

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,
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During the Spring of 1995, Felix Gonzalez-Torres responded to a woman who asked a question from the audience during an artist talk with curator Gary Garrels at SFMOMA. She asked if the artist's work is ever accompanied by commentary. Gonzalez-Torres responded to the query by narrating the essential functions of the certificate of authenticity that accompanies his works during their exhibiting trajectories. Politely dissatisfied with the artist's response the woman in the audience further clarified what she meant: that if the artist wasn't present in the there and then of the artist talk, she wouldn't understand a fraction of what his work meant. For her, hearing his voice and seeing his embodied presence gave her more insight into the work itself. And again she wondered if whether or not the statements he made during the artist talk provided the context needed for the work to be understood correctly. Gonzalez-Torres demurred and offered that he trusted the viewer and the viewer's intuition and emphasized his commitment to the formalism in his work, adding:

The content is just an accident I cannot escape as someone living, someone who lives in the late 20th century.¹

However, this response warrants a consideration.

It is an ambivalent sensation to be tasked with the trust of any artist, living or not, to co-author meaning onto their creative corpus. How do our viewing intuitions fortify the recognition a work of art demands while honoring the vulnerable legacies of its maker? As much as Gonzalez-Torres tried to secure a future that would heed his posthumous requests for the handling and exhibition of his work, there is always the possibility of misfires in the dizzying depths of Gonzalez-Torres's minimalist signatures. His is a minimalism that is almost deceptive for those of us with intuitive receptors that feel the excess of these gestures. Whether it's taking a piece of candy into your mouth or snagging a poster from a pile to preserve in your personal archive, being left with traces of an artist's creative body is heavy with familiar grief. What is it that we give back to the work or the artist in return?

I find it difficult to look at "*Untitled*" (*Loverboy*) (1989) from my vantage point here in the Sonoran Desert and not consider borderlands philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of liminality. She referred to it as *nepantla*, which she described as "a zone of impetuous transition, the point of contact between the worlds of nature and spirit."² Anzaldúa's formulation of *nepantla* is a way to make sense of, as well as heal from, the violent complexities of her upbringing in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas just a few miles north of the U.S.–Mexico border.

While the coupling of nature and spirit as a critical lens might seem a counter-intuitive method of interpreting the works of the avowedly atheist Gonzalez-Torres, I find it useful for weighing the implications of the violent contextual space from which Gonzalez-Torres's work emerged. In my viewing of "*Untitled*" (*Loverboy*) my gaze falls on the subdued mood of a powder blue curtain panel hanging in a room lit by the first hint of the morning sun. I feel the weight of loss. And on top of that loss, the delirium of ecstatic desire. I feel the agony of anticipatory grief. And yet, I am compelled to host it, make it comfortable in a corner of my psychic space for the rest of my days. This is how I tie myself to the memory of the artist and his muse(s) who have since perished in the AIDS pandemic. It is how I tie myself to those of us still grieving.

As a cultural hermeneutic *nepantla* facilitates another entry point into the liminal space present in Gonzalez-Torres's critical titling practice that bears the mark of meaning made between artist and viewer. That relationship is at the center of the subtitled ontologic of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work. What, exactly, lives in between the space of the untitled and the parenthetical clue that inspires the viewer to consider loss, harness grief, question authority, and more importantly, keep living?

Whether or not the content of Gonzalez-Torres's work is merely an accident, the structuring conse-

quences of the epoch in which he lived, it is within the space of the subtitled that some of the unarticulated dimensions of the experience of the late 20th century are elucidated. While it has been described in the short-hand of "the culture wars," it's worth stating that Gonzalez-Torres's work converged in between "overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures and social and geographic locations, of events and realities in all of their psychological, sociological, political, spiritual, historical, creative and imagined capacities."³ Gonzalez-Torres's work brings the violence of his era so powerfully into focus.

Any viewing practice today in 2021, nearly twenty-five years after Gonzalez-Torres's death from AIDS, might be a trauma-informed consideration of the rage that contextualizes that period of the 1980s and 1990s, which was engulfed in the violence of the Reagan administration. It is a rage that hides in plain sight. An untitled rage roaming in the ethers that connect our present to the past.

Gonzalez-Torres's life, death and legacy exist in between two pandemics. To study Gonzalez-Torres necessitates revisiting one of the more dangerous chapters of the late 20th century, a period of bureaucratic violence, of genocidal neglect. It is also considered the big bang theory of queer agitation. Gonzalez-Torres took umbrage with the way mainstream outlets portrayed the face of AIDS. For the artist AIDS was inextricably connected to the lack of adequate healthcare and housing, racism, fear, homophobia, and the elimination of welfare programs. These connections emerge from their dormancy as we near the end of 2021, a time when the death rate of the 21st century's pandemic surpasses that of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic.

For the rest of us who have learned to live in between pandemics we have learned again to long in the distance. We have learned to keep living.

We have eschewed our families for better families of our choosing. We have trafficked in the remote intimacies the technology of our age has enabled. We have surrendered. We have forgiven. We often leave these articulations unsaid, abort the affective excess that underpins these desires, but they reside in the liminal space between privacy and recognition.

I have looked to my gay friends nearing and passing their 60th year for solace. The ones who are still here. I looked to Joey Terrill, a Los Angeles artist I have admired for his saturated still life paintings and photographs of the gay Chicano quotidian. *What's it like to know we'll lose so many people?*

Our conversations are warm. I recently interviewed Joey for a piece that was published by a respected platform. They surprised me by publishing it on September 16th, a day that initiates Hispanic Heritage month. A month that starts in the middle. In the middle of a pandemic, I figure there's nothing to lose when I ask what it was like to lose a village of friends and lovers and the lovers of your friends?

What he says is precious. It is for us. This intimacy is present in the way its contents are protected, kept *entre nos*. In the in-between there's room for what is untitled to serve as a means towards that which passes for preservation. It is when we come together that we co-author the strategies for recognizing as well as resisting the dominant structure of power that is manufacturing our desired annihilation. There is what others see and then there is what we see.

1 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled (A Talk)," Lecture and Conversation with Gary Garrels, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, March 23, 1995.

2 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz in lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 28.

3 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 176.