

Press Release

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
1071 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10128 0173

681
Public Affairs Telephone 212 423 3840
Public Affairs Telefax 212 941 8410

FIRST COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY OF THE WORK OF FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES PRESENTED AT THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

**Press Preview: Thursday, March 2, 1995 from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, New York City**

From March 3 to May 10, 1995, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum presents *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, the first comprehensive survey of one of the most significant contemporary artists working today. This in-depth investigation spans ten years of the artist's career, beginning with his early photography- and text-based pieces and ending with examples of his most recent public billboards and garlands of electric lights. The exhibition comprises approximately fifty works of art, including examples of the artist's early conceptual pieces, all of his "date caption" pieces, a selection of the photographic jigsaw puzzles, "bloodwork" graphs, word-portraits, and paired objects. Also featured are his paper stacks, candy spills, light bulb strings, and photographic documentation of the artist's outdoor billboards. The works are presented in the Guggenheim's Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Rotunda, underscoring the subtle beauty of Gonzalez-Torres's innovative aesthetic.

Gonzalez-Torres has developed a multivalent and multi-media art form that addresses critical cultural issues such as the erasure of meaning and history, the AIDS crisis, gay rights, and the efficacy of our political system, often filtering them through his own "private" experiences. The artist's work treads a fine line between social commentary and personal disclosure, equivocating between the two realms and obscuring the culturally determined distinctions that separate them. In Gonzalez-Torres's photographic pieces, sculptures, and installations, it is this subtle shifting from cultural activism to intimate, autobiographical dimensions—and the subsequent erosion of the boundaries between—that forms the very essence of the work.

-more-

G U G G E N H E I M M U S E U M

Generous support for this exhibition has been provided by The Peter Norton Family Foundation.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres is organized by Nancy Spector, Associate Curator at the Guggenheim Museum, in close collaboration with the artist. The exhibition is a revitalization of the Guggenheim Museum's commitment to exhibiting the works of younger artists, as was the tradition in the 1970s, when the museum launched one-person exhibitions featuring Eva Hesse, Robert Mangold, Brice Marden, and Robert Ryman. The simultaneous mid-career showing of *Ross Bleckner*, which also opens on March 3 at the Guggenheim, illustrates not only the aesthetic synergies between the two artists, but their mutual social and cultural concerns.

Gonzalez-Torres was born in 1957 in Guáimaro, Cuba, and grew up in Puerto Rico before moving to New York City, where he currently lives and works. He received his BFA from New York's Pratt Institute in 1983 while attending the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. In 1987, he earned an MFA from the International Center for Photography/New York University, and was awarded a mid-career grant from the NEA in 1993. For the past eight years, Gonzalez-Torres has been a member of the artists' collaborative Group Material.

Early in his career, Gonzalez-Torres drew upon Conceptual Art practices to create his language-based "date caption" photostats. These works were conceived as empty sheets of black paper captioned with disjunctive historical incidents and private moments, followed by the year of their occurrence. Presented in arbitrary order, the events refuse narrative resolution and invoke disconnected memories, disparate places, and diverse social

phenomena. In 1989, Gonzalez-Torres extended this format to present an inventory of key events from the history of the gay rights movement on a billboard in Greenwich Village, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. This important piece was the first of the artist's billboard projects, which he has since exhibited in numerous cities internationally. One particularly memorable billboard project was the black-and-white photograph of an empty, but previously occupied, double bed seen in twenty-four locations around New York City in 1992.

Gonzalez-Torres's "word-portraits," such as *Untitled (Portrait of Ingvild Goetz)* (1994), evolved stylistically out of the "date-caption" pieces, in that they inventory a series of personal milestones specific to the portrait subject along with a selection of relevant historical or cultural events that the artist interjects. Painted frieze-like directly on to the wall, these "word-portraits" recount life stories without using the conjunctions, prepositions, or verbs that conventionally serve to anchor meaning in place. Also, the portrait owners are free to add or subtract entries from their own biographies at any time. Like the "date caption" photostats and the billboards, the "word-portraits" juxtapose personal and cultural references to interweave the realms of the public and the private.

