LOVE AND LOSS:
THE WORKS OF FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, THE AIDS EPIDEMIC, AND
POSTMODERN ART

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of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Art History

by
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The foundations of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s career began in 1979 when he left his native Cuba at the age of 22 and went to New York City to begin his scholarly training.\(^1\) Gonzalez-Torres first obtained an undergraduate degree in photography from the Pratt Institute.\(^2\) He then continued his education by attaining a graduate degree in photography from the School of the International Center of Photography and participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program.\(^3\)

During this time, Gonzalez-Torres studied modern and postmodern art theories.\(^4\) He assimilated the writings of postmodern theorists, such as Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin.\(^5\) This exposure directly informed Gonzalez-Torres’s work, giving him a highly intellectualized foundation that resulted in artwork which challenged cultural authority, representation and societal values.\(^6\) Also, coming to age as an artist during the era of Reaganomics, Gonzalez-Torres was faced with the implications of commercialism, and the decline of modernist principles. His artworks were informed by, but never truly mimicked, Minimalist forms, Conceptualist tactics and Pop Art colors. His heterogeneous artworks were displayed in unique and nontraditional forums, so that

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2. Ibid., 3.
3. Ibid., 3.
4. Ibid., 3.
5. Ibid., 3-4.
6. Ibid., 3-4.
maximum public exposure could be achieved. Using a variety of approaches, such as a photograph enlarged into a billboard, stacks of paper, a pile of candy, or a string of lights, Gonzalez-Torres’s works continued the practice of highly intellectualized art and institutional critique during a time when art production correlated with 1980s commercialism.

These simplified, yet complex, forms transcended the societal divides of the 1980s and 1990s, creating a sense of community and visual empowerment. Focusing on the complex issues of identity, originality, and authorship, the diverse art forms he created were a product of his life experiences. Living as an openly gay man who was HIV positive, he was influenced by the extreme societal prejudices against the gay community and those living with AIDS. These issues were manifested in Gonzalez-Torres’s artworks, but his art was not solely dedicated to creating a gay identity or promoting AIDS activism.

The discovery of the AIDS virus in the early 1980s and the impact of the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s called attention to the societal injustices of a conservative society. These injustices and the societal abandonment of those living with AIDS inspired artists to form collaborative groups in the hopes of using art to inspire change. For example, already in 1979, artists in New York City formed the collaborative group, Group Material.7 These artists emphasized using one creative voice to create installations and public exhibitions that focused on social injustices.8 Gonzalez-Torres joined this group

7 Ibid., 11-12.
8 Ibid., 11-12.
in 1987, and though the duration of his membership was brief, the exposure to using installation as a medium led to ideas and practices, which continuously informed his artistic career.  

The adversity faced by a person who was HIV positive in America during the 1980s and 1990s became deeply rooted in his subconscious and released through artistic expression. Gonzalez-Torres’s artworks were a conceptual snapshot of the impact of his life experiences, leaving himself vulnerable to the public eye. The consistent and prevalent prejudice against the gay community, especially those who were HIV positive and living with AIDS, motivated Gonzalez-Torres to create a unified and loving community, free of bigotry and disease.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was both a candid and generous artist. He genuinely wanted to make the world a better place and believed that his art could be a catalyst for that change. His art was his voice. It was not until the AIDS-related death of his partner Ross Laycock in 1991 that he began to focus on transforming the artist-viewer relationship. He openly admitted that prior to Ross’s death he only made works for his life partner. After Ross’s passing, he became more conscious of the role of the viewer with his artworks and the power of that interaction. Although the trauma of Ross’s death and the longing for Ross’s presence always remained present in his art, Gonzalez-Torres connected with the viewer by exposing his grief and love for Ross.

Gonzalez-Torres’s artwork addressed a broad audience, creating a prolific narrative connecting, and at times introducing, a diverse audience to postmodern art. He

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9 Ibid., 11-12.
desired viewer participation, and fulfilled this need by creating an open invitation for the public to interact with his artworks. Gonzalez-Torres wanted to foster a relationship with the viewer that enabled them to construct meaning based on their own life experiences.

Gonzalez-Torres achieved this by rarely providing a descriptive title or artistic signature when his artworks were displayed. When titles were attached to an artwork they followed a consistent formula. He typically declared the piece Untitled, and accompanied the work with a phrase in parentheses that may or may not have been relevant to the piece itself. Through this objective content, Gonzalez-Torres sought to reconstruct the role of the viewer and how a viewer interprets artworks. Instead of being told what to see or experience, the viewer was given an objective form and title so that they could create their own interpretation without bias.\(^\text{10}\) This interaction created a new dialogue between the artist and viewer, engaging the viewer in Gonzalez-Torres’s postmodern expression.

Gonzalez-Torres encouraged the viewer to interact with and even take home pieces of his artworks. Breaking the established museum and gallery decree of not touching the displayed artwork, Gonzalez-Torres created a community that transcended beyond the museum and gallery culture. He incorporated conventional gift giving in the hopes of creating a unified public that was without prejudice, societal awareness, and spreading a message of love. At times, it was the viewer who was given the task to complete the composition of his artworks. Gonzalez-Torres wanted his art, and thus the viewer, to question the production, distribution, and commodification of postmodern art.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 17.
By doing so, the viewer became empowered. His artworks taught the public a new way of seeing and experiencing postmodern art.

The relationship cultivated between Felix-Gonzalez Torres and the public reflected the lasting gift his artworks provided. The underlying message threaded within all of his compositions, interconnecting each artwork, was love. It was his love for Ross, his compassion toward a discriminatory society, and his passion for art that created this unique relationship. Felix Gonzalez-Torres wanted to make the world a better place, and the moment the viewer interacted with his art, he achieved that goal.
CHAPTER II

BEING OUT AND POSITIVE: THE PROFOUND PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF AIDS ON GAY AND ART COMMUNITIES IN AMERICA

To view Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s works as his contemporary is to recall what the sociopolitical climate in America was like in the 1980s. Recovering from the financial downturn of the 1970s, by the mid-1980s Americans experienced an economic boom that strengthened capitalism and enabled an excess of consumerism. All the while, medical cases of a new deadly immune deficiency began to first appear in gay communities across the country.

The public and government of 1980s and 1990s viewed what we now refer to as AIDS as a very different disease. AIDS baffled those in the medical community, as they scrambled to decipher what caused AIDS and develop treatments. Because the first known victims of this disease were gay, the stigma of the disease adhered tightly to the already oppressed gay communities of that time. The largely accepted attitude was that AIDS was exclusively a “gay” disease that could only infect those who were gay. This attitude acted as a catalyst for extreme prejudices and oppression against the gay community, as the number and diversity of AIDS victims grew steadily. The conservative US government fueled societal fears by continuously neglecting to allocate the necessary funds for AIDS research and education.

Living as an openly gay man who was HIV positive in New York City, Gonzalez-Torres faced the physical, psychological, and emotional repercussions of being infected
with the disease. For Felix Gonzalez-Torres his body and sexuality were at the center of this medical and societal conflict. Gonzalez-Torres faced this adversity with an unprecedented grace and dignity. His reaction was to reach out to the society that oppressed his personal lifestyle by creating prolific and poetic artworks that transcended beyond his diseased body. The conundrum of Gonzalez-Torres’s art is that throughout his career AIDS was not necessarily the focus of his compositions, but at the same time, AIDS always remained present. Gonzalez-Torres created artworks that were a reflection of his life experiences. As a terminal disease, AIDS greatly impacted his life and in turn, his art. In addition, the role as caretaker for his partner Ross, who was also HIV positive, and the subsequent AIDS-related death of Ross, was a pivotal moment in Gonzalez-Torres’s life that forever changed the canon of his artwork. It is therefore crucial to understand the implications of the disease that greatly impacted his life, was embedded deeply into his identity, and directly informed his artwork.

One of the first indications that led to the eventual discovery of AIDS in American society surfaced in the diagnoses of a rare cancer, Kaposi’s sarcoma, among an atypical demographic. Typically, Kaposi’s sarcoma patients experienced tumors in the blood vessel tissue in the skin or internal organs, and usually inflicted older men of Italian, Jewish or African descent. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, an abnormal aggressive form of Kaposi’s sarcoma began to surface among young, Caucasian, middle-

12 Ibid, 47.
class males and those who were labeled as having a history of homosexuality.\textsuperscript{13} In these new cases, it was soon discovered that the patients had an increased risk of infection due to the depletion of T cells that caused a weakened immune system.\textsuperscript{14}

Despite the unfamiliarity with this set of symptoms, these patients were identified as the first population suffering from the disease that would eventually be identified as AIDS. All of the reported cases shared one commonality they were gay men with a fatal immune disorder.\textsuperscript{15} Physicians were unable to diagnose or provide effective medical interventions for these patients. At that time, no medical explanation existed for the cause of the immune deficiency among the young patients. Although there were uncertainties, one fact was clear these young men were dying.

