

REQUIEM FOR THE SHADOWS:  
POETRY, SPIRITUALITY, AND FUTURE MEMORY IN THE LIGHT STRINGS OF  
FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

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And finally, to those whose presence is felt through the shadows.

*This thesis will be constructed upon the artist's statement that all of his artwork was made for an audience of one – his lover, Ross Laycock.*

“When people ask me, ‘Who is your public?’ I say honestly, without skipping a beat, ‘Ross’.”

-Felix Gonzalez-Torres<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Storr, “When This You See Remember Me,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York and Gottingen: Steidl Dangan Publishers, 2006), 9.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Someone tried to console me the other day, saying it would get easier – I hope it never does. I hope and pray that it will always hurt this much, and anger me this much, and that every AIDS death that follows is just as painful to me. I never want to get used to something this horrible.*

*-Paul Hill<sup>1</sup>*

Beating in synchronicity to the second, their bodies touch. They do not embrace – instead they remain entirely self-contained. Yet, the gentlest of touches connects the two, uniting the separate forms to create a symbol of eternity. The identical bodies are nothing extravagant – instead they are simple forms which might easily be overlooked as they often are only discreetly present in the corner of a room.

The symbols infiltrate, harnessing a message of the times. The beautiful representation, although simple in its form, is complex in its thought. The bodies at once expresses the archetypal hope of many and the often unspoken fear of many more, for it is understood that the time-keeping heartbeat will eventually fall out of synch. One will eventually slow before the other. Although connected by their touch they are, after all, still separate beings. And as one slows and dies the other will inevitably fall out of their perfect beating pulse and reach the same ending – utter stillness.<sup>2</sup>

Felix Gonzalez-Torres conceptualized “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987-1990, (Figure 1) — simultaneously clock and metaphoric body — to memorialize the love he shared with Ross

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Brown, ed., *The Names Project: Book of Letters* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), 40.

<sup>2</sup> The artist stated that the clocks should always be in synchronicity and in working order. The work is to be ‘restored’ should any of the mechanics begin to fail. Felix Gonzalez-Torres wished the ticking pulse of the clock to always continue. (E-mail from Andrew Blackley, 3/36/2015). However, it should also be noted that a difference lies in artist’s intent and practicalities, especially in regards to future memory (as will be discussed in chapter four). The clocks, after all, continue their life as an artwork after Felix’s life ends.

Laycock. Felix created an edition of three of these clocks with a single artist's proof between 1987 and 1990, a time when the artist's lover was infected with AIDS.<sup>3</sup> The literalness of "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*) is what makes it so moving and beautiful in its meaning: two store-bought-clocks used as symbols of the 1980s and 1990s AIDS and queer experience, as well as an homage to the artist's lover.

The clocks encapsulated the artist's greatest fear: "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."<sup>4</sup> From the moment of his lover's diagnosis, their every moment together must have felt as sand being pulled to the bottom of an hourglass.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres' artistic beginnings were rooted in social movements and grassroots organizing. In 1983 Felix Gonzalez-Torres was an unknown artist living in New York City. At the age of twenty-six the artist had yet to find his place in the contemporary art world.<sup>5</sup> The future for Gonzalez-Torres was to be a story of sublime romance and profound pain.

In 1987, the young artist was at the popular New York gay bar, Boybar, when he first saw a twenty four year old equally handsome student. Upon introduction, Felix Gonzalez-Torres learned the name of this stranger – Ross Laycock.<sup>6</sup> We can assume both Felix and Ross entered Boybar not knowing it would be an event that would forever alter their lives – signifying the ending of their time as entirely separate forms.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In 1991 he would revisit the clocks when he created another work also called "Untitled" *Perfect Lovers*, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Nickas, "All the Time in the World," in Ault, 45.

<sup>5</sup> At this time he was a member of the very politically based artist collective 'Group Material'.

<sup>6</sup> Joe Clark, "Ross Laycock," *OutWeek*, March 27, 1991, accessed January 13, 2016, [http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow\\_91.pdf](http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_91.pdf). ; For the remainder of the thesis I will refer to Felix Gonzalez-Torres simply as Felix and Ross Laycock as Ross following the model set by Nancy Spector and, more significantly, to acknowledge and reflect the personal nature of the artist and his oeuvre.

<sup>7</sup> As much as Boybar served as a free space for same sex desire and 'cruising' – in this instance the bar proved a location of a more permanent alteration in lives.

“*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) came to represent when Ross and Felix were bonded through shared struggle and the beginning of their time with one another.<sup>8</sup> Following their initial meeting at Boybar, Ross moved back to his home country, Canada, and to study English and biochemistry, following his interests in both logic and poetry – interests that also presented themselves in Felix’s art. Throughout this separation the two men remained devoted to one another.<sup>9</sup> Three years passed in this fashion before Felix and Ross would finally move in together. Unfortunately, this union came under most grim circumstances. The couple’s relationship was shaken in 1988 when Ross was diagnosed with AIDS.<sup>10</sup> His failing health forced him to quit his job at a reputable restaurant. Two years later the couple moved to Rossmore Avenue in Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup>

Many aspects of life seemed to turn quickly against the queer community of this period, including, and most importantly, time. By 1987, the same year as the first iteration of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*), 36,058 people in the United States had been diagnosed with acquired immune deficiency syndrome (commonly abbreviated as AIDS) and 20,849 were already deceased.<sup>12</sup> For many who were already diagnosed there seemed little hope. The disease was mercilessly taking

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<sup>8</sup> Despite being made before Ross was clinically diagnosed with AIDS, it is likely that he was already showing many of the effects of HIV.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, “Ross Laycock,” 1991.

<sup>10</sup> In 1988 *The New York Times* published an article that the most recent life expectancy from an AIDS patient (diagnosed in 1985) was 374 days. Gina Kolata, “15% of People with AIDS Survive 5 Years,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1987, accessed January 23, 2015, <https://partners.nytimes.com/library/national/science/aids/111987sci-aids-2.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 89. Felix chose to live on Rossmore Avenue for the name of the street, alluding to the wish that he could somehow have more of Ross. Ann Goldstein, “Untitled,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Russell Ferguson, editor (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 38. Despite overwhelming social and political tension, this painful time was treasured. The unimaginable reality was, in effect, what gave Felix and Ross their memories. It was a single moment in time, the juncture when they first spoke to one another as strangers and the instant in which their murderer was passed through an act of love – dictating all the time they had left.

<sup>12</sup> Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played on* (St Martin’s Press: New York, 1988) 596. When italicized and included in parenthesis after the work’s untitled name, such as *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* I am regarding the artwork, in the form of the two clocks. When not italicized and simply capitalized such as: Perfect Lovers, I am referring to the theme or idea of Perfect Lovers as it appears conceptually through Felix Gonzalez-Torres *oeuvre*.

many lives. Sean Straub, a California political activist, writes in his memoirs of the time, “Several times, I went to the AIDS ward at St. Vincent’s Hospital without intending to visit anyone in particular, knowing there would be someone I knew who was there.”<sup>13</sup>

The transmission of HIV/AIDS was feared and often stigmatized by the Reagan administration, housing authorities, and even some community healthcare clinics as well as brothers, sisters, and parents. Straub writes: “I also feared stigma. Some families were already refusing to allow gay male relatives to join family holidays or to hold young nieces and nephews. Those who tested [positive] and were sometimes welcomed to holiday meals on the condition that they use disposable utensils. People known to have AIDS lost their jobs or apartments. [...] Funeral homes wouldn’t take the bodies of those who died of AIDS or charged exorbitant extra fees to do so. There was serious talk of quarantine, and by the end of 1985, an effort was under way in California to put such a measure on the ballot.”<sup>14</sup> In this moment of crisis and fear, Felix created “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*): circles that touch one another in the most gentle and

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<sup>13</sup> Sean Straub, *Body Counts: A Memoir of Politics, Sex, AIDS, and Survival* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 151. Ronald Reagan, the president, first mentioned the name of the disease in May of 1987 despite the murderous rampage of HIV/AIDS first appearing over a decade earlier in 1976. In 1988 a California ballot, Proposition 64, was introduced to make those who suffered from AIDS register, making many fear that a quarantine would be inevitable should it passed; an issue that just two years later, although it didn’t pass, was ahead in the polls (Straub, 188). Home remedies were popularly traded as no medicine had yet to be distributed. These ranged from the ingestion of a Chinese abortion drug (Compound Q) to the drinking of urine (Urine Therapy). People were desperate for a cure and the government was doing little to help. In September of 1986 the first medicine (a failed cancer drug) was approved known as AZT (azidothymidine). Often AZT ended up killing those who took it as a result of its toxicity. By 1991 DDI (didanosine) was made available, a drug meant to be taken in addition to AZT. And finally, by 1995 the final part of what is still known as ‘the cocktail’ was put on the market – a drug-protease inhibitor. (Gran Fury and Michael Cohen, *Gran Fury: Read My Lips* (New York: 80WSE Press, 2011), 23.)

This gap from the time of the disease’s first appearance to the first cures is representative of the government’s lack of interest in something that affected those who were considered less than human – the homosexual community. With the government’s inaction there seemed little chance for anyone to be saved from the disease. The Illinois senate had outlawed all posters showing homosexual couples that might be viewable to those under twenty one, for fear that it would turn heterosexuals into homosexuals (Gran Fury, 49). 1987 Senator Jesse Helms had helped pass an amendment preventing the federal government from funding AIDS education initiatives, passing nearly unanimously 94 to 2 (Ault, 367). In 1992 Colorado had concluded that the LGBT community should be excluded from discrimination laws, a ruling that remained intact until 1996 (Ault, 373).

<sup>14</sup> Straub, 159.

affectionate way. He expressed the human experience of so many associated with the queer community. He also created one of his most personal gestures of love directed towards the man whom he was losing – Ross.

In a time so tense with the sociopolitical tensions from the queer community and that outside of it both Felix and Ross must have felt the existence they had built for themselves caving in. Although a moment of such unification of lives in a shared domestic space should have been a celebratory event, it was now overshadowed by the certainty that their time together would soon come to an end with Ross' inevitable failing health and passing.<sup>15</sup> As such, "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) depicts two figures always in proximity but unable to unite and become a single body. As a result the lovers are forced to individually suffer the blows of biology. The inaction of the government represented a chilled kiss of death as Felix was forced to watch the love of his life brutally pulled away at the young age of twenty-nine. Whatever hopes the couple aspired for the future, the fights the lovers should have been entitled to, the memories they should have been allotted, and all the moments of sitting in one another's presence were stolen. Many same sex male couples in New York faced this fatal loss and some rose to fight the best they could. Felix, himself, would advocate his beliefs in the only way he knew how: through art.

Until Ross died Felix avoided having his picture or an artist's biography attached to his art. His early works, especially through means of Group Material, aggressively pushed a purely political agenda. After Ross' physical death Felix's art became entirely personal.<sup>16</sup> The artist continued making art in a time when the things most important to him began slipping away. He

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<sup>15</sup> Ross would die in 1991, an event Felix refers to as "One hundred small yellow envelopes of his ashes – final will" in his self-portrait. (Ault, 371).

<sup>16</sup> Ault, x.

repeatedly said that the entirety of his work was made for Ross Laycock: “When people ask me, ‘Who is your public?’ I say honestly, without skipping a beat, ‘Ross’.”<sup>17</sup>

For three of the five years between Ross’ death and his own, Felix created a series of light strings such as “*Untitled*” (*Last Light*), 1993, (Figure 2). The artist’s complex gesture of using specifically produced strings, which vary only in their artist-specified creation from mass produced strings of bulbs, with an artist-designed certificate of authentication would give the work its status as ‘art’. Their very specific conceptual intent appears quite contradictory to their mass produced aesthetic.<sup>18</sup> On nearly all of the light strings there are few requirements in regards to the display. In fact, the artist rarely put forth any input on how to hang the light strings. He noted: “But it is funny because when I send this stuff to museums art handlers and historians have a hard time deciding what to do with them. They keep faxing us back saying, ‘What do we do with this thing?’ And I just keep faxing them back saying, ‘What you want!’ and they just don’t believe it. They say ‘This cannot be true!’”<sup>19</sup> The light string series consists of twenty-four different works, eighteen of which are identical. The artist created a certificate of authentication to accompany each light string. All works in the series would be given a different name, and two would have editions of two.<sup>20</sup> Deceptively straightforward in its conception, like

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<sup>17</sup> Storr, “When This You See Remember Me,” 9. ; Poet Mark Doty writes in his memoir, *Heaven’s Coast*, “Being in grief, it turns out, is not unlike being in love. In both states, the imagination’s entirely occupied with one person. The beloved dwells at the heart of the world, and becomes a Rome: the roads of feeling all lead to him, all proceed from him. Everything that touches us seems to related back to that center; there is no other emotional life, no place outside the universe of feeling centered on its pivotal figure.” (Doty, 38).

<sup>18</sup> The reasoning for creating objects that can simply be purchased at a store is complex and I plan to explore possibilities for this in a future project.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Lives of the Artists, Lives of the Architects*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2015), 115.

<sup>20</sup> Sprengel Museum Hannover, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Text* (Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1997), 57. When questioned about his choices concerning the logistics of his works Felix wrote that he uses numbers he likes such as five, twenty- four, and twelve for pieces he wants to connect with and numbers he dislikes such as seventeen, thirty-five, and twenty-one if the subject is distant to him. (Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 8) It is quite possible that the number twenty-four is used in reference to Ross’ age upon his first meeting with Felix and five is the date of Ross’ birthday.