Even in the act of rendering the most intimate concerns on a communal scale, Gonzalez-Torres maintains a light touch. The spare beauty of the "bloodwork" graphs, such as *Untitled (21 Days of Bloodwork — Steady Decline)* (1994) contrasts with its somber subject—the waning T-cell count of someone with AIDS. An equally delicate but less abstract approach to the recording of time is found in Gonzalez-Torres's jigsaw puzzles begun in 1987, which feature childhood snapshots, reproductions of cherished letters, found photographs, as well as images of grave sites and monuments. The artist fashions these

photographic mementos into small jigsaw assemblages and encases them in plastic sleeves pinned to the wall.

From 1988 to 1993, Gonzalez-Torres worked on a series of stacks, each of which contain identical sheets of paper with a printed image, text, or color border. In these endlessly replenishable works, Gonzalez-Torres invites the participation of museum visitors, who are free to take sheets from the piles, thus reducing their height and altering the work until more paper is added. This series of work encapsulates some of the main themes in Gonzalez-Torres's art, in that it challenges the uniqueness of the art object and the line between public and private ownership, while invoking thoughts of mortality and loss. Clues to the meaning of the works are most often embedded in the parenthetical subtitles he assigns to each "untitled" object. In the case of the stacks, subtitles such as *Death by Gun* and *Republican Years* impart a political and social dimension, while others, such as *Loverboy*, suggest more "personal" concerns.

Similar themes are invoked in the candy spills that the artist began in 1990. Featuring large quantities of colorful wrapped candies heaped in corners or spread out as "carpets" on the floor, these works have not only a formal sculptural quality, but also the potential for metamorphosis. As with the paper stacks, visitors are encouraged to take pieces from the piles, altering their shape temporarily until they are replenished. Despite its light-hearted connotations, candy as it appears in Gonzalez-Torres's installations can become a vehicle for raising political consciousness, as reflected in the parenthetical subtitles *Placebo*, *USA Today*, *Public Opinion*, and *Welcome Back Heroes*. Depending on the specific type, arrangement,

and quantity of candy, these installations can also function as a sensuous form of portraiture, since Gonzalez-Torres has often chosen the amount to correspond to the body weight of specific persons.

The theme of metamorphosis persists in Gonzalez-Torres's light bulb strings, which consist of 15- or 25-watt bulbs on one or more extension cords hung from the ceiling, draped across walls, or coiled on the floor. While each of these works subtly alludes to the memory of a specific event, place, or thought, Gonzalez-Torres leaves its form of installation up to the owner or curator, who can change it as often as he or she desires. As in the case of the paper stacks and candy spills, the light bulbs are replaced as they expire, echoing the theme of loss and renewal.

Thematically organized, the exhibition features significant works from the Gonzalez-Torres's career installed on the ramps of the Rotunda: *Untitled (Placebo--Landscape for Roni)* (1993), a candy spill of gold-wrapped sweets, is arranged on the Rotunda floor; *Untitled (North)* (1993), an installation of twelve light strings, is suspended in the High Gallery along with *Untitled (Portrait of Ingvild Goetz)* (1993); and *Untitled (Chemo)* (1991), a curtain of white plastic beads, hangs in the entrance to the Robert Mapplethorpe Gallery. But following the artist's inclination to utilize the least obvious places for the exhibition of his work, pieces can also be found in unexpected areas of the museum. For example, the Aye Simon Reading Room features a billboard; one of the back stairwells serves as a backdrop for a light bulb installation; and a video self-portrait is placed in the museum café. In addition, the Robert Mapplethorpe Gallery contains photographic reproductions of Gonzalez-Torres' billboard projects in Berkeley, Curaçao, Copenhagen, Glasgow, Graz, Hamburg, Kassel, Ljubljana, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New York City, Stockholm, Tokyo, and Vienna.

The exhibition is accompanied by a 280-page, full-color publication, designed by Takaaki Matsumoto, that documents the complete range of the artist's *oeuvre* to date. Written by exhibition curator Nancy Spector, the book situates Gonzalez-Torres's work within the history of postwar art and analyzes the cultural and social issues invoked by the recurring themes in his varied production. The themes of travel, the presence of the photographic trace or indexical sign, the body, and light are explored in detail, interwoven with the artist's own commentary, and supplemented by a definitive bibliography and exhibition history.

END

#681

February 3, 1995

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Christine Ferrara
Public Affairs Department
Telephone: 212/423-3841
Fax: 212/941-8410