There were many hypotheses formed for the causes of this new syndrome associated with the fatal immune disorder. The first challenge was that those in the medical profession had to understand what the disease was, where it originated, and who was at risk for contracting the disease. In the United States, it was instantly associated with the gay community. Researchers even suggested that the infection was caused by exposure to the gay lifestyle.\textsuperscript{16} This theory implied that the immune deficiency could only infect the individuals within the gay community.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, the inaugural term for the disease, \textit{Gay-Related Immunodeficiency} (GRID), proclaimed the prejudicial bias

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 47.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 47.
\textsuperscript{15} Madelon Finkel, \textit{Truth, Lies and Public Health: How we are affected when Science and Politics Collide}. (Westport, Connecticut: Prager Publishers, 2007), 34.
\textsuperscript{17} Finkel, \textit{Truth, Lies and Public Health: How we are affected when Science and Politics Collide}, 34.
of the medical communities toward the gay community, and provided society with a single demographic and scapegoat for this new syndrome.\textsuperscript{18}

By the early 1980s, it was clear that GRID cases an increasing cause of aggressive immune deficiencies within the United States.\textsuperscript{19} By 1982, those outside of the gay community, such as hemophiliacs and intravenous drug users, began to display similar symptoms to those with GRID.\textsuperscript{20} These additional demographics proved that the disease was not exclusive to the gay community, however society had already associated the stigma of the disease with the gay community. Consequently, the disease transformed from the Gay-Related Immunodeficiency to the current term Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS.\textsuperscript{21} Through this name transformation, the medical community recognized that this disease could not be strictly deemed a “gay” disease.\textsuperscript{22}

By 1985, in addition to the gay community and intravenous drug users suffering from infections, there were 70 known cases of AIDS infection through blood transfusion.\textsuperscript{23} As the diversity of AIDS patients grew, so did American hysteria.\textsuperscript{24} What was once deemed an exclusive disease was now seen as possibly infecting all members of

\textsuperscript{19} Gallo, \textit{The AIDS Virus}, 47.
\textsuperscript{20} Brunet-Weinman, \textit{The Scythe, the Scales, and the Palette: AIDS and the Rupture of Representational Strategies}, 152.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{22} Gallo, \textit{The AIDS Virus}, 47.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 34.
society. Hysteria especially increased when cases of women and children began to surface among mainstream society. Fueled by ignorance and fear, people began to assume that the disease was contracted through casual contact. This common misconception motivated people to take extreme actions to what they believed would help prevent AIDS.

During the 1980s, some extreme measures included landlords evicting those who had or were suspected of having AIDS; taxi drivers not servicing individuals who “looked sick;” hospitals marking AIDS patients’ doors, warning unsuspecting visitors to not enter; people avoiding public restrooms and drinking fountains; and government offices, such as the Social Security Administration, interviewing known AIDS patients via telephone only. These extreme actions were rationalized in response to the frightening fact that once a person began to show physical symptoms of the disease, they typically died within 12 to 18 months. This grim statistic was due to the lack of medical interventions and disease prevention. What’s more, the misinformed public supported these extreme measures as a form of misconceived societal preservation. As sociologist Madelon Finkel observed:

A poll taken in 1985 found that 72% of Americans favored mandatory testing for the disease, 51% favored quarantine of those infected and 15% of Americans favored tattoos for people infected with HIV. Clearly the

25 Ibid., 35.
26 Ibid., 35.
27 Ibid., 35.
28 Ibid., 35.
29 Ibid., 35-36.
public was confused and scared, while the scientific community was still trying to figure out the etiology of the disease and what preventive measure could be introduced to stop its spread.\textsuperscript{30}

As hysteria grew and spun out of control, discovering what caused AIDS was as equally necessary as finding a viable treatment for the disease.

One significant breakthrough came when researchers realized that an unknown virus remained present after the processing of Factor VIII, a plasma treatment for hemophiliacs.\textsuperscript{31} Therefore, researchers concluded that Factor VIII was contaminated with the \textit{Human Immunodeficiency Virus}, more commonly known as HIV and the cause of AIDS.\textsuperscript{32} Once a person is infected with HIV, they will live with the virus until the medical community is successful in finding a cure.\textsuperscript{33} One enigma of HIV is that the virus can remain dormant for any given amount of time before the disease develops into AIDS.\textsuperscript{34} Eventually, the multiplication of HIV within a host T cell will cause the demise of the cell, enabling the viral clones to infect other healthy cells, establishing the cycle of immunological destruction and sparking the emergence of AIDS within the patient.\textsuperscript{35}

The American public’s response to AIDS on society was initially fueled by ignorance, fear and prejudice; the disease has often been viewed as the modern-day

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\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 35-36. \\
\textsuperscript{31} Gallo, \textit{The AIDS Virus}, 48 \\
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 47. \\
\textsuperscript{33} Finkel, \textit{Truth, Lies and Public Health: How we are affected when Science and Politics Collide}, 32. \\
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 32. \\
\textsuperscript{35} Jaret, \textit{Our Immune System: The Wars Within}, 710. \\
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plague of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{36} AIDS was not merely an incurable immunological disease. It also challenged societal attitudes, values, and ethics, and brought attention to the injustices of communal hierarchies.

During the 1980s the spread of AIDS in America, particularly brought awareness to the attitudes and prejudices towards diseases and those living with diseases. For the first groups of AIDS patients, there was virtually no treatment or medical effort made to contain, control, or cure the disease. The patient’s survival rate upon diagnosis was 12 to 18 months.\textsuperscript{37} This grim life expectancy brought attention to the shortcomings and inadequacies of what was once deemed “infallible” modern medicine.\textsuperscript{38}

The first reports of AIDS portrayed the disease as a medical anomaly that infected a select subgroup of society. Reporter Peter Jaret explains, “The headlines portrayed this new disease, quickly dubbed AIDS, almost as science fiction—some unreal Andromeda strain loosed on the world.”\textsuperscript{39} As long as promiscuous gay men or irresponsible intravenous drug addicts were infected, the societal attitude was that there was not a need for concern. Mainstream society was content to find their AIDS scapegoat or as theorist Arthur Kroker describes as, “sacrificial victims.”\textsuperscript{40} Those living with AIDS were deemed as having a contaminated body created by viral infection and their immoral

\textsuperscript{36} Gallo, \textit{The AIDS Virus}, 47.
\textsuperscript{37} Finkel, \textit{Truth, Lies and Public Health: How we are affected when Science and Politics Collide}, 38.
\textsuperscript{39} Jaret, \textit{Our Immune System: The Wars Within}, 710.
decisions. Their diseased body became the prey for a society fueled by anxiety, fear and hatred. Gays living with AIDS especially challenged the mainstream hierarchy and the conservative social order. Their perceived alternative lifestyle and premature deaths stirred the American culture. Therefore, it was at times, easier for an uncomfortable ignorant society to turn a blind eye on this lethal disease.

AIDS represented the death of the individual. Strong, healthy, and thriving individuals were transformed into withered skeletons, reminding the public of the reality of their mortality. Young people were becoming infected, forcing the difficult reality of coming to grips with the death of the assumed vital generation.

Those who were dying of AIDS went unnoticed by mainstream society as they slowly disappeared out of society. In the early 1980s, the number of AIDS patients doubled annually. By the start of 1983, there were 1,501 diagnosed AIDS patients. That number drastically grew with each passing year and by the late 1980s there were an astonishing 100,000+ AIDS cases and more than 58,000 AIDS related deaths. The deaths of AIDS victims were on the back burner of the American conscience and their demise was rationalized by their condemned lifestyle.

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41 Ibid., 323.
42 Ibid., 323.
44 Ibid., 148.
45 Finkel, Truth, Lies and Public Health: How we are affected when Science and Politics Collide, 36.
46 Ibid., 36.
47 Ibid., 36.
As the demographic of AIDS patients diversified, a hierarchy between those deemed innocent victims and guilty players emerged. These attitudes redefined the view of the gay community as condemned outcasts of society as ignorance created subgroups within those living with AIDS. This societal attitude and hierarchy developed within the public domain after reports of infected women, mothers, children, and hemophiliacs emerged. For example, in 1984 American teenager and hemophiliac, Ryan White, contracted HIV through blood transfusions. Initially, Ryan was expelled from school and treated as an outcast within his community. Through his public battle to return to school and desire to promote AIDS awareness, the American public had a face to associate with the disease. This new public awareness deemed Ryan an “innocent” victim of the HIV epidemic caused by the “immoral” lifestyle of gays and intravenous drug users.

The lack of empathy for the societal lepers living with AIDS was influenced by a conservative society, which was content to have a scapegoat for this lethal virus. For example, throughout his two terms in office, President Reagan and his administration consistently avoided addressing the issues surrounding the AIDS epidemic. The extreme conservative politics of Reagan's administration ignored issues that affected the gay

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48 Ibid., 34-35.
49 Ibid., 34-35.
50 Ibid., 34-35.
51 Ibid., 34-35.
community, and deprived American society of a leader to guide them through this
crisis.\textsuperscript{52} Madelon Finkel recalls:

Reagan urged the public not to panic because AIDS was primarily
confined to gay men and intravenous drug users. He did not sympathize
with the victims or acknowledge the government’s delayed and inadequate
response. His focus was to promote abstinence-only education and to bar
HIV positive visitors from entering the country.\textsuperscript{53}

President Regan also contributed to fueling the fire of AIDS myths and discrimination.\textsuperscript{54} For example, when asked about the safety of sending HIV positive children to schools, President Reagan would not confirm and reassure the public that HIV could not be spread through casual contact.\textsuperscript{55} This outrageous response contradicted the prevalent scientific
evidence that HIV could not be contracted through casual contact.\textsuperscript{56} During this pivotal
and tumultuous time, the American public needed a leader to guide them through this
viral nightmare; such guidance was never to come from the Reagan administration.

The Reagan administration grossly underestimated the profound impact of AIDS
on society and consistently withheld government funding towards AIDS research.
Between 1982 and 1986, Reagan appropriated half of the meager amount of funds
requested by Congress to be contributed to AIDS research.\textsuperscript{57} In 1987, President Reagan

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 39-40.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 39.
officially acknowledged the AIDS crisis, but the conservative government regularly rejected grants and requests for funds by researchers to study AIDS. This blatant disregard outraged those in the scientific communities and left those living with AIDS hopeless. By 1988, the federal government approved the establishment of the Office of AIDS Research; meanwhile, 40,000 AIDS victims had died in the United States.

Societal prejudices that ascribed the stigma of AIDS to the gay community led to the formation of activist groups in the 1980s. The outrage at the lack of medical intervention and the blatant societal prejudices of the time motivated individuals, in particular artists living with AIDS, to use art to evoke public awareness and change. Psychologist Dennis Altman explains, “If AIDS is seen as a curse or a punishment as much religious discourse suggests its impact will strengthen deep and irrational feelings of personal inadequacy and this in turn will influence communal responses.” Artists began to use public art works to act as a catalyst for societal awareness and change.