*“Untitled” (Perfect Lovers)*, the light strings, however, function in a slightly different way. The aesthetic of illuminated strands is wrought with passion and intent.

Light is a provocative medium. It brings with it many connotations: from religion to knowledge and from nature to science. It also makes the consideration of the piece itself questionable, asking if the work is meant to be the mechanism, the light emitted, or both. If it is the light then it must be decided whether or not the shadows created by this light also become part of the art. Felix rarely addressed these intricate issues, preferring them left for the consideration and discretion of those who view and exhibit the piece. The artist did however address the antithesis of light – darkness: “How does one learn not to fear the night any longer, that the darkness comes, and one can actually go to sleep, and sleep until the next day, and get up without this metallic and bitter taste in one’s mouth, the taste of guilt, desire for death, the desire for a quick and final end?”<sup>21</sup> Felix’s use of light as a medium symbolically chases away the darkness of night. What if Felix could take stars that illuminate the cold darkness of the night sky and bring them inside, symbolically string them against a wall and drip them on the floor as if they were droplets of water? In each of the twenty-six light strands, the artist creates an elemental presence that is neither an object nor an idea and endows it with powers of rejuvenation and hope, a power to cleanse unending pain.<sup>22</sup> Spatially, the artist’s use of light coupled with a plainly visible lighting mechanism can be read as a depiction of stars thwarting the complete darkness of night’s descent while exposing the human-made nature of this

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<sup>21</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres to Andrea Rosen, September 27, 1994, in Ault, 164.

<sup>22</sup> Felix refers to his light strings as light streams in an interview with Ross Bleckner. Ross Bleckner in interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *Bomb Magazine*, Spring 1995. Accessed September 28, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40425631>.

redemption of soul. This manmade construction represents a history of progression, as mentioned by Walter Benjamin.<sup>23</sup> It also represents the power man holds for salvation.

To best understand the light strings and light we must first understand Felix's use of light, his source.<sup>24</sup> Felix was inspired to create the light strings after walking a Paris street and seeing the lights strung above streets.<sup>25</sup> Often the artist references "streets of lights" in his personal letters to his friends, suggesting the impact these lights has upon him.<sup>26</sup> He projects light from strings that are a mechanical production of mankind. Mimicking celestial objects of illumination, such as the moon, sun, and stars are often representative of peace, happiness, vastness, everything that will remain unknown, and of day and night – in effect – the turning of time; while the earthly representation of pure light, fire, is representative of knowledge and damnation, of the grittiness of survival. Art historian, Amanda Cruz writes of Felix's light "as a haven, a symbol of enlightenment or spirituality, and a source of warmth, yet as impermanent as the enduring bulbs."<sup>27</sup> The question inevitably arises as to which of these the conceptualist refers to: the light that we can master or the light that we can only stare in awe of? While I do not offer a suggestion to assuage the reader of this thesis, I propose these questions of light as a dichotomous expression in which the artist was forced to live in yet strove to destroy.

This study will look to understand the light strands through three different, but related, lenses: poetry, spirituality, and memory – each a metaphor for future memory. The first chapter

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> When using the term 'light strings' I am referring to the actual mechanisms of the strings and the light which they emit. In reference to solely the light emitted from the piece I will use the term 'light'.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Temkin, *Twentieth Century Painting and Sculpture in the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001), 146.

<sup>26</sup> Alejandro Cesarco, ed., *A Selection of Snapshots Taken by Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Storr, "When This You See Remember Me," 59.

will employ a poetic understanding of the series, both inspirationally and in their conceptualization. Poetry is an important facet of the artist, acting as a means of devotion and connection both in the life and death of Ross. From construction to naming, this love of poetry materializes in the light strands. This chapter will treat the light stands as a love poem Felix composed to his deceased lover.

The second chapter will portray the light strings in a spiritual context. I will define the word spiritual in terms of secularism, as the artist was an atheist.<sup>28</sup> His search for a universal understanding is conveyed in his effort to reach a wide audience. The artist attempted to enable an entire population with the means necessary to understand the pains of what a subculture was experiencing during the AIDS crisis: knowledge and compassion. In spite of his secular convictions it is impossible to ignore a certain spirituality in the creations of Felix.

The final chapter opens a dialogue of memory. Many of the parenthetical titles of the pieces are geographical locations. Some are places which the artist visited with Ross, but many are places they were never able to travel to. Through the passing of time there is no way in which one can decipher which light strings are parenthetically titled for places of their physical presence and which are parenthetically titled for places unvisited, thus confusing the line between memories the couple had and those they would only discuss but never physically

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<sup>28</sup> The artist said, "I have a major problem with the cultural traps and constructions of *God*. I think that is a good excuse for us to accept any kind of situation as natural, inevitable. Once we believe that there is no God, that there is no afterlife, then life becomes a very positive statement. It becomes a very political position because then we have no choice but to work harder to make this place the best place ever. There is only one chance and this is it. If you fuck it up this time you've fucked up forever and ever. Therefore God becomes a kind of lollipop you give people: 'Look you are suffering now in this life, I'm making you feel and live miserably. I'm making things really horrible for you, but in the next life things will be better – believe me and believe in God.'" Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 29-30.

experience. I propose that this is part of the artist's intention. By doing so he questions what validity memories have, and in effect, the much larger question what constitutes a life.

To best understand these ideas I expand upon cultural sociologist Avery F. Gordon's theory of 'ghosts' and 'haunting'. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), Gordon proposes a way of seeing the world around us by being willing to accept the imprint of the past upon the present.<sup>29</sup> She insists that loss is only apparent to us by the marks it has left upon the social aspects of the world in which we live. She calls these absences 'ghosts' and the way in which they still affect the contemporary world 'haunting'. Importantly, she says ghosts are only attached to things in which they were initially connected to and appear as a symbolic logic, or rather as a logical, though non-present, entity. To truly be ghosts, these absences in society must evoke an urge to respond in some way and to strive for a counter memory in the future.

When discussing Gordon's conceptualization of the theory of ghosts and haunting in the context of Felix I build upon her dialogue of ghosts using a phrasing of shadows. Shadows, unlike ghosts, are cast by the living and are therefore subject to the living's portrayal of the absent other, resulting in an affectual-based darkness. Gordon's articulation of ghosts suggest that history is inevitably visible, but I contribute to her discourse through an analysis of Felix's shadows. History can be lost through forgetting and misunderstanding; that it is only through the vision of others that histories of the past are allowed to be cast as a shadow over lives of the living. A person's history is able to act as a shadow – altering and veiling that which it spans across. Since the presence of shadows is dependent upon another, for example – a living and

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<sup>29</sup> Gordon, Avery F., *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008.)

fallible person, they are subject to alterations in depictions. Shadows can be layered upon one another by different representations or persons to create the darkest shadows: shadows that truly consume. For example, the shadow of an absent person is best shown, or – at its darkest, when multiple remembrances or feelings of that person are presented, rather than a singular memory. Were many people to tell stories of an absent individual a clearer and somewhat more truthful representation of the absent person would emerge as the shadows are layered one upon another. Thereby: the darkness becomes as clear in its articulation of truth as the light, albeit, being the product of shadows it represents a truth composed of memory instead of presence. The light strands of Felix create a dispersion in the levels of sublimity and romanticism – the contrast of darkness and light – both terrifying and comforting. The reliant dichotomist relationship of what is seen and what is unseen may represent knowledge while also representing confusion. Together light and darkness for shadows, and a more true representation of what it means to exist by presenting past and present; and in effect – future memory.

For instance, the shadows produced by one of Felix's light strings, such as "*Untitled*" (*Last Light*), project from various bulbs, each ordered one after another. The filaments of the light bulbs are composed of dark elements (reminiscent of shadows) necessary to create light, yet the translucent glass of the bulb does not constrict the light and force it to stay within its transparent confines. In addition, the construction of light strings in itself defines boundaries of light. A darkness, which is composed of bulbs blocking the illumination of other globes and of the wires necessary for light. Once light is created it is essential to form darkness. While being cast on many items the division of blurred shadows can become distorted and indistinct. The edges gradate and consume what the shadows are cast upon, creating indistinct boundaries of past and present. Absence creates a presence that is more real than the absence itself. In the

artist's words: "Absence became a way of confronting the essence of longevity."<sup>30</sup> Curator and art critic Robert Storr eloquently writes on Felix's employment of memories, and essentially shadows, through art: "But how does the invisible man leave his trace? How do those who are already shunned or denied make their presence felt? How do we first learn and then retain what an entire society would prefer to ignore or blot out?"<sup>31</sup>

By coding his deepest and most significant feelings into a series of light strings Felix strives to explore the flaws of being: obstacles that inevitably appear in the fates we attempt to orchestrate for ourselves.<sup>32</sup> In regards to Felix, these come into view in terms of his love with an end so tragic and unreasonable as he was forced to bear witness to his partner's early death. Despite the inevitable finale of heartbreak his art portrays an unapologetic love. It is essentially a selfish form of love that does more harm than good, yet one which the partners continue unquestioningly. Much of the artist's work is meant to affect the viewer in a personal and complexly emotional way, presumably similar to the artist's own feelings at the time of the works' conceptions. When articulating an interpretation of an oeuvre so wrought with feeling I will use affect theory – a means to validate the importance of emotions.

In this portrayal of love, the serial repetition of lights one after another as well as the illuminated and shadowed spaces that result from the light strings, Felix constructs rules from which he would not stray. He never enabled anything to break beyond the same constrictions which we must follow in our own lives as humans. No art would be given a privilege he, himself, did not have. That is not to say they exist as we exist. He endowed these works as far as he

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<sup>30</sup> Sprengel Museum Hannover, *Text*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Storr, "When This You See Remember Me," 30.

<sup>32</sup> I have included quotes from memoirs of those affected by HIV/AIDS contemporary to the lives of Felix and Ross in order to relate authentic voices in somewhat comparable situations throughout this thesis.

could with what he thought possible, but not once would the audience ever see an act or idea that Felix saw as impossible. There is no way to abandon the rules we live by in the world. He would explore the possibilities but never stray from the realities.

He does not substitute immaterial objects for real life. As he stated: “This is not life this is just an artwork. I want you, the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved, and informed.”<sup>33</sup> As Felix did not have control over a human’s biology, his light strings do not show a figural presence. Instead he uses man-made things to squander and grow in due course. This, in conjunction with the utilization of parenthetical titles such as “*Untitled*” (*A Couple*), 1993, (Figure 3), allows us to imagine a person; but we must remember that it is not an actual person we see. Because the pieces are essentially *untitled* the association of names are constructed by women and men. A word has no power were it not for the reference we as humans hold it to.

This holds true and is paralleled through his light strings. An aversion to using natural light brings about connotations without distinctly portraying something that he has no power over – whether it be natural light or death. These rules translate in equal measure to the question of what it means to exist. Existence is a series of memories because it is actually an experience. As we can only experience one thing at a time the rest becomes memories. We say an existence is what we do, which in turn becomes what we have done. But do these histories of love exist in the shadows of Felix’s light strings? At what point do they simply become stories of fictitious roots and, in effect, easier to control and manipulate? Through his light strings Felix pushes us to question what makes memories unexperienced any less real than those which exist. If he makes them, mentions them, are they not just as true? Felix consistently reminds the viewer of

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<sup>33</sup> Sprengel Museum Hannover, *Text*, 21.; N.B. The artist made his art for Ross but intended an audience that reached well beyond his lover.

the materiality of the art and the difference between the man-made and the preciousness of life. The 'unexperienced' lurks in the shadows of the light strings, an aesthetic of lightness and darkness wherein the past and future lay somewhere between the materiality of a cord and light bulbs.

CHAPTER II  
POETRY

*“Stop this day and night with me and you shall  
Possess the origin of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the Earth and the sun,  
(there are millions of suns left,)”  
-Song of Myself, Walt Whitman*

In Felix’s light strings ideas complement aesthetic beauty in their complexity of thought, lyrical use of words, and affection of emotion. Although present elsewhere in his art, the catalyst for poetry persists most completely through his radiant light strings and is made known through the parenthetical titles. Works such as *“Untitled” (March 5<sup>th</sup>) #2*, 1991, (Figure 4) depict the artist’s personal connections to poetry while other pieces including *“Untitled” (Last Light)* and *“Untitled” (Leaves of Grass)*, 1993, (Figure 5), portray an inspiration from poetic beauty, both in the form of verse and cinema. Felix’s respect for an eloquent mastery of words translates to his structures of light both in content and inspiration. Or, as Raymond Williams describes it – Structures of Feeling.<sup>34</sup> In a manifestation of affect theory, both in terms of poetry as well as a form of spirituality and memory, Felix’s light strands represent the physical materialization of feelings: responsive and continuously changing.

During the final two decades of the twentieth-century, AIDS was at the foreground of queer discourse in New York, making it compelling and intriguing that Felix used the beautifully haunting aesthetic of light and dark to express ideas of lives affected by illness and the flaws of being. Through his light strings he uses poetics to discuss the fragility of life. A poem is quite

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<sup>34</sup> Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

fragile; each word is labored over for meaning, sound, and placement. Words cannot be exchanged in poetry, unlike prose where a rhythm is not a key component of the writing, allowing for more flexibility. In this way the oversimplification of a simple strand of lights lying upon the floor or hanging from a ceiling invites an ambiguity and unknowing, yet, has a (possibly unconscious) significance for both the artist and the viewer.

