 2021

inbetweenness

Exhibition Checklist

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

"Untitled" (Loverboy), 1989

Sheer blue fabric and hanging device

Dimensions vary with installation

Courtesy of the Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres
and the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

"Untitled", 1991–1993

Billboard

Dimensions vary with installation

Two parts

Schenkung Sammlung Hoffmann,
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and Tate

Curated by Flavin Judd

Thank you to Andrea Rosen, Andrew Kachel,
and the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Editors:

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Design:

Michael Dyer/Remake

Printing:

Linco Printing, Long Island City

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In 1993, Felix Gonzalez-Torres contributed a compelling biography to an eponymous monograph on his work.¹ While it follows some of the conventions of the form, its most distinctive feature is the way in which it telescopes between entries of a public and private nature, resulting in a biography that is simultaneously individual and seemingly general. Some excerpts:

1977 Rosa

...

1989 fall of the Berlin Wall

...

1990 silver ocean in San Francisco

...

1992 President Clinton—hope, twelve years of trickle-down economics came to an end

Gonzalez-Torres's biography closely resembles one of his "portraits"—text-based works in which locations and events of private and public significance are painted directly onto a wall. In these works, the artist disrupts our expectations of portraiture, bringing it nearer to biography while raising questions about what constitutes a life, and identity.

In a 1993 letter to Robert Vifian, for whom he made a portrait in 1993, Gonzalez-Torres wrote:

We are *not* what we think we are, but rather a compilation of texts. A compilation of histories, past, present, and future, always, always, shifting, adding, subtracting, gaining.²

Text is one of many materials in Gonzalez-Torres's work but reading and the shifting nature of textual indeterminacy are fundamental to it. In a 1991 interview with Robert Nickas, Gonzalez-Torres makes the point: "Meaning" he said, "is created once something can be related to personal experience ... [it is] always shifting in time and place."³ By association, we can assume that an individual's unique encounter with the artist's work is formed and shaped by that encounter, uniquely. In this way, the meanings of a work multiply based on the number of viewers, even the number of their encounters with it. And, relatedly, our encounter with the work is highly inflected by the parameters of our individual experience. Importantly, for Gonzales-Torres, the interplay of these parameters in the shared experience of the work involves us in its politics.

While Gonzalez-Torres believed in the veracity of private, personal meanings of each work, he also believed in the reality of multiple readings. In a letter to collector Marieluise Hessel concerning "*Untitled*" (*A Walk in the Snow*), 1993, a photograph of the imprints left by feet in the snow, Gonzalez-Torres wrote:

The description, or subtexts depicting the photographs, is one of many readings. So that is o.k. with me. But this work is also about including the viewer into a visual process that includes beauty as a form of contestation, a work that is politically charged, even illegal in our country ... This work is deceiving: it has the look of a beautiful photograph in order to attract a wide segment of the public without regard to their politics, gender, or sexual orientation and to immerse them in contemplating it and then realizing that what they are actually seeing is something else, something universal, positive, constructive. Love.⁴

What does a work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres ask of us, the viewer? Perhaps we are being asked to inhabit, for a moment, a space that is specific, and yet indeterminate or, in keeping with the title of this exhibition, a space of *inbetweenness*. This is a space where we, as participants in "the unraveling of the meaning," can entertain our own meanings and also find pleasure in allowing alternate meanings to float, in a way like the birds in flight amongst dark clouds of "*Untitled*", 1991–1993 one of two works in this exhibition.⁵

The transparent floor-length curtains of "*Untitled*" (*Loverboy*) which fill the windows that line 101 Spring Street call attention to this sense of *inbetweenness*, as well. Though curtains usually block light, the transparency of the fabric of "*Untitled*" (*Loverboy*) does not obscure as much as it colors the view. The curtains are diaphanous and sensual while

still functioning as a boundary, as in the theater where curtains separate the audience from the action. When applied to this installation, however, the conventional delineation of stage and audience becomes more difficult to fix. Which is the stage—the ground floor of 101 Spring Street, the adjacent street, or both? By utilizing the architecture of the building, with its many windows, "*Untitled*" (*Loverboy*), allows passersby to become participants in the production of meaning.

Gonzalez-Torres found pleasure in meaning's instability, saying in a 1994 interview with Hans Ulrich-Obrist, "The work is always extremely unstable. But that is one thing I enjoy very much. I enjoy that danger, that instability, that inbetweenness." Yet, crucially, he added, "If you want to relate it to a personal level, I think in that case that the work is pretty close to that real life situation that I am confronted with daily as a gay man: a way of being in which I am forced by culture and by language to always live a life of 'in-between.'"⁶

Gonzalez-Torres said, "our self is constructed through many different channels."⁷ These channels flow, converge, and circulate concurrently and unceasingly. Culture and language can be used in law and legislation to fix identity and to govern the movement and actions of our bodies: who we can be, where we can go, what can be said, what can be memorialized, and who we can love. In defiance of this conscription of bodies and behavior Gonzalez-Torres's work demonstrates an affirmation of love as counterhegemonic, with all its attendant complexities. We see this thinking carefully deployed in "*Untitled*" (*Passport*), a stack of blank white paper in endless supply. As Gonzalez-Torres wrote of this piece in a letter to Andrea Rosen:

You know, the title: (*Passport*) is very crucial and significant—a white empty blank and unscribed piece of paper, an untouched feeling, an undiscovered experience ... an empty passport for life: to inscribe it with the best, the most painful, the most banal, the most sublime, and yet to inscribe it with life, love, memories, fears, voids, and unexpected reasons for being. A simple white object against a white wall, waiting.⁸

1 Written for *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993).

2 Letter to Robert Vifian, December 3, 1994, included in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault (New York and Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 170.

3 Originally published in *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November–December 1991): 86–89; reprinted: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault, 40.

4 Letter to Marieluise Hessel, February 8, 1994, included in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault, 173.

5 From an exhibition statement written by Gonzalez-Torres for a 1988 installation of his work at The New Museum, New York; included in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault, 121. Describing the exhibition statement as an opportunity to demystify his approach he wrote, "I hope that it will guide the viewer and will allow an active participation in the unraveling of the meaning and the purpose of the work."

6 "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Interviews*, vol. 1, (Milan: Charta, 2003), 311.

7 *Ibid.*, 309.

8 Letter to Andrea Rosen, February 14, 1992, included in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault, 160.