One such group was Group Material, which was first formed in 1979 in New York City. Group Material was as an organization of artists dedicated to creating exhibitions, infiltrations and distributions of art to evoke social awareness. The original 13 members founded the group based on a dedication to public education as an essential

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58 Ibid., 39.
59 Ibid., 39.
60 Ibid., 39.
61 Dennis Altman, “Psycho-Cultural Responses to AIDS” in Don’t Leave Me This Way, ed. Tedd Gott (Australia: National Gallery of Australia, 1994), 141-142.
62 Nancy Spector, FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 11-12.
principle of the group’s mission. Art critic and colleague of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Nancy Spector describes:

Group Material’s agenda is highly “political” in that it seeks to effect social change through the dissemination of information as well as through aesthetic experience. The group’s members, however, refuse to be categorized as “political” artists. In their view, all cultural production is in essence political, since it is impossible to ever truly escape ideology.

As the outrage toward the AIDS crisis formed, Group Material began incorporating AIDS activism and awareness as part of their mission. They invited a multitude of artists to create collaborative works that denied the presence of one authoritarian expression or style (see fig.1). Working from a storefront in the East Village, Group Material members were on a mission not to promote their principles or morals but to call attention to the unethical and despicable behavior of mainstream society, in response to the AIDS crisis.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres joined Group Material in 1987, and during his brief membership he was exposed to the power of using public forums as exhibition spaces, the possibilities of collective art strategies and the methodology of installation practices. The influences of Group Material’s tactics on Gonzalez-Torres’s work were clearly present in his series of works entitled, Double Fear, Untitled (Bloodworks), and Untitled.

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63 Ibid., 11-12.
64 Ibid., 12.
65 Ibid., 11-12.
66 Ibid., 11-12.
In 1987, Gonzalez-Torres created multiple versions of the series *Double Fear*, utilizing various mediums, such as collages, puzzles and transfer rubbings (see fig. 2–3). These clustered circular images featured magnified crowds of people that were slightly out of focus and distorted to mimic a cell infected by HIV.\(^67\) The two-fold imagery alluded to the multi-faceted societal fears and anxieties affiliated with homophobia and the public infiltration of AIDS.\(^68\) Also, this imagery predicted the future spread of the HIV virus amongst a growing population if society continued to ignore and bypass the severity of the AIDS epidemic.\(^69\) Gonzalez-Torres fabricated this series during an era of complete disregard for AIDS education, prevention and testing.\(^70\) As HIV infections were growing, Gonzalez-Torres was attempting to bring awareness to the urgency and consequences of the growing AIDS epidemic.

Gonzalez-Torres’s own experiences as an HIV positive patient are also apparent in the series of blood graphs created in 1987 and entitled, *Bloodworks*. Gonzalez-Torres constructed a series of charts that were exhibited in either sets of 2, 21 or 31 and corresponded to the steady of depletion of T cells from the resulting blood work tests AIDS patients received (see fig. 4).\(^71\) These fabricated graphs displayed a declining red line, bearing witness to the destructive force of the AIDS virus.\(^72\) For AIDS patients, the amounts of these tiny cells represented the difference between life and death. HIV targets

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 129.  
\(^{68}\) Ibid., 129.  
\(^{69}\) Ibid., 129.  
\(^{70}\) Ibid., 129.  
\(^{71}\) Ibid, 120.  
\(^{72}\) Ibid, 120.
T cells, thus short circuiting the body’s immunological response.\textsuperscript{73} This immunological short circuit is the trademark of AIDS. HIV destroys the production of T cells leaving the human body vulnerable to all types of debilitating diseases, infections, and foreign intruders. For Gonzalez-Torres, the steady decline of the charted T cells reflected a life on the verge of AIDS-related illnesses and the relentless approach of death.

In 1989, Gonzalez-Torres fabricated one of his first public installations and the work is a blatant attempt to raise AIDS awareness and outrage against homophobia with the billboard entitled, \textit{Untitled}. The billboard was displayed at Sheridan Square during the Gay and Lesbian March in New York City’s Greenwich Village to recognize the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion (see fig. 5).\textsuperscript{74} In 1969, New York police officers conducted unprovoked raids and blatant harassment against the gay patrons at the Stonewall Bar. This monumental event of police brutality and subsequent rioting ignited the gay rights movement in the late 1970s and gave a prominent voice to the oppressed gay community.\textsuperscript{75}

Located a block away from the original rioting site, the large black rectangle featured dates, locations, incidents and names in white text across the bottom register of the billboard.\textsuperscript{76} The text is not in any particular order, and highlighted key events or figures leading up to the gay rights movement. The text reads: People with AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey

\textsuperscript{73} Jaret, \textit{Our Immune System: The Wars Within}, 709.
\textsuperscript{74} Nancy Spector, \textit{FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES}, 23.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 23.
Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969. The series referred to such events as Oscar Wilde’s refusal to flee England during the nineteenth century; Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician; the formation of the People With AIDS (PWA) Coalition as a response to the governments inaction to the AIDS epidemic and the 1987 Gay Rights March in Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{77} Gonzalez-Torres purposefully did not organize the text according to historical sequence as a way to renounce the belief that the progression of history is rational.\textsuperscript{78} The billboard was displayed without any referential titles or explanations, so that the viewer could find meaning in the billboard based on their own experiences or cultural and historical memory.\textsuperscript{79} This public and solitary billboard was Gonzalez-Torres’ silent protest attesting to the wrong doings against the gay community, especially those living with AIDS.

As AIDS awareness began to spread through mainstream society, it was no longer feasible to ignore this disease that was infecting exponentially an increasing number of its victims. As artists and activist groups dedicated their works to AIDS awareness, their mutual hope was to eliminate prejudices against AIDS patients, and especially gays living with AIDS. However, for the gay community, the irreversible damage had already been done. As long as ignorance and hatred thrived, AIDS would prejudicially be unfairly viewed as a “gay” disease.

As the political and physical wars raged on for those who were HIV positive and living with AIDS, one thing was for certain, those living with AIDS did not want to die in

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 23.
vain. Their friends and communities were dying. These deaths had to mean something, and it took courage, innovation, and creativity to make that message clear.
CHAPTER III

THE PLACE AND PRESENCE OF FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

Modern art’s urge for extremes often seems like a death wish but turns out to be a life spring.
-Kirk Varnedoe

There are unique circumstances and moments in time when boundaries are blurred and commonalities are found between what would otherwise be deemed oppositional institutions. For the medical and modern art communities in the 1980s, AIDS was that bridge between two very different disciplines. The unique collision of these two worlds through the agency of AIDS allowed the similarities between the two fields to be realized. For example, much like the medical field, avant-garde art communities are constantly evolving, reflective of cultural trends, and can be a catalyst for social awareness. Felix-Gonzalez-Torres had the unique experience of living simultaneously in both worlds as creator and patient. His role as terminal patient was confined to his handling of AIDS-related illnesses as his immune system slowly deteriorated, leaving even the common cold as a deadly viral foe. But it was through his expressive role as a creator that he found solace for his physical degradation and the societal repercussions against gays living with AIDS. The result of this dual role of patient and artist, combined with his educational background and experiences in Group Material, was a highly intellectualized art product that was reflective of the societal climate at that time.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres approached making art as a product of his complex identity.

As his career as an individual artist began, Gonzalez-Torres developed an art form that was rooted in Group Material’s mission, but he maintained a sympathetic approach to society, hoping to create societal awareness by focusing on love and loss. He made a shift from activist to autobiographer, using his life experiences to form the core of his art.\textsuperscript{81}

Living in New York City, Gonzalez-Torres was at the civic center that harbored the development of the great post-World War II modern art movements. When Gonzalez-Torres entered the New York art scene in the late 1980s, artists had already been challenging, questioning and reacting to the hierarchy of American modernist movements for the past twenty years. This discourse began in the mid-1960s as the wealth, growth and prosperity of postwar America ran its course, societal discontent grew and artists began to raise the stakes in challenging institutional hierarchies. Two early postmodern art practices of the mid-1960s that directly informed Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s art were Minimalism and Conceptualism. These groundbreaking movements directly influenced the foundations of Gonzalez-Torres’s oeuvre and were incorporated to create his poetic signature. Gonzalez-Torres’s art was a singular hybrid of these two early postmodern art practices. Through his usage these movements continued to hold relevance for 1980s–1990s society. Gonzalez-Torres did not imitate these movements but transformed their methodology by personalizing and incorporating humanitarian elements into his art. By doing so, Minimalism and Conceptualism became more accessible to a generalized public and a new class was introduced to these early postmodern art practices. Thus it is

\textsuperscript{81} Spector, \textit{FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES}, 14.
essential to comprehend the foundations of Minimalism and Conceptualism to have a complete understanding of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work.