The poetic connection has another layer of significance for Felix. In Ross' obituary, published in the magazine *OutWeek* in March 1991, Joe Clark, friend of Felix and Ross, told of a "bookshelf full of volumes of poetry" in Ross' Toronto apartment. This does not come unanticipated for a student of English. As Felix's lover, about whom Clark writes, he was "intertwine[d] like the strands of a helix", it is assuredly assumed that they shared their passions with one another.<sup>35</sup> Clark's obituary brings to light the probability of Felix's poetics as an homage to Ross. The depth of Ross' presence is clearly evident within pieces such as "*Untitled*" (*A Love Meal*), 1992, (Figure 6). Light, as that emitted from the string, is necessary for the growth of life, and so too, is a meal seen as a form of nourishment and sustenance. The string emits this light, surely reflecting the nourishment which Felix wished to give to Ross as he faded from his physical presence. As they recall poetry, an echo of Ross' passion, the lyrical beauty of strings such as "*Untitled*" (*A Love Meal*) act as a series of love poems from Felix to Ross.

In 1988 Ross gave a collection of Wallace Stevens' poetry to his lover.<sup>36</sup> This year is of crucial significance in their story as it was the year in which Ross was diagnosed with AIDS, marking the end of the more care-free and blissful life the two of them would share.<sup>37</sup> At this

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<sup>35</sup> Clark.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Umland, "Project 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York and Gottingen: Steidl Dangan Publishers, 2006), 241.

<sup>37</sup> Although we know the year of his diagnoses, it is unknown when during that period Ross was diagnosed, therefore making it also unknown if it was before he gave the book to Felix or after. Before would mark the gift as a

time it was commonly accepted that AIDS was transmitted sexually – effectively meaning if one person in a relationship was infected the other would also most likely become infected. Within this volume was printed a poem of affective lyricism. It would resonate with Felix, creating a strong impact upon the artist’s structures of light.

The title of Stevens’ poem – “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” (Appendix) – is deeply significant and surely struck the lovers in an all too familiar chord. The poem traces a love condemned that is shared between two individuals who search for refuge and sanctuary within each other’s being. A paramour, after all, is love that is forbidden or condemned. Despite 1969’s Stonewall rebellion and the following two decades of attempts for equality for the LGBT community, the taboo of AIDS still strongly existed and was only strengthened by the reputation of AIDS as a ‘gay disease’.<sup>38</sup> This concept of a paramour combined with a ‘final soliloquy’ interact to create an idea of finality, an idea of an imminent end. In this sense Felix’s parenthetical title of his string “*Untitled*” (*Last Light*) is essentially a rephrasing of the poem’s title, whereby the artist declares a personal claim over the phrase. At its deepest roots the artist’s parenthetical title of *Last Light* is his own rephrasing of Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour. Both “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” and ‘Last Light’ offer textual visions of a beautiful, lyrical ending profound in its despair. If Felix’s “*Untitled*” (*Last Light*) is in fact a *final soliloquy*, the light strand acts as something emotive. There will inevitably be parts of the room, perhaps viewers in the room, who are condemned to stand in the shadows and not within a part illuminated – a flaw of being which must be accepted.

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translation of love, after as a more solemn begetting of one’s treasures – both are significant in their passion and intimacy: a memory of joy based in the present or a moment of fear based in the future.

<sup>38</sup> AIDS, was originally called GRID5 (Gay-Related Immunodeficiency Syndrome).

Perhaps the light string most personal and reflective of a connection shared between Felix and Ross is “*Untitled*” (*March 5*) #2. This string is parenthetically named for Ross’ birthday. Slightly different than the other strings, it has two separate cords that stretch 113” against a wall. Hanging from a single nail, the two cords end in identical bulbs, touching one another in a way reminiscent of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*).<sup>39</sup> Spector personifies the strings as, “...entwined like a loving couple huddled in the dark.”<sup>40</sup> Although “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2 appears different in size and exhibition than most of the light strings and the parenthetical title seems indifferent to Stevens’ poetry, the piece visualizes a monologue of unspoken reflections.

The poem begins: “Light the first light of evening, as in a room; in which we rest and for small reason, think; the world imagined in the ultimate good.” A deep sense of understanding emerges when we look at “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2 in terms of this ‘Final Soliloquy’.<sup>41</sup> In Stevens’ poem, the narrator of the poem is one member of this condemned love. The first verse of the poem creates an idea of light being brought or created by a source of comfort and understanding. Through words an image is constructed of a darkened room in which a light first appears, chasing away the darkness. It also brings with this image that of a serene and tranquil atmosphere – the same effect created by the illumination and parenthetical titles of Felix’s strings.

Were this poem on the artist’s mind he would have inevitably had to ask himself what the world imagined would be for lovers in a relationship condemned. For lovers like Felix and Ross

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<sup>39</sup> It is noteworthy that although the name “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2 is given the closing #2 for purely logical reasons, as another of Felix’s works was previously parenthetically titled *March 5<sup>th</sup>*, #2 conceptually comes to represent two bulbs and two persons who are so linked that dates do not divide their existence. The artist refuses the concept of time in a very sophisticated manner.

<sup>40</sup> Spector, 183

<sup>41</sup> Again, although we know the light strings first began the same year as Ross’ death, we do not know whether it was before or after, and again, it does not matter. Ross’ inevitable physical end in those final months were surely pre-defined and understood by his declining health whether spoken or unspoken.

it is presumably a world in which they could inhabit together, devoid of the judgements of those outside the couple. To see this representation in its fullest form it must be understood that the light strings exist without an audience. Whether the gallery is devoid of visitors or not, the light of the two bulbs of *“Untitled” (March 5<sup>th</sup>) #2* still shine upon one another. They exist whether anyone is there to witness them or not – they exist for themselves and because of each other, constantly reciting the artist’s monologue on a love unended. Reminiscent of Gordon’s theory of ghosts, one is dictated by the other – shadows cast by what light the other bulb blocks and the light that each bulb casts at a certain moment.

In addition to condemned love, Stevens’ poem also compares the safety sought in one another to a shawl “wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth, a light, a power, the miraculous indifference.” The shawl is representative of the joining of two entities into one; the unification of weakness into strength in a time when strength seemed unimaginable. The shawl that encases the relationship also secludes it, allowing a freedom of being as one wishes to be. Were a shawl, the shadow of the light strand, representative of a couple it would function more in alignment with a trap for the disease rather than a protective layer. Yet, the light of safety, the highest candle, would chase away the darkness. This shawl is a shadow cast by *“Untitled” (March 5<sup>th</sup>) #2*, both vulnerable in its ability to be punctured by an outside light, yet strong enough to remain in existence when the outside light shall disappear. Two lightbulbs have the power to lessen the shadows and cast more. It chases away the darkness and holds in its clutch all that is visible and all that can be deadly.

Felix’s New York at the end of the millennium was a time where the reason for your death could be an act of love and the one you loved could be your murderer. The poem echoes this compliance with the outside world as long as the lovers have one another: “Out of this same

light, out of the central mind; We make a dwelling in the evening air; In which being there together is enough.” For Felix and Ross the few moments they had together seemed worth whatever fates may come – it was enough for the artist to ground future memories. In fact, throughout the memoirs of the time period most often we see the ‘survivors’ feeling guilt about being the one to be alive.<sup>42</sup> Inevitably, and perhaps without the collector’s full understanding, a choice is irrevocably given when the bulbs are replaced. Light bulbs do not project light for the same amount of time before dimming to darkness, one often expires before the other. This allows the collector to decide when one bulb is replaced should the other bulb be left to shine hallmarking the absence of light by the presence of light in the other string. Or, rather, should both lights be replaced so that their lives can start anew together? By doing the latter a life is prematurely taken. Through this personification an entire responsibility of choice rests, perhaps more metaphorically than literally, upon the decisions of the outside world.

In *The Leaves of Grass*, (1891-92), the words of Walt Whitman inspired Felix, notably in the light string “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*). Whitman’s epic of the American experience is an ode to the battles and the land that eventually ends on an optimistic note. The narrative is one the diasporic artist may have wanted or even needed.<sup>43</sup>

Much of the final edition (what is commonly known as the ‘Deathbed Version’) of *The Leaves of Grass*, deals with the dark realities of living in a postwar America and ends with an idealistic portrayal of America. The title itself, *The Leaves of Grass* refers to the land on which

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<sup>42</sup> Mark Doty, *Heaven’s Coast* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 57. “Until today, I have never felt what I’ve heard other men I know say, that they don’t understand why they’re alive, when so many are gone.”

<sup>43</sup> Born the son of a farmer, Felix grew up in pre-revolution Cuba in the city of Guáimaro. Separated from his parents at the age of nine Felix was sent to Spain where he was fostered by the church. He then was sent to Puerto Rico before finally moving to the United States in 1979.; Sprengel Museum Hannover, 44; Rudi C. Bleys, *Images of Ambient: Homosexuality and Latin American Art: 1810 – Today* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 206.

America sits, but throughout the poem these leaves of grass are related to grass sprouting from the graves of the dead, thriving on the flesh of the dead below them.

...Leaves from you I glean; I write, to be perused best afterwards,  
 Tomb- leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death,  
 Perennial roots, tall leaves, O the winter shall not freeze you delicate leaves, [...]  
 ... O slender leaves! O blossoms of my blood! I permit you  
 to tell in your own way of the heart that is under you...<sup>44</sup>

When Whitman wrote of leaves as tombs and bodies he wrote of a renewal from death, a continuation of life in the same way that Felix allows his works "*Untitled*" (*Leaves of Grass*) and other light strings to live on; a redemptive process, for death, like Gordon's haunting, it continues on, remembering the hearts below.<sup>45</sup>

Felix was quite possibly also captivated by the poem "As I Ponder'd in Silence" in which Whitman created a heightened familiarity with the language of war. He wrote, "Knowst thou not there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards? And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles, the making of perfect soldiers."<sup>46</sup> The idea of war as the only theme for a poet would surely be crucial to Felix, who fought his own battle through works such as his light strings. Despite the protestations of Susan Sontag, social critic and author of the pivotal essay *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, many in the time of AIDS compared the plague to a battle, often to the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup> It was often seen as a war against the homophobic government and society of America, causing the problem to gain momentum.

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<sup>44</sup> Walt Whitman, "Scented Herbage of My Breast," in *Inclusive Edition: Leaves of Grass* ed. Emory Holloway (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1926), 95-96.

<sup>45</sup> "The Leaves of Grass" is also a self-deprecating pun. Whitman was using 'leaves' in reference to the leaves of paper and 'grass' was a common term amongst editors for bad writing.

<sup>46</sup> Whitman, "As I Ponder'd in Silence," 1.

<sup>47</sup> As represented in titles of books written about the disease, such as *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, and the appropriation of Holocaust symbols, such as the pink triangle to signify homosexuals, which was inverted and printed on the iconic Silence=Death posters that began appearing throughout New York City.

In “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*), Felix attempts to inspire ‘perfect soldiers’.

Paraphrasing Whitman, Felix ‘trains’ viewers for a futurity of hetero-queer consolation by creating works that first make people feel before they are allowed to understand or as the artist himself said – to infiltrate. “I love the idea of being an infiltrator. I always said that I wanted to be a spy. I want my artwork to look like something else, non-artistic yet beautifully simple. I don’t want to be the opposition because the opposition always serves a purpose [...] you are the person they fear the most because you’re one of them and you become impossible to define.”<sup>48</sup> An impossibility of designating fixed meaning upon a piece is apparent throughout his work. As viewers we only have the clues the artist provides – most often in the form of the parenthetical titles, such as “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*). When we see light strings similar to “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*) in different collections and in different portrayals, we are forced to question if we are seeing the same piece. We wonder if there is a difference the artist has articulated which has inconspicuously passed through the audience’s perception. When Susan Sontag wrote of war, Felix wrote that future memories could infiltrate, and in this manner attack.

Felix wrote on the aggressive and confrontation aspect of his art: “Two clocks side by side are much more threatening to the powers that be than an image of two guys sucking each other’s dicks, because they cannot use me as a rallying point in their battle to erase meaning. It is going to be very difficult for members of congress to tell their constituents that money is being expended for the promotion of homosexual art when all they have to show are two plugs side by side, or two mirrors side by side, or two lightbulbs side by side.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed there is no way to

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<sup>48</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (A.R.T. Press, New York, 1993), 20. Interview with Tim Rollins; Dr. Jonathan D. Katz, curator and art historian, observes the similarities between Felix’s idea of an infiltrator and the way in which AIDS acts as an infiltrator, essentially ‘taking over’ white blood cells. Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka, eds., *Art, AIDS, America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 27.

<sup>49</sup> Spector, 73.; Janet Kardon, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988); Bleys, 207.

ensor work that is as heavily reliant upon conceptualization as it is figural – in the words of Whitman, “...the finale of visible forms.”<sup>50</sup> Similar to “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2, the strand of identical light bulbs composing “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*) is representational of persons of the same gender without anything that could be seen as offensive in the façade.<sup>51</sup> In exhibition and concept, “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*) connects to the haunting in that the nearly complete absence of figural structure through abstraction and conceptualization allows the piece to exist past censorship through representation.<sup>52</sup>

Felix’s knowledge of poetry was not limited. “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2 and “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*) not only draws from Stevens, it is also inspired by Walt Whitman. When Whitman writes, “And I will make the poems of my body and of mortality” there is a near direct correlation to “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2. Whitman continues: “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul, the pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me, the first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.”<sup>53</sup> Like Whitman, Felix is striving to translate his ‘pains of hell’ into new understandings. The entirely personal nature of the art for the artist is portrayed, and possibly intended, for a public audience. The exposure of self that Felix allows exposes his personal sufferings. By doing this he hopes to affect a nation into action. As long as the disease was seen as only endangering gay men no action would be taken to prevent the suffering of any infected with HIV/AIDS. Works of indiscriminate portrayals such as the “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*) represent this disease as a

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<sup>50</sup> Whitman, “Starting from Paumanok,” 13-24.