The artworks produced during the mid-1960s were deemed postmodern by art critics and were a reaction to the creative obsession with aesthetic purity and autonomous abstraction of the post-war modernists. 82 This obsession was first established and promoted by the influential modernist art critic Clement Greenberg. 83 There was not one particular unified reaction to Greenberg’s standards, but rather a multitude of art practices born out of the desire to create an institutional critique that dematerialized the modernist art object. Even the term “postmodern” is problematic and has been a source of contention for many artists, critics and theorists because it generalized diverse art practices employed by a multitude of artists during that time. 84 Despite the vagueness of the term, deeming an artwork postmodern alludes to a significant change in the art produced after the mid-1960s that rejected the established modernist hierarchy in order to create an institutional critique. 85

The advent of postmodern art emphasized the importance of challenging aesthetic conformity and the multitude of art practices. 86 Artists looked toward using unorthodox mediums and practices to challenge the preconceived notions of originality, authorship, identity, and subjectivity. The first of the postmodernist camp, the Minimalists embraced

82 Tim Woods, Beginning postmodernism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 126-127.
83 Ibid., 125.
84 Edward Lucie-Smith, Movements in art since 1945, Issues and Concepts. (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd. 1995), 174
85 Varnedoe, Minimalism and After, 5.
86 Woods, Beginning postmodernism, 140.
this challenge by interpreting Greenberg’s methodology literally, reducing artworks to essential forms in an effort to discover the essence of the medium used. Minimalists reduced compositions to basic forms and viewed their artworks as objects, instead of as a painting or sculpture. By doing so, Minimalists challenged and redefined the established hierarchy. Even the term *minimal* implies the act of stripping or reducing aesthetics to create a simplified compositional form.\(^\text{87}\) But Minimalist art forms are not reductive.\(^\text{88}\) Art critic Hal Foster explained that deeming a Minimalist work reductive was one of the great misconceptions about the art practice.\(^\text{89}\) According to Foster, Minimalist artists were more concerned with creating a phenomenological experience between the viewer and object.\(^\text{90}\) Minimalists materialized this concern by creating objects often using seriality, geometric forms and industrial materials.\(^\text{91}\) The use of industrial materials, especially in the Minimalist object, represented a clear break from traditional mediums.\(^\text{92}\) In addition, the hand of the artist was often removed from the execution of the work, thus mimicking both Duchamp’s ready-made and commercial products.\(^\text{93}\) Therefore, the use of the ready-made and the seriality of Minimalist objects continued the break from

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\(^\text{89}\) Ibid., 40.

\(^\text{90}\) Ibid., 40.


\(^\text{92}\) Ibid., 257.

\(^\text{93}\) Ibid., 257.
traditional artworks.\textsuperscript{94}

As will be shown further on, Minimalists explored the possibility of creating non-relational objects by producing works that redefined the relationship with the viewer, the exhibition setting, and created a phenomenological experience.\textsuperscript{95} Therefore, Minimalists established that the “place and presence” were vital components of Minimalist art; a new standard was created for the role of the viewer.\textsuperscript{96} The emphasis on “presence and place” suggested that the artwork was not an absolute construction with a definitive meaning, but a phenomenological creation that depended on the circumstances of the setting and the participation of the artist and viewer.\textsuperscript{97} The concept of “presence and place” can be witnessed in the works of Donald Judd.

Donald Judd produced industrial objects that denied the hand-skilled art process affiliated with traditional sculpture by excluding textures, details, and figurative references.\textsuperscript{98} For example, in 1967, he fabricated a series of objects entitled, \textit{Untitled (Stack)} (see fig. 6). Each stack consisted of 8, 10, 12 or 14 boxes, and these groupings

\textsuperscript{94} Foster, \textit{The Return of the Real, The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century}, 62.
\textsuperscript{95} Brehm, \textit{Where are we coming from? Where are we going? Where will we go on vacation?}, 41.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 40.
were nothing more than a preconceived arrangement of placing one box after the other.\textsuperscript{99} The dimension of the boxes and the spacing between each one were identical, suggesting that not one unit in the series was subordinate and the series could be understood to be infinite.\textsuperscript{100}

Minimalists were also concerned with and began to redefine the bodily presence of the viewer and how that bodily presence related to their objects. This concept can be witnessed in the L-beam wall and floor structures fabricated by Robert Morris in 1965 and entitled \textit{Untitled (L-beams)} (see fig. 7). The installation evoked a similar form shown in different positions.\textsuperscript{101} The different positions provoked the viewer's attention to view the objects not as static sculptures but as performers expressing different perspectives and positions.\textsuperscript{102} Art critic Gregor Stemmrich describes, “It points to a ‘visibility’ of things which does not derive from our capacity to see, but through which we may recognize our continuity with the world and our bodily existence in the space of the work itself.”\textsuperscript{103} Therefore, the Minimalist object was not considered to be pure art with a “good side” but an industrial serial structure that fundamentally reoriented the viewer’s perception by focusing on the “here and now.”\textsuperscript{104}

One of the challenges of the Minimalist works was that the viewer was required to reevaluate the preconceived notions of viewer participation and the traditional ways of

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 29–30.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 29–30.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 29–30.
interacting with art. Furthermore, while Minimalists attempted to exclude emotion from their artworks, there can be an emotional response found within the viewer’s participation in the artwork. In addition, Minimalists looked to create a new expression that was founded in the aesthetic pleasure of efficient forms, order and proportions.\(^{105}\) Thus, it was this challenge that often led to misunderstanding, or difficulty for the viewer to fully grasp the Minimalist logic.

As Minimalist practices developed and continued, another corresponding trend furthered this liberation from the cardinal rules of modernism and looked to devalue the modernist object. Conceiving their practice as Conceptual art, artists emphasized the importance of the idea or concept of art through the extensive use of language, creating what was referred to as “post-object art.”\(^{106}\) Conceptualists looked to further dematerialize the art object by negating the physicality of the artwork. Art historian Edward Lucie-Smith describes:

> Conceptual art is a form of expression which tries to abolish the physical as completely as possible, and which aims to bypass optical stimulation in favour of intellectual processes, which the audience is invited to share with the artist. That is, it is essentially an art of mental patterns embodied by any means, which the maker sees fit to employ.\(^{107}\)

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Conceptual artists created highly intellectualized products that challenged the role of the viewer and the parameters of art. They also questioned the conventional perceptions of past art traditions by approaching the creation of art as an institutional critique and believed that the work could exist both through a materialistic representation and in one’s mind. In the influential postmodern essay, “The Dematerialization of Art,” art critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler describe:

During the 1960s, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes of art-making characteristic of the last two decades have begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively. As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object’s becoming wholly obsolete.

This radical methodology emphasized a non-visual creation that could exist even if it is only in the mind of the artist. When conceptual products did materialize, they increasingly incorporated the use of text. This extensive use of words and language was

108 Schmidt-Wufflen, Forget Minimalism. . . !, 63.
used to convey ideas, societal critiques and was symbolic for phrases or item the words represented. Lippard and Chandler described that when such an approach to creating artwork was utilized, the end product was the medium rather than a definitive finished product or even “art as art.”

Conceptualists challenged the standardization of mediums, such as painting and sculpture, through the extensive use of text and photography. For example, in 1965, Joseph Kosuth created a series of investigations that questioned the theory of art as an idea and the nature of art. Such investigations included the series *One and Three Hammer* and *One and Three Chairs*, both created in 1965 (see fig. 8–9). With each series, Kosuth fabricated installations that consisted of an item such as a chair or hammer, a photograph of that item, and a photographic enlargement of the definition describing the item displayed. What was the difference between the experience of a photo of an item, the actual item and the conceptualization of an item through a written definition? Thus, this questioning demanded the attentiveness of the viewer and restructured how that viewer experienced art.

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110 Ibid., 48.
111 Ibid., 48.
114 Ibid., 94-95.
Considered to be a “low brow” medium, Conceptualists’ use of photography reiterated their unconventional tactics and raised the status of that medium.\textsuperscript{115} The use of photography also questioned the traditional notion of originality by the reproducibility of the prints and even the modes of representation. Thus this medium was the epitome of postmodern expression.\textsuperscript{116}

Similar to Minimalist practices, Conceptual Art challenged the viewer and the ways the viewer was accustomed to experiencing art. The cerebral art object demanded a more intellectualized participation from the viewer who was not accustomed to this type of expression. The art at times seemed hostile and empty, although Lippard and Chandler described the hostility more as aloofness.\textsuperscript{117} However, despite the misconceptions Minimalist and Conceptual practices challenged the production, status, and interpretation of postmodern art. This radical shift in art practices influenced and acted as a precursor to postmodern practices of the 1980s.

As an artist who began his career in the late 1980s, Felix Gonzalez-Torres used the process of Minimal fabrication and the logic of Conceptualism as a foundation for his artistic oeuvre. The outcome of these influences was artworks that carried the weight of the human condition, questioned authorship, challenged cultural authority, reinterpreted the role of the viewer, and created an institutional critique. Explaining such influences, art critic Gerardo Mosquera describes:

\textsuperscript{115}Woods, \textit{Beginning postmodernism}, 11.
\textsuperscript{116}Ibid., 137-138.
\textsuperscript{117}Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, \textit{The Dematerialization of Art}, 46-47.
His irony was aimed in the other direction: he deconstructed minimal and conceptual art from within, as one who appreciated and subscribed to both movements (Felix always knew that all deconstruction was a self–deconstruction), and at the same time from the perspective of the “other.” In this dual role, he structured a difference within the self referentiality of conceptual art, integrating this difference in an almost subliminal way, yet never abandoning the most austere minimal construction.118

Early in his career Gonzalez-Torres incorporated Conceptualist methodology through the use of text and photography as witnessed in the Sheridan Square billboard, *Untitled* (see fig. 5). Gonzalez-Torres credits the use of text and photography as a direct result of the influence of Joseph Kosuth’s artworks.119 But, Gonzalez-Torres departed from Kosuth’s emphasis on pure categorical and analytical statements that are associated with language and reapplied those tactics to create a social commentary.120

Gonzalez-Torres also embraced the Minimalist tactic of reducing compositions to essential forms. The result of this embrace was simplified yet complex artworks. Gonzalez-Torres transformed the Minimalist approach by incorporating a humanitarian element in his artwork.121 Thus, through this transformation he created a very different

120 Ibid., 13.
121 Ibid., 13.
result than that of Minimalist works. Also, Gonzalez-Torres utilized unique outlets and commercial products, so that the artworks were ambiguous in their message, distribution and presence in the daily lives of the public.

Through the influence of Minimalism and Conceptualism, Gonzalez-Torres was conscious of the power and uniqueness of the viewer’s relationship with his artworks. His intended audience went beyond the elitism of the fine art world and included the general public. In his own words, Gonzalez-Torres described his audience:

I think certain elements of beauty used to attract the viewer are indispensable. I don’t want to make art just for the people who can read Fredric Jameson sitting upright on a Mackintosh chair. I want to make art for people who watch The Golden Girls and sit in a big, brown, La-Z-Boy chair. They’re part of my public too, I hope.