<sup>51</sup> The same point has been brought into the context of the candy stacks by pointing to the idea of the candy as oral sex, a type of transubstantiation that Robert Storr relates to the Eucharist.; Storr, “When This You See Remember Me,” 8.

<sup>52</sup> Another perspective reading on *Untitled* (*Leaves of Grass*) is available through the application of Gordon’s theory of haunting through Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Collection* (1979).

<sup>53</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 42.

universal danger rather than one specific to what was seen as a minority. Most persons in this world rely upon electricity for the light by which they live. As such, in “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*) Felix uses something many persons in the world need and uses it to represent his pain. In this way the artist translates personal pain and lived experience into light and shadows.

Beyond a literal reading of classical poetry Felix also accepted a beauty in words portrayed through cinema. The artist said the film *Hiroshima mon Amour*, (1959), directed by Alain Resnais, was also amongst his inspirations. In this French New Wave film, a French woman and Japanese man spend a single day together. Although both are married, the two persons both feel themselves falling in love with the other. This film displays many of the popular conventions of a French New Wave film – a simple plot, very much more a situation than a conflict; the scenes are cut together limiting the effects that would normally distract the viewer from the story; and most significantly, the lovers (nearly the only speaking characters in the film) are nameless.<sup>54</sup> Marguerite Duras’ screenplay is one of eloquence and beauty; fluid in its conception, it reads as a poem in a similar way to Felix’s cascading ropes of light.

The film opens with the nameless woman recounting all she has seen at Hiroshima – museums, artifacts, and videos that reenact and memorialize the events of the bombings. When she tells the man all that she has seen he replies, “You saw nothing.”<sup>55</sup> The facts can never portray the atrocities of an event. Perhaps this provides another reason for Felix’s use of poetry – an attempt to convey through abstract phrasing what images and objects cannot.

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Barsam and Dave Monahan, “1959-1964: French New Wave” in *Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company. 2010), 437-440.

<sup>55</sup> I am employing the English subtitles provided from *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, directed by Alain Resnais (1959), DVD (Criterion Collection, 2010).

Like Stevens' "Final Soliloquy to an Interior Paramour," *Hiroshima mon Amour* revolves around a love formed between two persons and the way in which it is affected by loss. In an interview with Tim Rollins, the artist interpreted the movie as not being about love, but instead entirely about the fear of loss. Rollins responded, "Love and fear seem to be the great themes of your work." Subsequently, Felix quoted the opening lines of the film, "You are good for me because you destroy me." Felix built upon this, "I finally understand what that means. You can be destroyed because of love as a result of fear. Love is very peculiar because it gives a reason to live but it's also a great reason to be afraid, to be terrified of losing that love..."<sup>56</sup>

Alone in a cellar the woman recounts the death of her German soldier: "The moment of his death actually escaped me, because at that moment and even afterwards – yes, I can even say afterwards – I couldn't find the slightest difference between his dead body and my own." This universal perception of true love, of a true unification of selves is a theme illustrated in Felix's light strings. Each bulb hangs on the string, entirely united. If one bulb in "*Untitled*" (*Last Light*) were to cease its glimmer what part of the cord is considered dead? The wires create a continuous circuit, destroying an inner separation of bulbs even though the outer workings, specifically the bulbs, seem very much distinguishable.

The film is about memory, specifically, remembering what has been lost. Both the woman and the man arrive in this city, a city which itself was very nearly lost, with their own troubled pasts. During the woman's youth in France she had fallen in love with a German soldier. It was a passionate affair, a forbidden relationship ending with his death and herself being shamed by her town. The parallels between this nameless woman and the German soldier

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<sup>56</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 14.

and the love shared by Felix and Ross are numerous and clear. The man is from Hiroshima and has lost his entire family in the bombing. Both are afraid of forgetting the love they had – another paramour. Felix surrounds himself in paramours to relate to his own – a similar aspect of poetry where the openness of meaning is favored for its adaptability to each different person's experiences. The film focuses on how these two individuals, whose lives are now joined like the clocks, can go on remembering and forgetting their pains and their losses, a complicated disunion which many in the queer community of New York were dealing with during the final two decades of the millennium.

While literal poetry inspired Felix, the narrative of *Hiroshima mon Amour* appealed to the artist as well. In his eloquent light strings Felix articulates the same inner struggle as the lovers in the film: the struggle of remembrance and of forgetting. In regard to the light strings, metaphorically, light illuminates experience and darkness can represent what is forgotten. Accordingly, shadows only exist when both are present – making light a perfect medium for Felix to compose in.

When Ross died Felix went on, but still he created art for Ross. He still held on to that connection and reinforced it through his work that never has an object independently present. Whether it be clocks or a string of light, Felix never shows any object by itself. To each he instills a partnership and a world of togetherness. He condemns none of his works to a life of solitude, something he so feared. This is a mature form of togetherness, balancing upon the most delicate fragility, with an end always looming dangerously close. However, an electrical surge can throw the lit room into utter darkness, resulting in a sudden form of emptiness. Echoing "*Untitled*" (*Last Light*), the artist personifies Duras' dialogue in the film when the French woman must leave and the Japanese man begs her to stay.

“A week?” he pleads.  
 She shakes her head.  
 “Three days?” he tries again.  
 “Time enough for what?” she questions back. “To live from it or die from it?”  
 He answers, “Time enough to know which.”  
 Her answer is stark and dystopian: “There is no such thing.”

The viewer is left to question if there is no such thing as time or if she instead refers to if *it* would lead to life or death. The lack of time would resonate with Felix, the idea that everything left in his world would be defined by limits. The time remaining before the disease would steal his life was limited. The joy he could experience without Ross was now limited. There was no longer the feeling of limitlessness in his work. The light string “*Untitled*” (*Last Light*) expresses this through the function of replacing a bulb. Once a bulb is lit, its time automatically begins to count down.<sup>57</sup> The glass bulbs face their final fate in the gallery – existing until they expire, whereupon they are discarded and replaced. Terrifyingly, with no documentation of those who have been discarded. Although they are just light bulbs, they were essential parts of the body of the piece, of what enabled it to work, and these ‘appendages’ are simply cast away.

For a moment, possibly for days, these strings can remain hanging in a gallery when some light bulbs cease to glow. This harmonizes the theory of shadows – affectively speaking, the feeling set by the bulbs changes when we experience the loss of light. It is visible in the hollowed translucent shell of a bulb, an aesthetic of lightness and darkness remembers what used to be and what would be. “*Untitled*” (*Last Light*) would have a significantly different feeling with just a few bulbs no longest casting light, rather than an entire string being out. The dichotomy of light and darkness from a single string presents the parallels of life and death, presence and absence, heaven and earth, and these references of dichotomies should force one to

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<sup>57</sup> “Meeting is the beginning of parting.” –Japanese Proverb.

want to make a difference, even were it to simply relight the missing bulb. The urge to change the bulb caused by the resultant absence of a wasted bulb is Gordon's final requirement of haunting.

This is Felix following his own rule that nothing beyond what is humanly possible shall be shown, that all flaws of being must be accepted, for direct representations of a natural light such as stars or the sun will not burn out for hundreds of years, should never burn out. Felix understood the vulnerability threaded throughout the dialogue of *Hiroshima mon Amour*. Consequently, "*Untitled*" (*Last Light*) is the artist's personification of susceptibility to physical as well as emotional harm.

This threat of having to live after a deeply rooted connection has ended haunts and casts its own shadows. The absent past comes to define us and is a ghost. No transmission of dialogue is as effective in the film as the final lines. We are left unsure if the man has convinced the woman to stay with him in Hiroshima, but we see them embrace and she tells the nameless man, "Hiroshima, that is your name." He replies that hers is Nevers. Until this moment we never knew either person's name, we are not even sure if the characters knew one another's name. We are defined by our losses, a realization both the characters and ourselves have come to by the conclusion.

As *Hirsohima mon Amour* ends with revelation and loss, so do the titles of Felix's work. Most of the light strands are "*Untitled*". There is no intention to suffocate the works with words.<sup>58</sup> Instead they freely exist in the realm of being. This is oddly presented by the artist

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<sup>58</sup> Despite the works being untitled, the utilization of grammatical marks such as quotation marks and parentheses are mandatory by intention of the artist. Andrew Blackley, Archives Associate of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, e-mail to author, October 5, 2015.

requiring quotation marks around the word “*Untitled*”, as if the lack of title is always changing – meant to shift in its implications the viewer associates with a work with no name. They only grip to the world of rules by having parenthetical titles. Felix plays the game knowingly: “Labels are very useful, when you want to be in control. Actually, more than anything I think the work is about form. I’m a sucker for formalism, and yes, it does include a certain interpretation because everything we see in culture we ascribe to language. We ascribe to it a narrative.”<sup>59</sup> Surely the narrative interpretation the artist refers to begins with the parenthetical title.

Parenthetical titles give the viewer insight to what Felix felt at the time of conception.<sup>60</sup> The differentiation between untitled work using an explanation in the form of an afterthought (for example: “*Untitled*” (*Last Light*)) leads the viewer to understand each string as different representations.<sup>61</sup> Art historian, Nancy Spector, wrote on the complexity of parenthetical titles “...function[ing] like whispered cues, subtle guides to interpretation that only imply and never prescribe. And those meanings shift and realign depending on the context in which the work is seen.”<sup>62</sup> The artist’s love of poetry, that of Stevens, Wallace, and films such as *Hiroshima mon Amour*, morphed into ambiguous passages marked by curved brackets that allow a reader freedom to interpret at their own will. These parentheticals were used because English was not Felix’s native tongue: “Things are suggested or alluded to discreetly... because ‘meaning’ is

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<sup>59</sup> Bleys, 209.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Blackley, Archives Associate of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, e-mail to author, October 5, 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Russell Ferguson offers that it is quite possible that the non-restrictive bounds each piece falls to by having no title actually enforces a possibility that all the pieces are meant to work with one another, as a single piece. All of the *Untitled* works, according to Ferguson are quite likely parts of a story in which Felix is telling, or a mechanism which the artist is using to understand his own life. Russell Ferguson, “The Past Recaptured,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Russell Ferguson, editor, (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 28.

<sup>62</sup> The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 33.

always shifting in time and place. Also, this isn't really my language, but the language I learned. So I'm reluctant to give something a name imposed on me. You have to deal with who your public is: Whom are you making these things for? Whom are you trying to establish a dialogue with?"<sup>63</sup>

Felix continued to make titles that became a sort of poetry in themselves, affirming who he made his art for – Ross. This frailty of bulbs, of life and death, is given presence linguistically in titles such as “*Untitled*” (*Last Light*) as well as through exhibition. The light creates finality. Once the light bulb is turned on it slowly begins to die. There is no life without death, there is no chance of love without the threat of loss. The cycle constantly haunts Felix.

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<sup>63</sup> Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 17-18.

### CHAPTER III SPIRITUALITY

*I met a man in a bar several months ago who had lost several friends two years ago and has been running ever since looking for a place where no one is run out of place to run – he was and is in pain.*

*I designed [a panel for the NAMES Project] based on the first verse of the 137<sup>th</sup> Psalm:  
'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion.'*

- Br. Karl Welsher, LBC-F<sup>64</sup>

Felix's light strings are arguably his most approachable works. Albeit their conceptual complexities, for example, in regard to poetics, the materiality of the bulbs lit through electricity is familiar to many people and helps extend the artist's intentions of portraying a universality. In a body of work so grounded in attempting to annunciate flaws of being, it seems peculiar that Felix would reach to something unobtainable, unimaginable, and most emphatically – spiritual. Upon examination, the spiritual aspects of his light strings seem quite prevalent. For example, the work "*Untitled*" (*North*), 1993, (figure 7), is named in reference to the Cuban phrase *el norte* for anything north of Cuba and employed spiritually as an expression of futurity.<sup>65</sup>

Futurity, according to queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz, "allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."<sup>66</sup> Felix's articulation of spirituality is secular and devoid of

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Br. Karl Welsher, LBC-F to accompany NAMES Project patch in Joe Brown, ed., *A Promise to Remember: The NAMES Project Book of Letters* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), 246.

<sup>65</sup> Nancy Spector, "Travel as Metaphor" in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York and Gottingen: Steidl Danguin Publishers, 2006), 261 and 2659. According to queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz futurity, in regards to queerness, is the aspiration for a time when "educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present (1)." Essentially, that as a person is most often considered queer for whom they desire. As desire is unobtained, all ideas of queerness are futuristic and representative of what is sought, an idea similar to salvation. As Munoz continues to write: "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world (1)." (Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press. 2009).

<sup>66</sup> Muñoz, 1.

Western religious institution. The idea of God harkens upon a connectedness and universality as the artist described it. This universal thread has been noted by many historians of his work. Robert Storr relates it to his interest in desire universally, not only same sex desire but attraction and love in general.<sup>67</sup> He sees homosexuality simply as an expression of desire, and desire is synonymous with futurity and spirituality. Terry Atkinson, writer for *Art & Design Magazine*, calls it instead: “[Felix’s] idea of *communitas* is one with a social heart and an enlightened head....”<sup>68</sup>

Above all else, Felix’s belief in a better world, a spiritual futurity, a space filled with future memory, is his most spiritual aspect. In light strands such as “*Untitled*” (*North*) and “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2, the artist uses electrical wire and lightbulbs as a spiritual allegory for a better world in enabling a brighter future in regard to *el norte* and an enduring memory of the artist’s love of Ross. In effect, Felix’s articulation of spirituality conveys an irrational belief or hope that the world will get better, even though in the 1980s and 1990s gay community in New York there was little reason for this optimism. Although the death rate of gay men during this time was so severe that many believe the population would inevitably perish, Felix’s hope continued. Hope in the bleakest of situations is not impractical nor is it inhuman. Many constantly hope that the world can get better, whether of its own accord or with the assistance of others. Through a spiritual aesthetic, an aesthetic of future memory archived through light, for example, light cast by Felix’s “*Untitled*” (*North*), allows one to persist and to continue fighting every time a visitor sees a work such as the piece, for giving knowledge and making one think can often be the most powerful of tools in altering the world around us.

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<sup>67</sup> Storr, “When This You See Remember Me,” 15.

<sup>68</sup> Tony Atkinson, “Rites of Passage,” *Art & Design* 9 1/2, no. 34 (1994): 17.

Felix said, “Once you agree that there is not any other life, that there’s nothing except *here* – this thing, this table, you, me – that’s it. That becomes a very radical idea because you have to take responsibility to make it the best.”<sup>69</sup> By first recognizing the flaws of being as well as accepting and mourning them, “*Untitled*” (*North*) catalyzes a spiritual force of change resonant with the artist’s search beyond the flaws of being for the closes possible achievement of the perfection of being.<sup>70</sup> For Felix, spirituality is what is common amongst humans. It is beyond the physical, often represented by the light strings in complex ways. “*Untitled*” (*North*) charges viewers with the responsibility of continuing forth in the darkest and grimmest of situations; when one has to pour one cup of coffee instead of two, when they have no one to call in their darkest hours, and when they lie alone in bed. It is a responsibility for sacrificing and showing our own pain in an effort to prevent the pain of others in the future as well as the responsibility to replace the light bulbs.

This constant – constant because light bulbs will always burn out and need to be replaced – call for a better world despite overwhelmingly grim circumstances was contemporary to the period in which Felix was making art. It is the reason why those who were knowingly doomed to a death in the near future continued to fight and the reason why the time of HIV/AIDS is as inspiring as it is tragic. HIV/AIDS activist Larry Kramer’s call to action conveys this desire to push forward during these tragic circumstances: “In the past we have often been a divided community; I hope we can all get together on this emergency, undivided, cohesively, and with all

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<sup>69</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 30.

<sup>70</sup> This point has been explored through many community artworks in relation to AIDS, most notably the NAMES Project, or AIDS quilt.

the numbers we in so many ways possess.”<sup>71</sup> Like *el norte*, “*Untitled*” (*North*) expresses hope and the need for future memory necessary to unite a divided community.

Felix made no secret of his aspirations of a better world, often expressing it through interviews: “I’m still proposing the radical idea of trying to make this a better place for everyone.”<sup>72</sup> He also said, “Therefore I don’t want a revolution anymore, it’s too much energy for too little. So I want to work within the system. I want to work with the contradictions of the system and try to create a better place.”<sup>73</sup> In conversation with conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth he is also quoted as saying “At this point I do not want to be outside the structure of power, I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative to what? To power? No. I want to have power. It’s effective in times of change. I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are, in other words, replicating themselves, because that’s the way culture works.”<sup>74</sup> In title and in light, “*Untitled*” (*North*) affirms his desire for a better place – all the more remarkable after the death of Ross.

To ensure that his work would reach the widest possible audience Felix always took special care to explain his intentions to museum guards, allowing them to pass the message to patrons.<sup>75</sup> This form of shared knowledge embraces the idea that he believed all were equal and that his art had a chance of affecting everyone, as articulated by art historian Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*. The artist believed in the common good of mankind: something inexplicable that unites and his light strings allegorically implicated all who viewed them: truly,

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<sup>71</sup> Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 9.

<sup>72</sup> Spector, 29.

<sup>73</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 27.

<sup>74</sup> “Joseph Kosuth and Felix Gonzalez-Torres: A Conversation”, *Art & Design* 9 1/2, no. 34 (1994): 76.

<sup>75</sup> Storr, “When This You See Remember Me,” 6-7.

a relational aesthetic. I suggest that this is a spiritual connection. The artist created “*Untitled*” (*North*) and invited future memory to begin something beyond logic and physics and, sometimes, beyond this world.

Seeing and feeling beyond the quagmire, paraphrasing Muñoz again, the artist describes his artwork as a form of transcendence. “... What they [the public] are actually seeing is something else, something universal, positive, constructive. Love. These photographs are about pleasure and the possibility of transcendence through an act of creation. It is about giving back, and sharing with the viewer some experiences that are so common, so universal.”<sup>76</sup> The love in his light strings shines through in their inspiration and their context. Felix’s spiritual transcendence is illuminated by locating an object we would not expect in a gallery, such as a light string, in place of objects that are quite often considered ‘sacred’. When “*Untitled*” (*North*) draws power and electricity from the same source everyone relies upon, the light strands conceptualize the human condition of co-existence.

This common and universal means is extended to emotions. Julie Ault, artist and fellow member of Group Material, points to intimacy and remoteness as two of these, for example.<sup>77</sup> The viewer would also be hard pressed to ignore the fear that influences all of his works. In regards to “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2, Felix said, “When I first made those two light bulbs I was in a total state of fear about losing my dialogue with Ross, of being just one.”<sup>78</sup> This fear is consistently present in Felix’s writings, especially when he refers to Ross. Before the physical death of Ross the artist wrote about his work in accordance with a showing at the Andrea Rosen Gallery: “Just to quote Sigmund Freud ‘We rehearse our worst fear in order to lessen them.’

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<sup>76</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres to Marieluise, February 8, 1994, in Ault, 173.

<sup>77</sup> Ault, x.

<sup>78</sup> Spector, 183.

Right? So at that time, I was losing Ross and I wanted to lose everything in order to rehearse that fear and just confront that fear and perhaps learn something from it. So I even wanted to lose the work, this stuff that is very important in my life. I also wanted to learn to let go.”<sup>79</sup> By entwining the two light bulbs of “*Untitled*” (March 5<sup>th</sup>) #2 Felix wraps a couple inseparably forever. They cannot lose one another. As an artwork these lightbulbs are always a pair; even when taken down or put into storage as two separate strings they exist as an artwork together, inseparable.

It is a recurrent theme in Felix’s works’ – most notably portrayed in his series of *Perfect Lovers*. Despite one clock inevitably stopping, both reach out and hold one another, even after death. They hold each other because they are meant to be with one another and cannot exist without the other’s existence. They are wholly and infinitely connected: they are, after all, *Perfect Lovers*. This is the artist’s expression of perfection. Felix used this paradigm to represent what he had – Ross. Despite falling in love in a time when America seemed to be collapsing upon itself and when their relationship was a target for prejudice and discrimination, Felix and Ross saw their own relationship as perfect.

The very idea of perfect recalls ideas of the sublime and otherworldly. Perfection might seem unachievable on human grounds. We are flawed, we are haunted, we cannot erase the past and we cannot foretell the future. However, when one thinks of perfect one can imagine what the future will hold – infinite happiness and togetherness. As mentioned earlier, crucial in the works of Felix is his perception that nothing impossible will be portrayed – essentially transitioning the idea of perfect into our world where the artist attempts to show it is achievable.

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<sup>79</sup> Obrist, 115.

Felix often, and perhaps centrally, works to create a dialogue and I suggest a belief, in a life after our mortal ones, a rebirth. Bourriaud discusses relational aesthetics in accordance with Felix's work. In the same way Bourriaud says often all we have left is the photos of an event in relational aesthetics, were we to encounter a piece of artwork again we would never be able to have the same exact experience with it. I do not imply 'second life' or 'second experience' as a representative of heaven or hell, for Felix's work is spiritual and not religious. It is a fine line that must be tread with care. We are shown things that unite, cycles of life, and the betterment of mankind through the betterment of our personal understandings and knowledge of ourselves and subjective history as it relates to our personal identities and beyond. It is an Eastern form of spirituality for a Western form of love. He seems to believe in a spirituality of transcending self, yet many Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, discount the idea of 'falling in love'. As they are based upon discovering a wholeness in self, a dispute arises in the means of having 'another half' in another person.<sup>80</sup> This idea is illustrated through the theme of *Perfect Lovers*, wherein one piece exists primarily for the other. They must be there for one another, and are only there for the viewer inconsequentially.

Felix did not endow his work with something beyond what he saw as humanly possible. If this is the case, then when Felix invests hope into his work he is also citing it as a possibility for mankind. In "*Untitled*" (*Last Light*) and "*Untitled*" (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) it is not an ending because the lightbulbs are replaced. Life goes on. There is hope in a Felix light string – inspired by transcendent universal, and secular spirituality. Nothing is fatalistic; instead it is opportunistic and hopeful. Once the lightbulbs of "*Untitled*" (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) #2 are hollow carcasses of glass the

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<sup>80</sup> Peter Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1997), 110.

shadows will grow in the room. Projections of light reference the absent body, marking the love and Felix and Ross as well as the queer struggle in 1980s and 1990s New York City. Once illuminated, “*Untitled*” (*March 5<sup>th</sup>*) personifies ‘life’ and as such, constructs future memory. However, the human urge to replace the light bulb will also hopefully consume, but this time consume the visitors. An urge to change will affect the viewer or the collector. And in this change a continuation of life shall be given upon the light string.

At first glance, when the lightbulbs in “*Untitled*” (*North*) burn out, it appears spiritual hope is lost. However, Felix’s light strings work as a metaphor for unending life – a decisive conquering of man’s mortality. When lightbulbs get replaced and batteries are changed it is possible for it to be misconstrued as an immortal presence to rival the pain set forth by the mortal existence of Ross. While Felix does have items replaced, mechanics of his art, one must first suffer death. No lightbulb is replaced without first dimming, without first dying and becoming a translucent shell. To an extent, Felix invited a public death: the presence of an expired bulb. The beauty of conceptualism keeps his works in existence even if all the lights were to remain suspended after their death. Felix said on this:

“As long as there is someone there supporting the work, someone responsible, i.e. the collector, the piece will always exist as something I named ‘The Body’. Now that was my own language, my own brand new idea of what a body could be, and can be; it’s just paper. When most people die, all they leave is paper, photos, books and letters and stuff like that. That’s it.”<sup>81</sup>

Within “*Untitled*” (*North*) one feels the pain of someone who has lost everything, who reluctantly shares his anguish with the world by reflecting it exactly how it truly is. Once a bulb is left dim, it is replaced. One ending become a beginning – a future memory embodied spiritually.

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<sup>81</sup> Ingvild Goetz Herausgeber, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Roni Horn* (München: Sammlung Goetz, 1995), 31-32.

Two points must be taken from this statement. Firstly, Felix mournfully reflected upon how little one has of those who are gone. Secondly, we learn by his naming of ‘The Body’ that he thought of his work as a body. Vulnerable to all things human bodies are susceptible to and limited by time. *“Untitled” (North)* is cast to an existence of abstraction defined by shadows, these elements of ‘the body’ are susceptible to human alterations in their portrayal. For example, the light string *“Untitled” (Last Light)* is personified as a body in itself and as an element of a larger body, and yet it is completely non-figurative. This structure of shadows develops as an understanding of the bodies that are not there, that never will be again.

In reference to his paper stacks (stacks of paper in which the viewer was invited to remove papers and the curator/collector was responsible for replenishing the stack), Felix said: “When you take these pieces of paper out of the stack and the stack disappears, I think that is a very beautiful and poignant metaphor for the body, which is always decaying and disappearing. It’s always leaving”<sup>82</sup> Felix’s proposal for the stacks as an allegory of the body applies to the light strings as well. But as it is artwork, more specifically: Felix’s artwork, again, can be regenerated. However, as noted by Robert Storr, they only come back to die once more.<sup>83</sup> In *“Untitled” (North)* created a body that does not disappear. Aligned with shadows the body exists perhaps most concretely in its absences. When Felix speaks of the light strings as part of ‘the body’ he implies a desire for control. Control over *a* body: his body and Ross’. Bodies that seemed lost to him, leaving him only power over his art. In the context of her exhibition “Traveling,” art historian, Ann Goldstein, said:

“[Felix] also didn’t want to disappear. [...] he did construct his work very carefully and clearly to ensure that it could continue and thrive. He was very pragmatic about it, which reflects his roots in Conceptual art. Within a certain set of parameters, there was an openness to the work that

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<sup>82</sup> Herausgeber, 31.

<sup>83</sup> Storr, “When This You See Remember Me,” 9.

allowed for flexibility. For example, if a certain type of candy doesn't exist anymore, you can use another. There's a certain threshold of change that the work can sustain and still maintain its integrity, allowing it to continue."<sup>84</sup>

Just as Felix spoke of the stacks of paper in decline and Goldstein spoke about the candies in a similar fashion, I assert this carries forward to the light strings.

Although Gordon's theory of ghosts and haunting was ascribed to the modern era, the dependency of creation upon destruction and destruction based upon creation has existed for thousands of years. Shiva, as an example, is not only the Hindu god of destruction but also the god of creation through this destruction. What at first may seem contradictory, a god to represent both the end and the beginning, is quite potent. Nothing can be created without first destroying something else and nothing can be destroyed if it is not created first. "*Untitled*" (*North*) foregrounds the insight that but every ending forces a new beginning and when we accept a new beginning we are in turn accepting and acknowledging an eventual ending. It is against these standards at which I suggest the presence of the notion of rebirth, as exemplified by Shiva, in the works of Felix. He relates this relationship of new, decidedly doomed relationships:

"The feeling is almost like when you are in a relationship with someone and you know it's not going to work out. From the very beginning you know that you don't really have to worry about it not working because you simply know that it won't. I have control over it and this is what empowers me. It is a very masochistic kind of power. I destroy the work before I make it."<sup>85</sup>

This is not at contradiction with the idea of haunting. While ends and beginnings are created other stories are still in the process of unfolding, therein by linking all events as the shadows pass over many surfaces and creating a constant stream of progression, or rather, life.