He invited the viewer to participate with and be present in his intimate and personal expression. Gonzalez-Torres did not sway the viewer with his agenda but used the commonality of the human condition and the inherent desire for love to connect with the viewer. Gonzalez-Torres empowered the viewer. He considered the viewer’s life story and experiences, allowing the viewer to interpret his works according to his or her experiences. Art critic Rainer Fuchs explains:

The activation of the viewer intended by Gonzalez-Torres thus takes full account of the fact that the construction of meaning is ultimately a process.

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122 Ibid., 13.
123 Ibid., 15.
that is consigned to the viewer, and that the various attributions of
meaning always raise the question as to the social, political and
sociocultural background and values of the interpreter.\textsuperscript{124}

Thus, the meaning of Gonzalez-Torres’s artworks was found in his ambivalent expression
and the presence of the viewer.

At times, the viewer did not know they were in the presence of Gonzalez-Torres’s
works because they had assumed that artwork could only be viewed in a gallery or
museum. They were unaware that Gonzalez-Torres’s works were ever-present in their
lives. This perception was altered due to the mediums and exhibitions of the artworks.
The site specificity of Gonzalez-Torres’s artwork incorporated the postmodern concern of
challenging the notions of how artwork could be exhibited and furthered postmodern
institutional critique.\textsuperscript{125} Through these factors, he used a public forum to invite the
viewer into his life, a lifestyle that was rejected by mainstream society at that time.

Therefore, Gonzalez-Torres’s work was a bold expression and a memorial of his love for
his late partner, Ross Laycock. Prior to Ross’s tragic death, Gonzalez-Torres admittedly
only made art for Ross. But after Ross died, he began to produce art for a broader
audience. His audience became the general public and his work was permeated with the
loss of his lover.\textsuperscript{126}

In 1991, the same year that Ross died of AIDS, Gonzalez-Torres produced twenty-

\textsuperscript{125} Woods, \textit{Beginning postmodernism}, 133.
four billboards that were displayed throughout New York City for Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres at the Museum of Modern Art (see fig. 10–12).\textsuperscript{127} Enlarging a snapshot of an unmade bed with the imprints of two bodies onto billboards of varying sizes, Gonzalez-Torres boldly exposed his life as a person impacted by and living with AIDS.\textsuperscript{128} There was not an explanatory title, caption or artistic signature featured on the image, allowing an open interpretation of what this seductive imagery could mean.\textsuperscript{129} Nancy Spector explains:

Although it certainly was possible to interpret this bed as a declaration of homoerotic desire, multiplied twenty-four times through the city in a kind of municipal orgy, it could also be comprehended as something entirely different, something far more culturally benign.\textsuperscript{130}

The viewer may not fully comprehend or be aware of the emotional baggage behind this imagery and the consuming grief Gonzalez-Torres experienced. The imagery does signify a sense of absence, loss, or the idea that something or someone was missing. Gonzalez-Torres’s choices to use the personal imagery of a bed, photography as a medium, and the super scale of the billboard evoked what he refers to as an “illogical meeting.”\textsuperscript{131} It is illogical in the sense that the domestic bed, typically a private, intimate piece of furniture, had been altered and displayed in a very public forum.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 241.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 241.
\textsuperscript{129} Spector, FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 25.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{131} Umland. Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 243.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 243.
of using photography and billboards as mediums created a sense of omnipresent imagery and anonymity.\textsuperscript{133} Gonzalez-Torres embraced the postmodern concern of originality by breaking away from the use of traditional mediums and by producing multiples of the imagery throughout New York City. The viewer is presented with the difficulty of determining whether they are viewing a work of art or the latest avant-garde advertisement for household goods.\textsuperscript{134} In one sense the white crumpled sheets signify comfort, intimacy and relaxation, but they also signify the loss or absence of those bedmates, thus signifying recent or impending death.\textsuperscript{135}

It was through these illogical circumstances that Gonzalez-Torres hoped that the meaning was revealed to the viewer.\textsuperscript{136} The viewer was not given a bias. At times, because Gonzalez-Torres and Ross were gay and infected with AIDS, the general public’s prejudices would not take notice of their love story. However, Gonzalez-Torres did not hide the fact that he was a gay living with AIDS or that he had just lost his partner to AIDS-related death. He simplified his compositions so that they would remain ambiguous in people’s daily lives, in a similar fashion to how the AIDS epidemic was obscure to mainstream society.

There was a political and biological threat attacking the young gay community. At times the AIDS epidemic seemed hidden within society, but if people were willing to

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 23
\textsuperscript{135} Spector, \textit{FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES}, 25.
take notice, it was clear that this epidemic was ever present in their daily lives. Similar to the presence of the AIDS epidemic in society, most people were unaware of the presence of Gonzalez-Torres’s billboards in their lives as they walked by and went on with their day. The ones who did take notice may have questioned its purpose, and if so, would have been exposed to Gonzalez-Torres and Ross’s story. Therefore, the absence of information helped Gonzalez-Torres connect with a large audience, and created the opportunity to bring attention to AIDS impact on people’s lives.

Through his artwork, Felix Gonzalez-Torres embraced the postmodernist concern of challenging the preconceived ideas of authorship. Initially established as a Minimalist and Conceptualist concern, Gonzalez-Torres wanted to transform, revise and update the concept of authorship as it related to late 1980s and early 1990s art communities. He deliberately used the fear affiliated with the loss of a loved one and the inevitability of the viewer’s mortality to challenge artistic authorship. Theorist Roland Barthes states:

Thus the private trauma is worked out by recourse to the public sphere of the art world. Insight into the fundamental interlink between private and public matters here determines a kind of authorship as the mediation of what is only seemingly disparate, whereby the renunciation of the self and allowing the work to be destroyed are also forms of self-preservation, self-control and the preservation of the work. If notions of oppositional constructs, when held up against social reality, prove to be only allegedly oppositional, then it is only logical that for the art that addresses these issues, the conventional schemes of the confrontation of alternatives and
mutual exclusion can no longer be valid. Destruction paralyzed by
destruction and the staging of the authority of the author by means of
authorization of the viewer are thus correlating phenomena.\textsuperscript{137}

Authorship and the empowered viewer were thus connected through the need to use a
public forum to create artworks that were a reflection of one’s fears, anxieties,
heartbreaks, and traumatic life experiences.

Gonzalez-Torres deliberately used this drive to transfer the power of authorship
from creator to viewer. For example, from 1987 to 1990, Gonzalez-Torres created several
versions of his work, \textit{Untitled (Perfect Lovers)}. In a letter describing this work to Ross
Laycock in 1988, Gonzalez-Torres explains his reasoning behind the artwork to his
partner. Gonzalez-Torres writes:

\begin{quote}
Lovers, 1988

Dont be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous
to us. We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered
fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain space. We are a product of
the time, therefore we give back credit where it is due: time.

We are synchronized, now and forever.

I love you.\textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

Gonzalez-Torres affixed two generic, battery operated, store bought clocks in a variety of

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
homes and galleries (see fig. 13–14). These two clocks were joined together by the slightest touch and were initially synchronized to the same hour, minute, and second. Eventually, the low-tech clocks fell out of synchrony when one prematurely stopped, while the other remained ticking. Similar to Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the twin clocks blended into the surrounding environment and were unaccompanied by a caption, title, or artistic signature. The significance of these works lay within the experience and subsequent interpretation of the viewer. Art critic Robert Storr writes:

The meaning of the image hinges on the projected fantasy of the person who stands below and looks up at an enlargement of the most eroticized zone of their everyday lives, the psychological site of their greatest longing, insecurity and discomfort, the nearly neutral screen on which memories or expectations of happiness, frustration, or deprivation can be played in the mind’s eye.139

The “perfect lovers” could be representative of any type of intimate relationship, whether it was platonic, gay, straight, monogamous or promiscuous.140 There is a commonality created between these diverse relationships by focusing on the emotional attachments developed between two people.

The clocks acted as an existential metaphor for the anxiety affiliated with the impending separation of those relationships. In his own words, Gonzalez-Torres explained his motivations for creating Untitled (Perfect Lovers) during an interview by

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139 Storr, When This You See Remember Me, 28.
140 Ibid., 28.
Robert Nickas in 1991, originally published in *Flash Arts*. Gonzalez-Torres explains:

> Time is something that scares me...or used to. The piece I made with the two clocks was the scariest thing I have ever done. I wanted to face it. I wanted those two clocks right in front of me, ticking. I also was very influenced by Benjamin’s idea that art should act right now at the end of the century. We are always shifting back and forth between the personal and the public. One day I want to make something from what I read in the paper and the next day I want to make a work about a memory I have of eating a delicious meal with my boyfriend in Italy. The idea of pieces being endless has happened because at that point I was losing someone very important.\(^\text{141}\)

*Perfect Lovers* was realized during the years that Ross’ health began to rapidly deteriorate as AIDS began to ravage his body.\(^\text{142}\) The two clicking clocks represented Gonzalez-Torres’s vantage point of his anguish as caregiver and survivor.\(^\text{143}\) Describing Gonzalez-Torres’s dual role, art critic Linda Weintraub explains:

> Gonzalez-Torres’s daily confrontation with AIDS completes the symbolic narrative of the battery-operated clocks. This temporal context for love is derived from the emotional aftershock of watching his lover succumb to the HIV virus. *Perfect Lovers* resonates with Gonzalez-Torres’s intimate


\(^{143}\) Ibid., 111-112.
involvement with a life that expired too quickly and sorrow that lasts too long. When *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* was made, two lovers’ hearts were still beating.\(^\text{144}\)

The constant, rhythmic ticking sound of the clocks acted as a catalyst for anxiety, fear, and, in many ways, the death of the author at the cost of the birth of the viewer.