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<sup>84</sup> Guggenheim Museum Publications, America, 57.

<sup>85</sup> "Maurizio Cattelan Interviews Felix Gonzalez-Torres", Mousse Magazine. Issue 9. June 2007.

## CHAPTER IV MEMORY

*This is another classic story, one that's particularly difficult to tell because the externals of it hold little to distinguish it. -Mark Doty<sup>86</sup>*

Much of Felix's biography is absent in his early art. It was not until the pronouncement of his lover's diagnosis that the artist began to overtly include any personal elements in his work. It seems that this personal experience of terror and loss brought about the realization that personal attribution would be a most effective way for the artist to reach others. Rather than simply tell of experiences had, when Felix addresses a narrative of self he gives equal sympathy to events that never would be. The remembrance of what is unexperienced, or future memory, treated in the same form as what is 'accepted' memory is another thread in the fabric of a shadow. The absence of experiences becomes as discernible as the experienced, or present.

Aligning with Gordon's theory of haunting, what is currently unseen is significant in its impact upon the visible. Yet, memories, which are what comprise a life, are unseen. The nearly identical light strings "*Untitled*" (*America #1*) 1994, (Figure 8) and "*Untitled*" (*Lovers – Paris*), 1993 (Figure 9), attend to that which is unseen: memory. They are distinguished only by their parenthetical title. While we know that the United States was significant, as a place, to the couple, we do not know if Paris was ever physically visited by the two. In essentially identical representations Felix makes the two indistinguishable – the memories had, "*Untitled*" (*America #1*), and those of a future never had, "*Untitled*" (*Lovers – Paris*), or, future memory. "*Untitled*" (*America #1*) and "*Untitled*" (*Lovers – Paris*) also act as personifications of the artist: he created

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<sup>86</sup> Doty, 52.

a biography of the future that would never be experienced and gives it equal validity to the biography experienced.

While Felix held Ross, clutching their bodies together as closely as their lives had been held together for the previous years, he surely prepared himself for a life alone after Ross' diagnoses. Felix must have realized the life would be brief in its solitude, as his own death would be inevitable. At the end of the artist's life, having just lost Ross, the artist's light strings narrated the admission that no matter what fate we construct for ourselves we are human and we must acknowledge the flaws of our being. We must eventually all come to terms, after all, that reality has its own agenda.

After Ross' death, Felix started to address the complicated concept of memories of that which had never happened into his art. The artist sought a cathartic release through the pain of imagining the future he would be unable to enjoy. This release through submission and indulgence of emotional agony is a selfless means of attempting to assist others while perhaps attempting to find a way to save himself, romantically and emotionally. This is best described when the artist talks of a trip to Paris that had an effect on his Paris themed works, such as "*Untitled*" (*Lovers – Paris*), which epitomizes future memory. Felix expressed his memories as well as his desire to experience it with Ross, in vivid terms: "When I went to Paris for the first time I had already been there thousands of times. I had been in Paris because I dreamt about going there with Ross and walking down the Champs-Élysées and going to the Louvre. When I finally was in Paris, it was just to bring my physical entity, my body, there as a completion of what I had dreamt before."<sup>87</sup> "*Untitled*" (*Lovers – Paris*) therefore expresses the artist's lived

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<sup>87</sup> Spector, 81.

experience and the impossibility of an experience he desired by would never be. As *“Untitled” (America #1)* and *“Untitled” (Lovers – Paris)* both convey the importance of place, *“Untitled” (Toronto)*, 1992, (Figure 10). Toronto was the place where Ross returned after first meeting Felix at Boybar. It was where the young man spent much of the couple’s relationship. Again, by codifying *“Untitled” (Lovers – Paris)* and *“Untitled” (Toronto)* in the same way we are forced to question how geography gains a validity that imagination lacks. One who approaches the works with no knowledge of the artist’s life would assume that the parenthetical titles are in regards to important locations of the artist’s life. They would be correct in this declaration, for what we aspire and dream of defines us much in the same way as what we actually accomplish in life. These shadows of our own biographical narrative shift and darken as we grow.

This multi-layered inquiry into what it actually means to travel and traverse through time is put into dialogue through works such as *“Untitled” (America #1)* and *“Untitled” (Lovers – Paris)*. If we agree that our lives are a series of memories, we must follow by understanding what a memory is. Memories shape how we understand our lives; however, for the artist they also express what could never be. We understand who we are from what we have experienced and the choices we have made; yet future memory defies memories as something that already occurred. Memories represent the past as well as future memory for Felix. More than how we understand everyday life, memories are also what eventually define our lives – both by our own standards and by those around us. Memories are the standard by which we decide if a life was lived to its potential or in vain. However, with all of the importance memories hold in defining us, memories are subjective and alter with time.

Gordon proposed that the past haunts those it affects. Therefore, the future in turn has the ability to haunt the present. The lands unvisited are constructed into light strings, such as

“*Untitled*” (*Ischia*), 1993 (Figure 11) is demonstrative of a known acceptance of what will never be physically, but what has existed through talks and dreams. This is a Greek island where Ross’ and Felix’s presence is unrecorded.<sup>88</sup> Yet this string still follows the construction of the strings named for places in which Felix and Ross definitively were once located. Whether discussed in terms of where they wished to someday visit, or in terms of anger dictated by what they would never be able to literally see, their moments together were shaped by these memories discussed but never lived. These aspirations or secret-mentions between the scatterings of locations appeared inconsequential to many outside of the relationship. We are often surprised by what remains important of those we share our life with after they pass: a phrase, an item of clothing, or a single discussion. Felix’s mastery over their situation is demonstrated by using a mechanism that masquerades as a factory produced device to present places in which memories for the artist and his lover were made or could have been made. Perhaps they were traveled to, or else simply mentioned in passing. These locations, such as Ischia, can represent both an anger that these potential memories were stolen from them or act as a way for the artist to capture them and make them their own.<sup>89</sup> By utilizing a mechanism constructed of human-produced parts we see Felix creating a metaphor for human means to employ a natural element – light. In the same way he references human means and limits of memory for something also entirely natural – a life (un)lived.

Parentetical references to geography make apparent that the light strands “*Untitled*” (*Lovers – Paris*) represents the idea of travel or memories. Whether seen hanging from the ceiling or lying on the floor they can give the impression of floating in a heavenly realm, perhaps

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<sup>88</sup> Unrecorded as far as both time and resources constrain my research to discover. In future research I hope to spend time in the artist’s archive in New York to better understand the larger sequence of events.

<sup>89</sup> As poet Mark Doty writes in his memoir of his partner’s death, *Heaven’s Coast*, “That, I think, is one of the real tragedies of illness; you cannot know the life you might have had.” (Doty, 42).

even above a glistening puddle of stars. This is a classic romantic notion: no matter where in the world you stand, under the skies of night the glowing stars look the same. So when Felix looked upon the glimmering night sky with the dying Ross by his side, knowing it was one of the last times they would ever breathe in the crisp night air of their final home together – Rossmore Avenue, they would be able to imagine that they were anywhere – France, Italy, the small Greek island of Ischia, or a new dimension where a plague was not killing them for the simple fact of who they loved.

The perfect lovers could imagine they were somewhere away from all of the pills, the decaying forms of bodies once known and unchanging, the lesions, the vomit, and cessation of life. They could imagine that they were somewhere better than this and at the same time they could look at these stars that would be the same if they were a hundred miles away or a hundred years away and realize in their togetherness that they had found one another and that there was nowhere better than this.<sup>90</sup>

Felix did not want a new start, for he did not see death as an end. The phrase ‘starting over’ is not part of his common vocabulary: he had found love and he had found purpose through that love: a love tragic in its reality and concrete in its strength. And *this* is spirituality referred to in the previous chapter now expressed as future memory – when desire, thought, and passion reach beyond logic. “*Untitled*” (*Lovers – Paris*) addresses flaws of being in its vulnerabilities that are reflections of the flaws of human bodies. He charges his light strings with these reflections. Although strings such as “*Untitled*” (*Lovers – Paris*) must constantly be reignited through the replacement of bulbs the entire string is only replaced should replacement bulbs ever

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<sup>90</sup> One of Felix’s most charged paper stacks features two stacks of paper facing one another, one with the text “Somewhere better than this” written upon its surface and the other with “Nowhere better than this” upon it.

stop being produced. Theoretically, a museum or collector should never have to start over with an entirely new string. The some light bulbs will continue to illuminate the space and fulfill their action as others begin to dim.

This is not to imply that all of these locations were unvisited. Many played crucial parts in their time together. “*Untitled*” (*Toronto*) signifies the home of Ross for many of the years during their relationship, while “*Untitled*” (*Miami*), 1992, (Figure 12) refers to the final home to Felix. “*Untitled*” (*Rossmore*), 1992, (Figure 13) is named for the street in which Felix first moved in with Ross while Felix taught at CalArts.<sup>91</sup> This latter piece represents both a moment of happiness and a moment of deep agony, for the circumstances of their domestic companionship were overcast with the knowledge that Ross was too ill to live by himself any longer.

Others such as “*Untitled*” (*Lovers – Paris*) and “*Untitled*” (*Ischia*) designate locations in which history has not recorded their presence.<sup>92</sup> Again, we do not know if Felix ever put his physical presence with Ross at these places, but they may have talked about it. They likely dreamed of Paris and Ischia. By entailing the use of identical light strings for the memories had as the strings for the memories he may never have had physically, the artist makes them indecipherable.

When discussing “*Untitled*”, 1991, (Figure 14), a billboard of a photograph of the artist’s own bed, Felix said: “... I needed distance from my bed, and that bed because a site that was not only the place I sleep in, it was also the place of pain at night.”<sup>93</sup> The fear and pain that surround

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<sup>91</sup> Sprengel Museum Hannover, *Text*, 56.

<sup>92</sup> Hege Kjeldsen, Administration Secretary of the Astrup Fearnley Museet, e-mail to author, November 4, 2015.

<sup>93</sup> Obrist, 112.

this bed that he once shared with Ross is utilized in creating a very specific separation through the light strings. A string such as “*Untitled*” (*Lovers – Paris*) takes the feeling of absence (derived from the memory of what was) and transforms it into a presence of soft light showing was is still there. The light project a futurity in this way, allowing what will come into this room they illuminate to be seen clearly when it finally comes.

This idea of moments had and moments only discussed in longing brings to light the idea of presence and absence. This concept is constantly apparent in the work of Felix. His first love, photography, is an excellent example of this.<sup>94</sup> While most would say the appeal of a photograph is to precisely capture what is present, Nancy Spector argues that, “the snapshot does not lie about the present or the past. It also unnervingly predicts the future... a medium that simultaneously imparts the knowledge that “this will be” and “this has been.””<sup>95</sup> Everything in this world is in a constant state of change and what is photographed is immortalized as what can never be again.

Felix addressed the idea of presence and absence through his candy stacks: “I wanted to make an artwork that could disappear, that never existed, and it was a metaphor for when Ross was dying. So it was a metaphor that I would abandon this work before this work abandoned me. I’m going to destroy it before it destroys me. That was my little amount of power when it came to this work. I didn’t want it to last, because then it couldn’t hurt me.”<sup>96</sup> As many of the themes and messages of Felix’s works resonate throughout the majority of his later works we can apply this statement to his light strings. Although his words communicate powerlessness, he felt

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<sup>94</sup> Felix first imagined himself a photographer (Storr, “When This You See Remember Me,” 11).

<sup>95</sup> Spector, 125.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Storr and Felix Gonzalez-Torres: “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Etre un Espion (Interview),” *Art Press*, (January 1995): 32, quoted in *Sprengel Museum Hannover, Text*, 44.

the things that had the potential to hurt him can move his audience to understand the way in which he suffered and the way in which Ross' absence influenced Felix's presence. He uses materials that harness the finite: light strings that are vulnerable to electrical currents, faulty bulbs, and broken wires. They are materials that will not last a lifetime without human intervention, enabling himself to make the work suffer, so he does not have to. This was solely Felix's casting of Ross' shadow. It is his revenge upon the world that stole Ross from him.

*"Untitled" (Arena)*, 1993, (Figure 15) addresses collective memory. This work, though concentrated on the use of light, is different from the other light strings in that its display is specific to the piece and that unlike the other geographic pieces, this location is coded rather than avert.<sup>97</sup> The strings are hung in a square from the ceiling with two sets of Sony Walkman players near. Viewers are meant to put on a Walkman as they dance in the lit room.<sup>98</sup> A Viennese waltz plays, drowning out the world beyond the dancing couple. It is a fast paced dance, romantic in its tone and exhilarating in its tempo. The parenthetical title "Arena" invokes a romanticized idea of a classical arena – a place of battle and competition – laid bare to the sky and world above.

Rarely discussed is the conception of the transposition of time. Instead of focusing upon limited time *"Untitled" (Arena)* uses light to create infinite time. The couple in the center of the arena is lost to the world, encouraged to have one another at that moment in our chronological world whenever they embrace and also have that moment thousands of years ago in a Roman world. Although Roman arenas were used for many events associated with death, such as

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<sup>97</sup> Andrew Blackley, Archives Associate of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, e-mail to author, November 9, 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Australian Centre for Contemporary Arts: *Intimacy Exhibit Education Kit*, accessed November 13, 2015, <https://www.accaonline.org.au/sites/default/files/INTIMACYEDKIT.pdf>.

gladiator competitions, the transposition of the idea to a more subtle and contradictory place such as a museum questions what we know and to look for other contradictions. What better way to conquer death than to disprove the relevance of time? By defeating time Felix defeats death. What is left to fear when there is no more time and you no longer have to face moments without someone? *“Untitled” (Arena)* presents utter freedom in its refusal to accept time as it is traditionally conceived. It is a contradiction to the power of death – the power *we* give death.

*“Untitled” (America)*, 1994, (Figure 16), is Felix’s final light string as well as his largest. Installed today at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City, the work consists of twelve strings that cascade down and are encircled by the stairwell. When Felix thought of *“Untitled” (America)*, he considered it his “own history of light.”<sup>99</sup> The quote is ambiguous and does not specify if he is referring to the history of the light strings her created, or to light more generally. If he is talking about natural light it is noteworthy that he calls it his own history. The uncertainty of his quote brings forth connotations that we all experience light quite differently. Were we to see it as a type of genesis of the universal light, we would also see, in effect, it being claimed by Felix alone.

Felix experienced life, love, and death through light, both environmental and in his constructed light strings. Because of light we have darkness, another equally crucial attribute of life. It also makes the darkness a basis for what we do not see. We would never know how dark darkness could be were it not for us having light; the antithesis is only created by the original. *“Untitled” (America)* creates illuminated and shadows spaces in the Whitney stairwell. Because of light projected from *“Untitled” (America)* we see shadows.

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<sup>99</sup> Guggenheim Museum Publications, 37.

Felix saw the world around him as "... an explosion of information but an implosion of meaning. It is like "Casablanca" where Humphrey Bogart said, "A long time ago, last night." People don't remember last night."<sup>100</sup> Persons of this generation were terrified of this concept of forgetting. A majority of the victims to this disease were quite young. They were robbed of a lifetime's worth of works to be remembered by. This idea of being forgotten struck another chord for some. If they did not die but their lovers did, should they move on? Would they have a choice? At so young an age what would prevent them from forgetting someone? This is an idea represented through the entropic nature of Felix's self-defeating light strings. In a letter written in 1994 Felix mourns time's cruel power: "My dialogue with Ross, the smell of his hair, his voice, his language, his love, his touch, his humor are becoming so distant. 1991 was a good, bad, year. To more 1991."<sup>101</sup>

The artist projects Ross into his light strings by means of geography, allowing the future memory of Ross to be ever-present. It is visible in the dedication of each piece to Ross. It is there in the distance Felix puts between politics and personal. Ross is ever present. Perhaps it was a fear of Ross changing from an existence to a memory that charged the work of Felix. Felix interpreted the role of artist as a messenger and carrier. "*Untitled*" (*America*) communicates that he was always willing to put this aside for what he felt was more important – getting his message out. This is demonstrated in the artist's aversion to telling those close to him that he had HIV/AIDS, yet, as Ault remembers, he would tell strangers such as taxi drivers.<sup>102</sup>

Felix seems not to have feared death, but instead a life alone. Whenever he allows one of his pieces to portray the pains of life and the flaws of being, Felix most importantly allowed a

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<sup>100</sup> Herausgeber, 34.

<sup>101</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres to anonymous, 1991, in Cesarco.

<sup>102</sup> Ault, xii.

vision of the perfection of being portrayed through works such as “*Untitled*” (*America*). When “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) has reached stillness, frozen in time, he allows and urges for the rejuvenation of life. The batteries *will* be replaced, and the clocks placed in synch again. The perfect love will continue. So too, when the light bulb in “*Untitled*” (*America*) burns out, it is replaced. The idea of the piece is a beautiful composition of a life that can continue, together, portraying future memory.

Felix searches for power over existence when he recognized his lover’s body would no longer be there to grasp. With Ross’ physical presence fading, Felix strove to dictate a poem to mark his love’s place in this world, a perfection of which to hold his companionship against, and a validity for the presences that only lived in longings and dreaming. Indeed, “*Untitled*” (*America*) is the portrayal of love and survival while being a poem of companionship. He creates a personification of light so that he can have the powers of a god over it. It was a way for him to claim power in a time when the millennium was coming to a close and for Felix, something more important. Illumination, through the utilization of Felix, becomes an allegory for something visceral, spiritual, poetic, and a new definition of what a life could be. By redefining a life Felix could claim that he and Ross had had a full one. By illustrating complex ideas in light strings he left his mark: that he was here, that Ross was here, and that their love existed.

*“Dear Julie:*

*What to leave? How to mark the fact that we were? That we were here? How to make friends smile and feel content when one is no longer around? Not only through acts, memories, and shared moments. I also want to leave light – to make this world a brighter space – to my friends: special lights, many many lights all over.*

*- F.<sup>103</sup>*

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<sup>103</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres to Julie Ault, October 13, 1993, in Cesarco.

## AFTERWARDS

I offer the following afterward as a documentation of what I have taken away from the art of Felix and my time studying the depth of it. The following is at once a letter to Felix as well as a reflection. I took the art that was made for Ross and consumed it as though it were made for myself. When I deviated from the artist's intent in my interpretative frame of shadows and future memory, unintentionally but inevitably, it was because I wanted to convey the richness and complexity of Felix's art. My interpretations of Gordon's theory of ghosts and hauntings were used in an effort to situate a context of the historical moment of the art and the future of the art. Affect theory and my linguistic approach were used as a way in which to accentuate the personal nature and emotional scope Felix invested in his art. I have only attempted to enunciate the flaws of being where there was hope for the perfection of being as well. I hope that this is apparent.

Felix-

I hope it is apparent that I tried. I tried to portray the fears of the time, the loss, and the hope. I tried to move someone into feeling, relating, and acting; even if it was myself. Above all of this I tried to be true to you, Ross, and your art. My greatest concerns are that I dulled the agony – your agony, and that I masqueraded my own thoughts as yours.

I hope I punctuated the amount of thought that drove your work. I hope I was able to tear down the twenty-five years that separates me from your time, from your existence, and from your suffering. Suffering is likely a word you would loathe – for from your anger and frustration that is apparent in your work you overshadow it with hope and most remarkably, tranquility and acceptance. That breath of fire deep in your lungs, cooled by a heart of compassion, of perception, of a future changed.

You had time – not enough, but you had your time of fear, unknowing, creation, and love.

Felix, I know I fall short in my aspirations and I apologize. I suppose this is why art is art and words are words. They are inseparable yet they are toxic. A certain irony lies there, with the things we both love.

I started writing this thesis to finish my degree. I continued writing this thesis for you, Felix. For your memory and for your message that have made me feel as only art can. I wanted to share the compassion in your work and make others feel and understand, also. Now I realize as I finish this thesis it was actually for myself.

As the final shadows begin to descend as night's finale I realize I am in this thesis. This thesis has become as much of a record of me as it has of you, and I prayed that this did not mean your message was completely subjugated and altered. But now I realize: this is what you desired. This is why you used ambiguous titles and materials – so we may all find ourselves in the light. So we can grow and find a place somewhere between the light and the darkness. This is what your art is truly about. At the conclusion I now realize, Felix, that words and art are not toxic. They are symbiotic – like life and death and like light and darkness. The dichotomies I tried so hard to write about and that were orchestrating this paper from the beginning fall away as I stand at the end and now realize there is no dichotomy. One cannot exist without the other.  
*This is Perfect Lovers.*

-Shawn

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## FIGURES

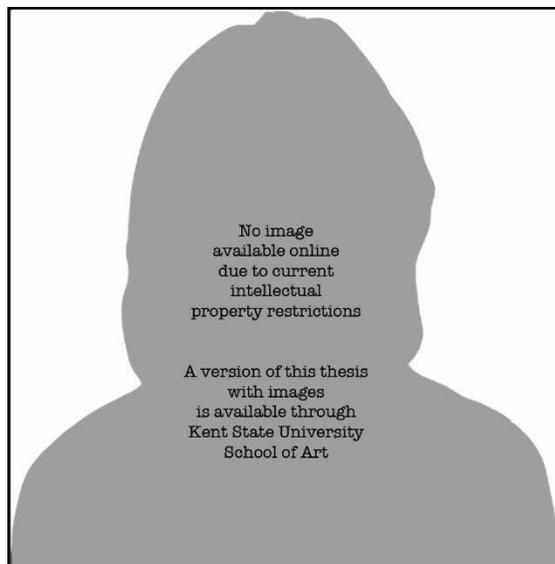


Figure 1. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, (1987-1990). Clocks. 14" x 28" x 2.75" (35,6 x 71,2 x 7 cm) overall. Diameter: 14: (35,6 cm) each of 2 parts. Signed and dated on label on the back of each clock. Edition of 3, 1 a.p.

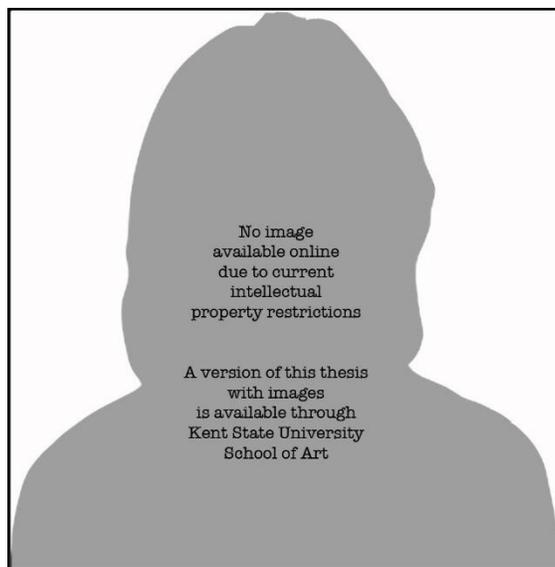


Figure 2. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Last Light)*, (1993). 10 watt light bulbs, plastic light sockets, extension cord, dimmer switch. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 11.5 (3,5 m) length, with 12.5 (3,8 m) extra cord). Edition of 24, 6 a.p.

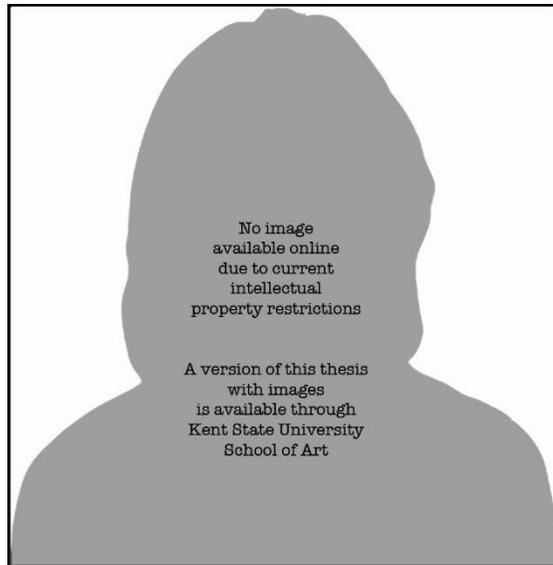


Figure 3. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *“Untitled” (A Couple)* (1993). 25 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, extension cord. Dimensions vary with installation. 2 parts: 42’ (12,8 m) length, with 20’ (6 m) extension cord.

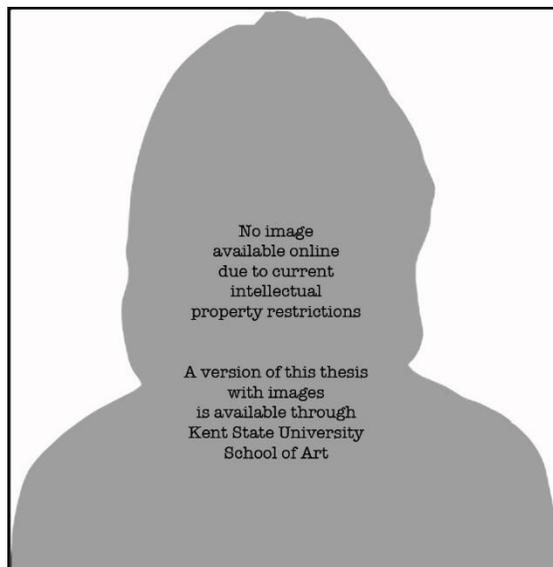


Figure 4. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (March 5<sup>th</sup>) #2*, (1991). 40 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, extension cords. Dimensions vary with installation. 2 parts: approx.. 113” (287 cm) high. Edition of 20, 2 a.p.

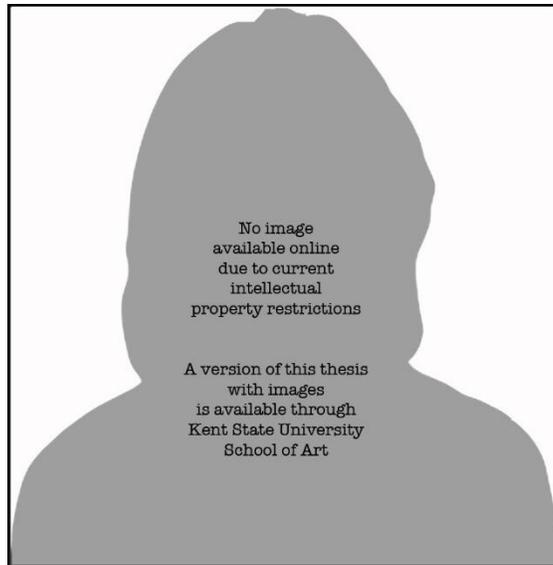


Figure 5. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Leaves of Grass)*, (1993). 15 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, extension cord. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 41.5' length, with 20' extra cord.