Working as a post-studio artist, Gonzalez-Torres redefined the role of the author by empowering the viewer.\(^\text{145}\) He provided the viewer with an active role, and with his or her participation, the meaning of his works was ignited. The intentional neutrality Gonzalez-Torres created with his works forced the viewer to question who created these works and even why the artist created them. Historically, there has typically been an immediate explanation found when viewing artworks. Whether it is through a correlating title or caption, the viewer is told how he or she should interpret the works. Roland Barthes theorized that the meaning of a work of art is normally derived from the person who created it.\(^\text{146}\) Through this absolute creative power, it is the artist who is confiding to the viewer through his or her artworks.\(^\text{147}\) But what happens when the author is absent? The viewer finds himself or herself with the unique opportunity to use the artwork as a catalyst to explore his or her deepest thoughts and emotions. Thus, he or she becomes his or her own confidant. Through his inactive or absent role, Gonzalez-Torres allowed an unconventional, highly intellectualized relationship to occur that engaged the viewer and

\(^{144}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{145}\) Schmidt-Wufflen, *Forget Minimalism. . . !*, 64.

\(^{146}\) Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 113.

\(^{147}\) Ibid., 113.
even redefined the function of postmodern art.

In 1992, Gonzalez-Torres produced a series of powerful sculptures entitled, *Untitled (Petit Palais), Untitled (North), Untitled (Summer), Untitled (Miami)* (see fig. 15–18). These sculptures became the ultimate embodiment of connecting the viewer to the artwork and allowing the viewer to construct meaning in artworks.\(^{148}\) He fabricated twenty-four light sculptures that each consisted of either fifteen, twenty-four, twenty-five or forty-two low-tech light bulbs, that were distributed evenly over varying lengths of electrical cord and installed in various locations.\(^{149}\) These works were identical, with the only differentiation between them being found within the individual titles and lengths of each sculpture. Gonzalez-Torres had only one request for these structures: the installer had to compose the form of the light strings solely using his or her discretion. Therefore, the completion of the sculpture was dependent on the eyes and hands of the installer. Gonzalez-Torres wanted the installer to become liberated, while at the same time eliminating the perceived connotations of how artwork was created and how it functioned. The light sculptures acted as a catalyst that enabled the installer to become free of personal restraints and use his or her creativity to complete a sculpture. Felix Gonzalez-Torres describes his creative process:

> I didn’t know how these pieces are best displayed. I don’t have all the answers—you decide how you want it done. Whatever you want to do, try it. This is not some minimalist artwork that has to be exactly two inches to


\(^{149}\) Ibid., 215.
the left and six inches down. Play with it, please. Have fun. Give yourself that freedom. Put my creativity into question, minimize the preciousness of the piece.\textsuperscript{150}

The outcome of this request was a display of varying light sculptures that were a unique reflection of the individual installer. The sculptures had a hypnotic effect. In one instance, the soft glow of the lights acted like a church votive candle flickering in remembrance of a prayer or memory. In another instance, they were a ball of tightly intertwined lights, or even a radiant field of garlands marking a city street.\textsuperscript{151} The distinctive locations allowed various interpretations, to the extent that when viewed outside of a gallery or museum, the sculptures could be misidentified as lighting decor bought from a store.

Gonzalez-Torres embraced the challenge of exposing his vulnerabilities to a judgmental society. The multiple reproductions of the billboards, \textit{Untitled (Perfect Lovers)} and \textit{Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres} at the Museum of Modern Art, and the light sculptures coupled with the participation of the viewer, allowed the artworks to be dethroned as, what Walter Benjamin describes, “an object of devotion.”\textsuperscript{152} Furthermore, Gonzalez-Torres embraced the rise of the mass culture and reproducibility that Benjamin described in his writings. He allowed the viewer to not simply be a disinterested critic. It was through their participation that the “aura” of the mechanically reproduced artwork

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 215.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 215.
\textsuperscript{152} Walter Benjamin, \textit{The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media} (Cambridge: The Harvard University Press, 2008), 21-22.
was restored.\textsuperscript{153} Through this bold act, Gonzalez-Torres allowed art to become the product of mass society, but instead of the devaluing the object, it was raised to a new standard. This standard allowed art to reach the depths of the human condition and allowed the creation of artworks to become a collaborative activity that embraced all people and did not discriminate because of their socio-cultural background, sexual preference, or diseased body.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 21-22.
CHAPTER IV:

IN PERFECT UNISON:
FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES’S LOVE, GRIEF AND LASTING GIFT

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was a generous artist. His artworks were a direct reflection of his life experiences. These experiences were at times oppressive, traumatizing, viral and filled with consuming grief. Despite this adversity he used his artworks to approach a harsh society and the implications of his disease with profound sympathy, kindness, honesty, and love. Therefore, his artworks were a combination of a highly intellectualized art product, and a reflection of the experience as a gay living with AIDS.

The transcendent quality of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s artwork was that the AIDS epidemic directly influenced it, yet at the same time, his artworks were not wholly dedicated to this disease. However, he did communicate one message clearly: AIDS was and is a disease of loss. By witnessing the deterioration of Ross’s body, combined with the psychological impact of being that witness, Gonzalez-Torres was in many ways looking into the crystal ball of his future. The pain, anguish, and deterioration Ross experienced so too would Gonzalez-Torres. This intense past, present, and future for Felix could only be succeeded by extraordinary grief. He grieved for the loss of his love and for the all too imminent loss of his own life to the disease. For Gonzalez-Torres, producing art was an outlet for this consuming grief, an expression of his profound life
experiences, the physical and psychological impact of the AIDS virus, and more importantly, an existential funerary rite for Ross, himself, and all AIDS victims.

The constant reminder of sickness and impending death for Gonzalez-Torres made his art production at times a necessary and urgent calling.\textsuperscript{154} The reality was that in the 1980s and early 1990s there was virtually no effective medical intervention once HIV transformed into AIDS, leaving patients with a 12 to 18 month life expectancy. It was as if they would disappear, losing their future aspirations, hopes, self-esteem, identity, lifestyle, psyche, body, other loved ones who were HIV positive and, at times, the support of friends and family.\textsuperscript{155} Therefore, the issue of loss and uncertainty exceeds the extent of HIV infection. Psychologist Lorraine Sherr writes, “HIV infection and AIDS encompass not only the process of dying but also a constant process of loss which includes adaptation and coping with change on behavioral, physical, emotional and intrapsychic levels.”\textsuperscript{156} Gonzalez-Torres and many other young gay men who were infected with AIDS were confronted with adverse challenges and many uncertainties during what should have been the most vital time of their young lives. Gonzalez-Torres coped with this multifaceted conflict by incorporating his desire to continue his and Ross’s legacy through his complex creative expression.

Gonzalez-Torres openly admitted that he initially only made artworks for Ross. Then after Ross’s passing in 1991, he began to make artworks for a broader, general

\textsuperscript{154} Storr, \textit{When This You See Remember Me}, 9.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 116.
audience. In many ways, his creations were an attempt to cope with the fact that life would go on with or without Ross. Sherr further explains, “Grief comprises the emotional reactions focused on or surrounding the longing for someone that is no longer there.”¹⁵⁷ In some respect, that longing is never resolved. Once a loss is experienced, the bereaved cannot truly accept or get over the void that is created by that loss.¹⁵⁸ Freud interpreted the psychological response to losing a loved one as mourning or melancholia.¹⁵⁹ He concluded that when one is in mourning, time would eventually heal both the psychological and emotional wounds.¹⁶⁰ On the opposite spectrum, when one was in the unhealthy state of melancholia, they would experience loss of interest to the outside world, loss of self-esteem and a loss of capacity to love another due to the fear of replacing the deceased.¹⁶¹ Gonzalez-Torres could never truly heal from the trauma of Ross’s death because he possessed the unsettling awareness that he too would succumb to AIDS. It was unnecessary for Gonzalez-Torres to move on, but it was necessary to create artworks to immortalize their love and partnership. The artwork created out of this necessity was thus able to transcend any theoretical, intellectual limitations and reach

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 2.
¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 116.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 243.
¹⁶¹ Ibid., 244.
such a large audience because of the commonality and universality of grief and mourning.\textsuperscript{162}

In 1991, Gonzalez-Torres created a floor sculpture that embodied postmodern spontaneity and innovation entitled, \textit{Untitled (Placebo)}. Exhibited at a multitude of venues, such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Hirshhorn Museum at the Smithsonian, this all-over floor composition consisted of a multitude of glistening hand-wrapped candies, evoking the horizontal plane of Pollock.\textsuperscript{163} (see fig. 19–22) The geometric form and inherit neutrality of the sculpture were both parodies of his biography and Minimalist inheritance.\textsuperscript{164}

Redefining the conventional rules of viewer participation with fine art, the viewer was invited to interact with the sculpture (see fig. 23). Viewers were encouraged to take and consume these metallic candies and once all the pieces were consumed the mounds were replenished.\textsuperscript{165} At times, the spills were calculated to equal the weight of Gonzalez-Torres, Ross or their combined weights.\textsuperscript{166} Thus, the spills were also an abstract portrait of Gonzalez-Torres and Ross. By offering the viewer a metaphoric freebie in a glistening silver wrapper, Gonzalez-Torres was also confronting the viewer with the issues of homophobia and societal fear of physical contact with those who were HIV positive or

\textsuperscript{163} Kirk Varnedoe, \textit{Minimalism and After}, 5.
\textsuperscript{164} Weintraub, \textit{A Hispanic Gay Man: Felix Gonzalez-Torres}, 115.
\textsuperscript{165} Storr, \textit{When This You See Remember Me}, 7.
\textsuperscript{166} Weintraub, \textit{A Hispanic Homosexual Man: Felix Gonzalez-Torres}, 115.
living with AIDS. Instead of combating these complex issues with corresponding hate and fear, Gonzalez-Torres employed compassion. Thus, with the simple and essential act of reaching down and taking a piece of the candy, the viewer in essence became a carrier not of a terminal disease but love.

Once the viewer takes possession of the sculpture, they immediately break the museum cliché of “Look, don’t touch.” Describing the internal conflict the viewer is presented with, art critic Margrit Brehm explains:

Learned behavior and past experience must be overcome: hands off! Art is to be seen and not touched, and you certainly don’t take it home with you. Gifts from strangers can be dangerous. But then there’s this sparkling pile of candies, just one can’t hurt...

Thus, the viewer became the consumer or accomplice who was seduced by the shiny candy wrappings and was the cause of the deterioration of the mounds. The simplified composition created by the candy mounds, coupled with the need for viewer participation, mimicked a Minimalistic concern. At the same time, the active role of the viewer and the conceptual consideration for the body went beyond the Minimalist canon. Also, Minimalists contended that when they deconstructed visual forms, the

167 Ibid., 115.
168 Ibid., 113.
169 Ibid., 113.
170 Brehm, Where are we coming from? Where are we going? Where will we go on vacation?, 43.
171 Ibid., 43.
172 Kirk Varnedoe, Minimalism and After, 5.
173 Ibid., 5.
meaning could never be found in the absence of the forms. Utilizing a similar approach, Gonzalez-Torres deconstructed conventional forms of representation, but the meaning of his work was found in the absence of the forms. For Gonzalez-Torres, the absence created presence.

Gonzalez-Torres made few compositional and exhibition requests for the display of the candy spill. He simply stated that the composition of the candy sculpture would remain solely dependent on the installer.\(^{174}\) While on display, the sculpture and the area surrounding the sculpture should remained untouched by the installer until all of the mound was to be replenished.\(^{175}\)

In an interview conducted by Robert Storr in 1995, Gonzalez-Torres explained the development of *Untitled (Placebo)*:

> When people ask me, ‘Who is your public?’ I say honestly, without skipping a beat, ‘Ross.’ The public was Ross….After doing all these shows, I’ve become burnt out trying to have some kind of personal presence in the work. Because I’m not my art. It’s not the form and not the shape, not the way these things function that’s being put into question. What is being put into question is me, I made *Untitled (Placebo)* because I needed to make it….From the very beginning it was not even there--I made something that doesn’t exist. I control that pain. That’s really what it is….Of course, it has to do with all the bullshit of seduction and the art

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\(^{174}\) Storr, *When This You See Remember Me*, 7.

\(^{175}\) Ibid., 7.
authenticity. I know that stuff, but on the other side, it has that personal level that is very real….It’s also about excess, about the excess of pleasure…First and foremost it’s about Ross. Then I wanted to please myself and then everybody.176

The destined disintegration of the candy spills correlated with the inevitable physical demise of Ross, Felix and those living with AIDS. Even the subtitle, Placebo, incorporated an unfulfilled promise AIDS patients received from the medical community and the never-ending hope for a medical cure. Unlike the physical degradation that AIDS patients experienced, the candy was reconfigured and eventually restored. This systematic revival occurred time and time again, so that the representative body could figuratively die over and over again, signifying a multitude of deaths.177

The ritualistic cycle of consumption, death, and rebirth evoked divine grace through renewal. This symbolic hope for resurrection blurred the boundaries between temporal forms and ecclesiastic traditions.178 The communal practice of consumption paralleled the Catholic practice of communion and belief of transubstantiation. Robert Storr describes, “And so, in a public place under the gaze of authority as well as that of believers and non-believers, male and female, gay and straight- take a new democratic form of communion by metaphorically ingesting the ‘other.’”179 When the participant ingests the candy, it slowly begins to dissolve and the process of vanishing occurs.

176 Ibid., 9-11.
177 Ibid., 8-9.
178 Ibid., 7-8.
179 Ibid., 8.
Similar to the vanishing of a diseased body or the melting away of one’s grief. By representing the body through consumed objects, Gonzalez-Torres created an ideological community by creating an unbiased setting where a diverse public was welcomed to participate in conventional gift giving. This generous and loving gift from Gonzalez-Torres connected the viewer to the past, present and future of his works.

In the same year that *Untitled (Placebo)* was created, Gonzalez-Torres produced another candy spill entitled, *Untitled (Rossmore II)*. (see fig. 24–27) Capturing the Pop Art colors of artists such as Andy Warhol, these seductive green candies evoked a sense of pleasure and longing. Art critic, Miwon Kwon, recounts that he was told that Rossmore Street was Gonzalez-Torres’s favorite street in Los Angeles. Especially because this street not only included Ross’s name, but declared, *more Ross*.

Whether or not this story correlates with Gonzalez-Torres’s intent, it was not an oversight that in the same year that Ross passed away, Gonzalez-Torres longed for, missed or wished for the presence of Ross.

Throughout his career, Gonzalez-Torres consistently avoided most conventional forms of representation. Nancy Spector explains, “The refusal to render a visual likeness serves additionally to disavow the binary implications of representation

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180 Fuchs, The Authorized Viewer, 112.
182 Ibid., 215.
184 Ibid., 309.
185 Spector, *FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES*, 143.
itself.”186 There was never a literal rendering or reproduction of the body or portraiture in Gonzalez-Torres’s work, but bodily representation remained ever-present. This affirms his deliberate attempt to desexualize artistic perception.187 Gonzalez-Torres wanted to create an unbiased reading of his works that was not rooted in presumptive baggage and in turn, this act renounced the objectification of his work.188

Living as a gay man with AIDS, Gonzalez-Torres was well aware of the implications of the role of the cultural other in a right-wing society. With prejudice thriving against the gay community and AIDS destroying it, the body and its representation were grounds for social and political discourse. Gonzalez-Torres was conscious of the implications and shortcomings of overtly politically charged artwork.189 The societal impact of such work was lessened because the audience had learned, as Robert Storr described, “to duck the thrust of radical critique if they can clearly see it coming.”190 Therefore, Gonzalez-Torres wanted his art to be a neutral ground within which a diverse general audience could come together without bias or prejudice. He created a delicate balance between personal disclosure and social commentary. Therefore, he recuperated what would be deemed subjective gay body imagery by creating a neutral presence in visual culture.191

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186 Ibid., 143.
187 Ibid., 144.
188 Ibid., 144.
189 Storr, When This You See Remember Me, 14.
190 Ibid., 14
191 Spector, FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 156.
In 1991, during his formative year of visual creation, Gonzalez-Torres created *Untitled (Orpheus Twice)* as a quest for conceptual body representation and the need for fulfillment through absence (see fig. 28).  

The subtitle alludes to the Greek myth of two lovers, Orpheus and Eurydice, who were cruelly separated by Eurydice’s premature death. Orpheus traveled to the underworld to rescue his love and made a deal with the underworld god, Hades, for her return. The one stipulation was that Eurydice could return with Orpheus as long as he did not look back at her as they were traveling from the underworld. Unfortunately, Orpheus succumbed to this condition, turning back and catching a glimpse of Eurydice, thus losing her to Hades’ underworld forever. Similar to this mythological tale, Gonzalez-Torres lost his love forever, but he was powerless and not presented with an opportunity to save Ross.

This conceptual interpretation of loss and representation requires the viewer’s participation and unique presence. The twin mirrors’ reflective surfaces allude to the presence of the viewer and the absence of the lost lovers, Ross and Gonzalez-Torres. By standing in front of the mirrors, the viewer experiences his or her physical presence in the work. The bodily presence of the viewer calls attention to the physical absence of Ross and Gonzalez-Torres. Nancy Spector describes:

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192 Ibid., 140-141.
194 Ibid., 57.
195 Ibid., 57.
196 Ibid., 57.
The lone viewer is bound to perceive one empty glass, the mark of an absent other. Or, if the viewer chooses to observe both mirrors at once by standing directly between them, the corresponding reflection will show a figure severed in two, suggesting a self divided, a split personality, a shattered ego. 197

The viewer is also presented with Gonzalez-Torres ideology that individuals did not endure alone, that people live in pairs as companions and as each other’s beloved, who exist together without prejudice and are not prematurely separated by tragedy. 198 Therefore, for Gonzalez-Torres, the ultimate fulfillment was to be loved and in a relationship, to exist as a pair. 199

Gonzalez-Torres used his artworks as a vehicle to travel through personal memories. He created narratives that always included, and at times desired the viewer’s presence to partake in that journey. In many ways, after losing Ross, the viewer became Gonzalez-Torres’s partner or the other half of his pair. The prolific narratives Gonzalez-Torres created even alluded to a transition both spiritual and physical. This transition, journey, or rite of passage was reflected in the paper stack sculptures created in 1991, entitled, Untitled (Passport).

The stack of blank sheets of white paper is displayed horizontally on the floor, evoking a Minimalist object and beckoning the viewer to take a sheet (see fig. 29–30). 200

197 Spector, FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 143.
198 Ibid., 143.
199 Ibid., 143.
200 Cristiane Meyer-Stoll, “I Desire to Make this Place a Better Place. About Two works
Similar to the candy spill sculptures, the paper stacks were endless and the viewer was encouraged to take a booklet as a souvenir and lasting gift for their presence. The viewer who upon taking a sheet of white paper depleted the stack and the piece of paper became a token of orthodox gift giving.  