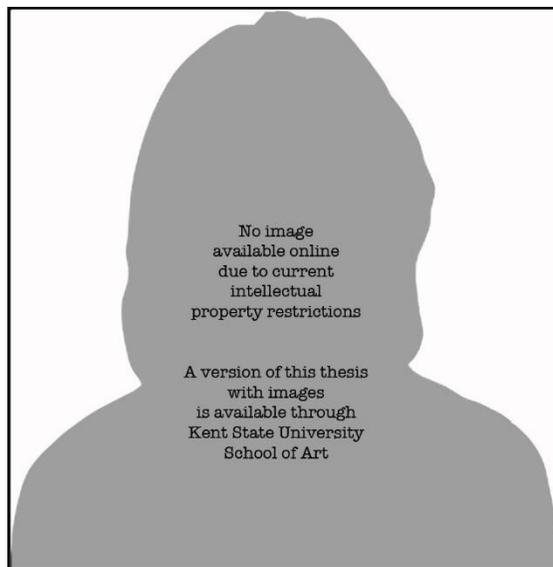


Figure 6. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (A Love Meal)*, (1992). 15 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, extension cord. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 42' (12,8 m) length, with 20' (6 m) extra cord.

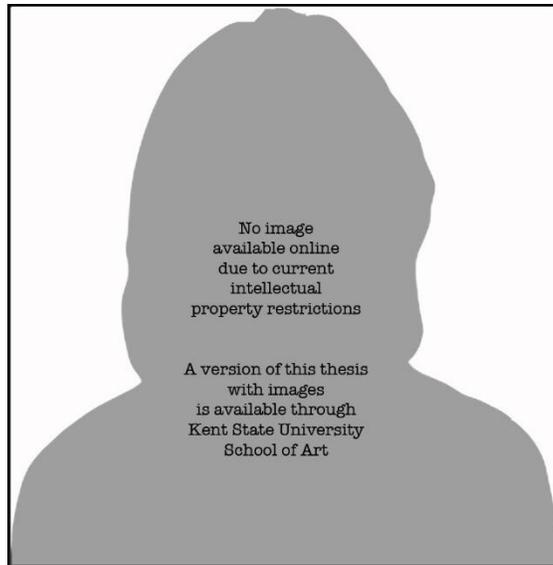


Figure 7. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (North)*, (1993). 15 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, extension cords. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 12 parts: 22' 6" length each.

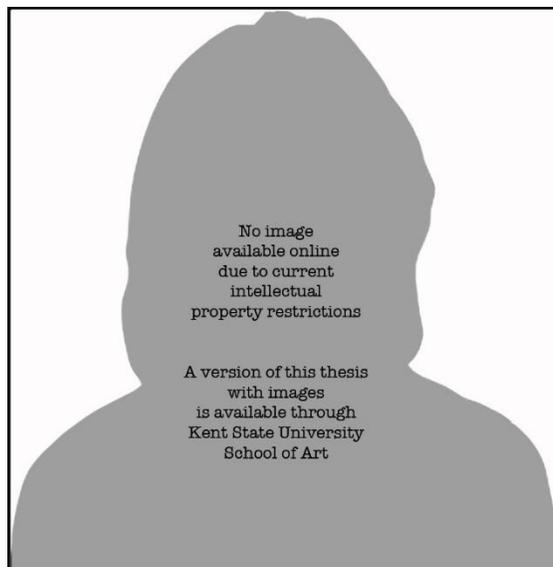


Figure 8. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (America #1)*, (1992). 15 watt light bulbs, rubber light sockets, extension cords. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 2 parts: 42' (12,8 m) length each, with 20' (6 m) extra cord each.

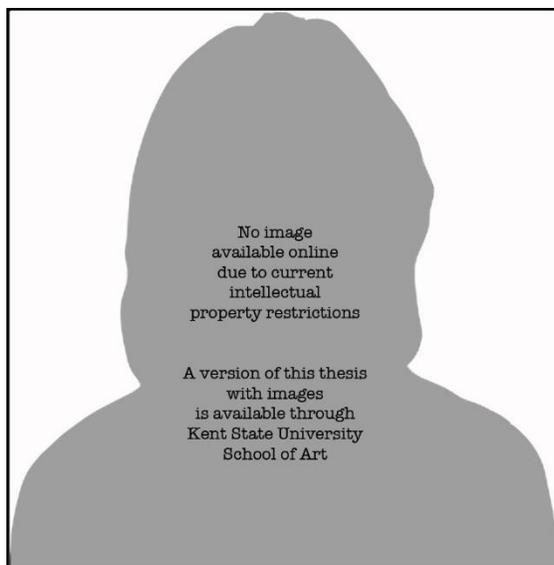


Figure 9. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Lovers – Paris)*, (1993). 15 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, extension cords. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 2 parts: 41' (12,5 m) length each, with 20' (6 m) extra cord each.

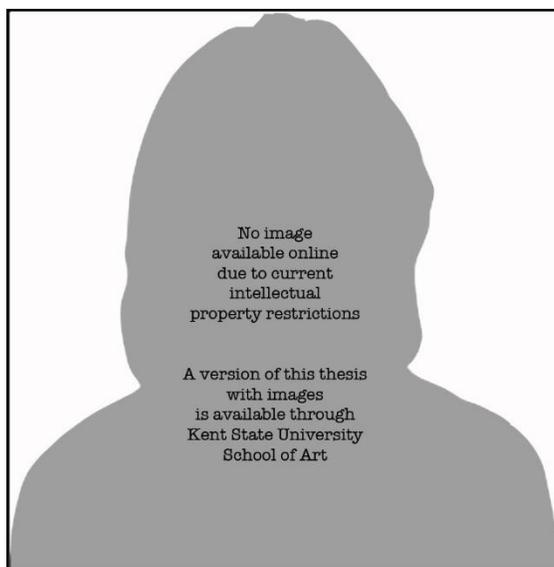


Figure 10. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Toronto)*, (1992). 25 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets extension cord. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 42' (12,8 m) length, with 20' (6 m) extra cord.

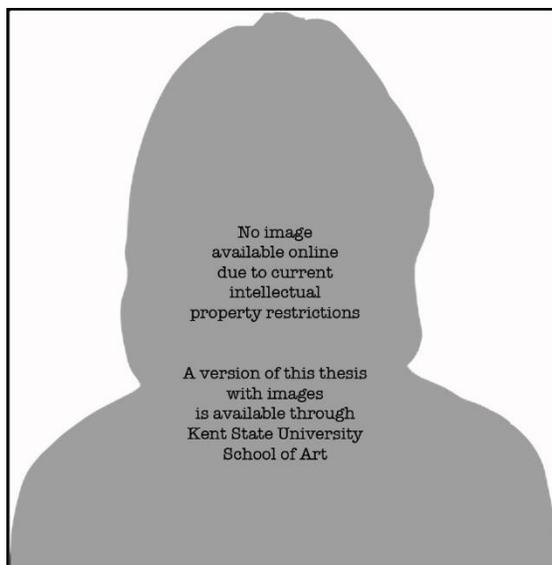


Figure 11. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Ischia)*, (1993). 15 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets extension cord. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 42' (12,8 m) length, with 20' (6 m) extra cord.

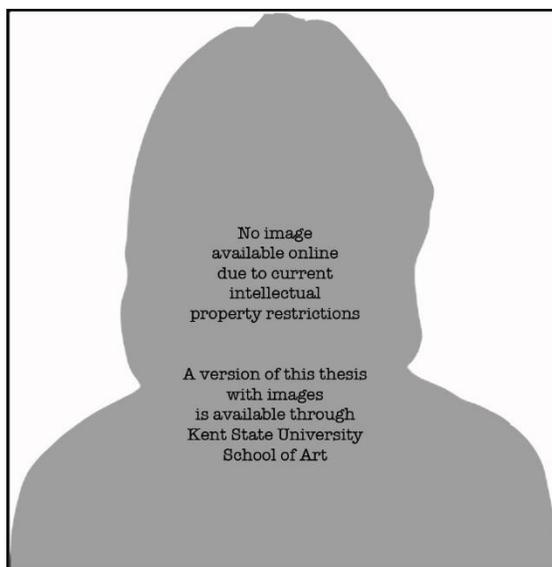


Figure 12. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Miami)*, 1992. 25 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, extension cord. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 42' (12,8 m) length, with 20' (6 m) extra cord.

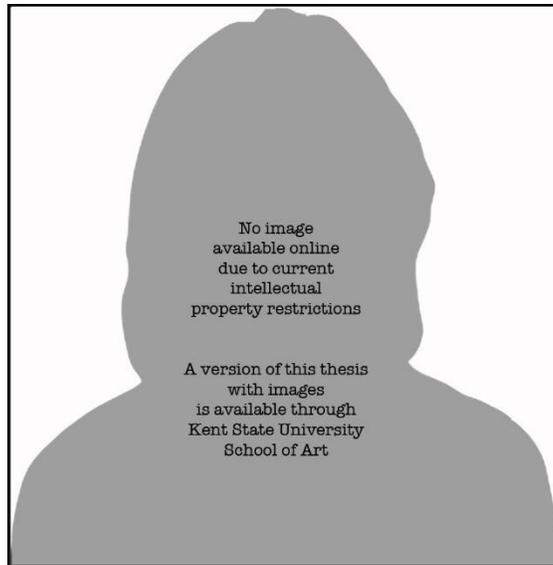


Figure 13. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Rossmore)*, (1992). 15 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets extension cord. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 42' (12,8 m) length, with 20' (6 m) extra cord.

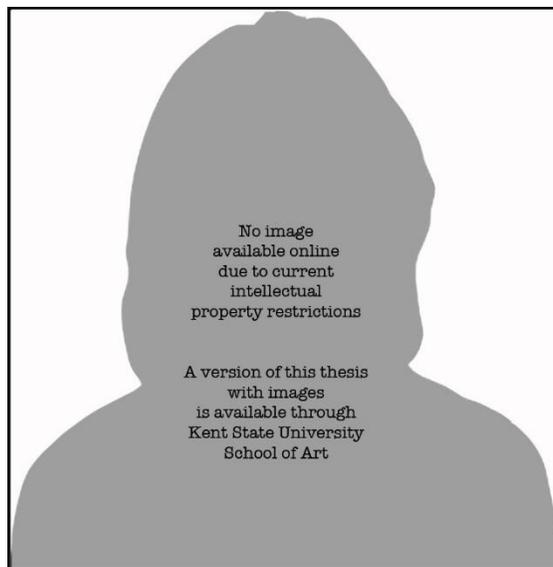


Figure 14. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, (1991). Billboard, dimensions vary with installation. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

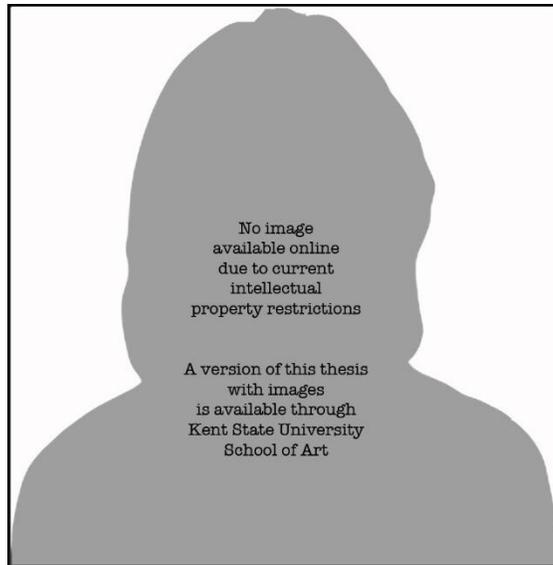


Figure 15. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Arena)*, (1993). 25 watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, dimmer, extension cord. Overall dimensions vary with installation 59' (18 m) length with 20' (6 m) extra cord.

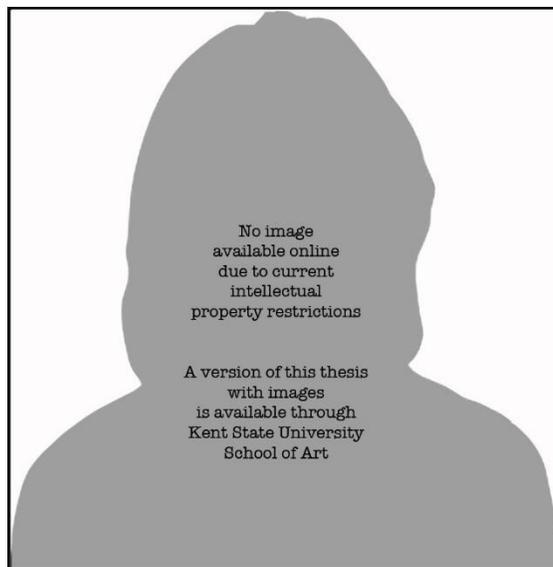


Figure 16. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (America)*, (1994). 15 watt light bulbs, rubber light sockets, extension cords. Overall dimensions vary with installation. 12 parts: 65.5 (20 m) length each, with 24.5 (7,5 m) extra cord each.

## APPENDIX

Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour*by Wallace Stevens*

Light the first light of evening, as in a room  
In which we rest and, for small reason, think  
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.  
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,  
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl  
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,  
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.  
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,  
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.  
We say God and the imagination are one...  
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,  
We make a dwelling in the evening air,  
In which being there together is enough.