As the subtitle suggests, these blank pages were a passport or token to interact with and create memories and dreams. The term passport refers to a source of identity and personal journey. A passport contains identifying information of the owner, such as nationality, physical attributes, and where that person has traveled, and what that destination may be. With the blank, enlarged passport pages, Gonzalez-Torres allowed the viewer to decide their own destination and identity. The concept of travel or a journey alluded to going from one place to a foreign one, whether it was a journey of personal growth or an existential travel. The invitation to take and accept the blank page obliged the viewer to make a choice and agree to immortalize all victims of the AIDS epidemic and honor their afterlife.
In 1993, Gonzalez-Torres revised the passport blank stacks, with a printed version entitled, *Untitled (Passport #II)*. The stacks consisted of 30 handmade passports, or small booklets, arranged approximately 20 centimeters high in a rectangular form. Each booklet contained 12 pages featuring a photograph of two birds flying upward against a clouded sky (see fig. 31–33). Unlike the pure stacks of the blank pages, the booklet stacks were uneven and unstable, thus creating disorder in what was previously a strict order.207 The 12 photographs were apportioned evenly over 6 pages, evoking a cosmic and spiritual numerical sequence. Describing the historic significance of the numbers, art critic Christaine Meyer-Stroll explains:

Since time immemorial, twelve, a cosmic number representing completeness and the sacred, has been very important, and every day we come across it in the division of the day into twelve hours of night, twelve months of the year. Has the camera captured twelve seconds, twelve hours, twelve months here?208

For Gonzalez-Torres, the use of the number twelve could refer to the sacred, spiritual, and physical journey for a person living with AIDS. The pair of birds represented that journey, one that was filled with hope and despair. Gonzalez-Torres’s journey was medical, emotional, and physical, as a couple with Ross, and as an individual. It is as though they were the pair of birds, traveling together against the blustery sky. For that moment, they were side-by-side, free and in perfect unison.

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207 Meyer-Stoll, *I Desire to Make this Place a Better Place. About Two works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 176.
208 Ibid., 178
On January 9, 1996, in Miami, Florida, Felix Gonzalez-Torres lost his battle to AIDS at the age of 39.\footnote{Julie Ault, ed., “Chronology” in \textit{Felix Gonzalez-Torres}, (Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2006), 376.} In 2007, nearly eleven years after his passing, Felix Gonzalez-Torres was chosen to represent the United States in the 52\textsuperscript{nd} Venice Biennale. He is only the second artist to represent the United States posthumously.\footnote{Randy Kennedy, “Tough Art With a Candy Center.” \textit{New York Times} (June 7, 2007). \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/07/arts/design/07bien.html} (accessed March 2, 2010).} The exhibition featured an array of his most celebrated works including the candy spills, paper stacks and illuminated strands.\footnote{Ibid.} Most importantly, the exhibition featured a never before fabricated sculpture originally conceived by Gonzalez-Torres and entitled, \textit{Untitled} (see fig. 34–35).

The composition mirrored the circular design first seen in \textit{Untitled (Perfect Lovers)} (see fig. 13).\footnote{Ibid.} As witnessed in \textit{Untitled (Perfect Lovers)}, the pools were conjoined by the slightest, most delicate touch. This simplified composition alluded to Gonzalez-Torres’s desire for partnership and harmony.\footnote{Ibid.} Fabricated from white Carrara marble, this native Italian material was especially significant because it was the chosen medium other great artists such as Michelangelo and Bernini, and was used to fabricate some of the greatest masterpieces of western civilization.\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, these reflective pools aligned Gonzalez-Torres with the great masters of western art, and publicly declared the

contribution of his work to the tradition of western art and its continuing relevance to present day society.

These pools were displayed in front of the United States pavilion, utilizing the previous exhibition tactics first employed by Gonzalez-Torres nearly twenty years prior. For example, due to the pools indistinct display, the viewer may not have even realized that these two pools were part of the exhibition at the United States Pavilion. Perhaps the two pools were another Italian fountain common to the Venetian landscape, or maybe a wishing pool where people could drop coins so that their dreams would come true. Gonzalez-Torres’s wish was to create a unified community that was free of disease, loss, and prejudice. Thus, the reflective pools represented his hopes and wishes for society. The tranquil beauty of the pools, reminded the viewer of Gonzalez-Torre’s ideology and their own inherent quality to love.

The two large, shallow circular pools weighed between eight to ten tons each. Filled with clear water, the pools vibrantly reflected the surrounding environment and those who looked into the pools. Also, as discussed with Untitled (Orpheus Twice), the pools called attention to the bodily presence of the viewer and the absence of Gonzalez-Torres and Ross (see fig. 28). By looking into the pools the viewer experiences his or her reflection and by doing so, the viewer is reminded of the absence of Gonzalez-Torres and Ross. In many ways, because the pools were exhibited after Gonzalez-Torres’s death, the pools acted as a memorial for Gonzalez-Torres and Ross.

The two reflective pools were Gonzalez-Torres’s legacy. Throughout his life, it was the love he shared with Ross that was of the utmost importance. It was the act of
love that brought his audience together. It was through his generous gift that Gonzalez-Torres’s audience continues to experience the universal need for love, partnership and acceptance.
CONCLUSION

In 1996, the year that Felix Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS, new drug trials were developed as an effective fight against AIDS.215 These protease blocking drugs thwarted a key chemical sequence mimicked by HIV, transforming AIDS into what the medical community termed as a more “manageable disease.”216 Although AIDS in many ways defined him, and in the end took his life, it did not rob Gonzalez-Torres of his creativity, generosity, or his ability to love.

Through my research, I found that Gonzalez-Torres used his disease and life experiences to create artworks that were the direct result of the physical and psychological impact of the AIDS virus, the experience of living as an HIV positive gay in New York City, and a highly intellectualized art product rooted in Minimalism and Conceptualism. I believe that Gonzalez-Torres did not fall into the 1980s commercialized art trends, such as Neo-Expressionism, rather he incorporated the intellectualized and conceptually challenging art movements of the mid 1960s into his artistic oeuvre. His artworks were deeply rooted in the notions of Minimalist forms and Conceptual intelligence. Therefore, I interpreted Gonzalez-Torres’s works as a singular fusion of Minimalism and Conceptualism by incorporating but not imitating these two movements and his own methodology. Also, I found that Gonzalez-Torres’s artworks were especially significant because they introduced the foundations of Minimalism and

215 Ibid., 376.
216 Ibid., 376.
Conceptualism to a diverse community by addressing and including all members of society as opposed to limiting exposure of his work to an elite audience. Therefore, Gonzalez-Torres created a coherent interpretation and, in turn, a unique readability of Minimalism and Conceptualism that enabled his audience to understand the concepts of these typically challenging art movements.

By allowing his audience to understand the meaning and significance of Minimalism and Conceptualism, Gonzalez-Torres continued the legacy of these past art practices and created a new audience exposed to postmodern concepts. I concluded that Gonzalez-Torres succeeded in connecting an eclectic audience to the foundations of Minimalism and Conceptualism by incorporating humanity into what would otherwise be viewed as mechanical art products. Focusing on and using his experiences with love and grief, Gonzalez-Torres connected with his diverse audience by exposing them to his compassion and, in turn, his own human nature.

Focusing on the complex issues of identity, originality and authorship, the diverse art forms he created challenged preconceived notions of representation and societal values. Gonzalez-Torres simplified his artistic compositions to redefine the role of the viewer, author and the function of postmodern art. Gonzalez-Torres wanted his art, and thus the viewer, to question the production, distribution and commodification of postmodern art. By doing so, I believe that his artworks taught the public a new way of seeing and experiencing postmodern art. The heterogeneous artworks were displayed in unique and nontraditional exhibition spaces so that maximum public exposure could be achieved and thus, his ideology could spread.
The AIDS-related death of his partner Ross Laycock profoundly altered and informed Gonzalez-Torres’s artworks. After Ross’s death in 1991, Gonzalez-Torres began to incorporate the viewer as an integral component that was necessary to complete his artwork. He began to create artworks that were more compassionate toward the viewer and exposed an unprecedented honesty in his compositions. I believe that it was Gonzalez-Torres’s humility that enabled him to reach out to the general public, even to those who were prejudiced against his lifestyle and disease. He believed in the essential goodness of human nature and wanted to create a community that was free of bigotry. I believe that by creating a commonality between the viewer and object, Gonzalez-Torres’s works acted as a catalyst for the viewer to see beyond the prejudices directed toward the gay community and those living with AIDS during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, through this act the viewer was able to understand the common bond that ties all people, a need for love.

Gonzalez-Torres used inclusion as opposed to exclusion tactics, to create a community that extended beyond the museum and gallery cultures. He would encourage the viewer to take parts of the sculptures, and at times allowed them complete control over the installation of his artworks. By inviting the audience to take “freebies” of his work, I think that it was clear that Gonzalez-Torres’s motivations were not monetary, but that he desired to create social change. Thus, when the viewer accepts his gift they are not only taking away a piece of his art but a part of his intoxicating ideology. This simple act allowed his message of love and compassion to spread throughout his audience.
When Gonzalez-Torres was chosen to represent the United States in the fifty-second Venice Biennale, it was a testament to the importance and significance of his work. By featuring the never before fabricated sculpture *Untitled*, the selection committee recognized the significance and legacy of his work. Also, this international exhibition expanded his audience and by doing so continued his ideology and message of love. His methodology and unprecedented honesty has allowed such a large and diverse audience to encounter and be touched by his works. Therefore, I believe that Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s influence on art and society is yet to be fully realized. The continuing and growing influence of his works will carry on because of the underlying message of love. It is the universal need for love that continues to capture his audience and create the unified community that Gonzalez-Torres dedicated his life and art to. It is through this growing following that his legacy, memory, and most importantly, his love remains relevant and continues to influence present-day society. Felix Gonzalez-Torres wanted to make the world a better place, and in many ways he has achieved his goal.
APPENDICES
Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 3

Figure 4
Figure 5
Figure 6
Donald Judd, *Untitled (Stack)*, 1967.

Figure 7
Figure 8

Figure 9
Figure 10
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1992,
Displayed in 24 locations throughout New York City.
Figure 11

Figure 12
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991,
Figure 13

Figure 14
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991,
The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1994.
Figure 15
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Petit Palais)*, 1992,

Figure 16
Installed in the home of Eileen and Peter Norton.
Figure 17

Figure 18
Figure 19

Figure 20
Figure 21

Figure 22
Figure 23

Figure 24
Figure 25

Figure 26
Figure 27
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Rossmore II)*, 1991,
Installed in the home of Ranbur Singh.

Figure 28
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Orpheus Twice)*, 1991,
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York City.
Figure 29

Figure 30
Figure 31

Figure 32
Figure 33
Figure 34
Figure 35
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