THE WORK OF ART AS A TRANSGRESSIVE GESTURE: 
HANS BELLMER AND FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES 

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

A number of artistic practices in the 20th century expose the intent to transgress traditional formal limits of art. A relation between the viewer and the work has been especially closely scrutinized and questioned. The established limit that separates the viewer as a subject and the work of art as an object has been challenged in different ways.

Through a series of arranged photographs of self-constructed dolls, the Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer examines the transformative force of human desire. His works put the viewer in a position to realize one's existence as incessant work of desire. The delimited and mutilated bodies of dolls that Bellmer's photographs present the viewer with serve as a powerful metaphor that quite often the established structure of the body may figuratively and literally be transgressed in one's dealings with the surrounding world. The analysis of the historical situation Hans Bellmer lived in shows that such a transgression may also be understood in broader terms as the questioning of established societal structures. The consideration of the writings of Bellmer's contemporary and friend Georges Bataille helps to understand the dynamics of how such a
transgression occurs. It is argued that Bellmer's strategy of delimiting the object closely resembles a sacrificial practice.

Related issues are explored by the contemporary Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The structure of his works deliberately refuses to establish a physical limit between the space of the viewer and that of the work itself. In some cases, the viewer is even encouraged to take a part of the work. The work of art as a non-returnable gift to the viewer signals a qualitatively different transgression which, unlike sacrifice, does and cannot lead to any utilitarian goal.

It is concluded that Bellmer took the Surrealism project of endowing the work of art with the dynamics of desire to its furthest point. Dealing with the issue of (self-) sacrificing was the inevitable outcome of such a project. However, in the view of Gonzalez-Torres's achievement that engenders a more radical transgression in the form of gift, Bellmer's work is seen as partial failure.
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INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have been marked by various attempts to rewrite the history of twentieth century art. One of the most pronounced and sustained efforts in this enterprise has been directed to reclaiming Surrealism to modern art. The strategy that such scholars as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster have undertaken consists in “decentering” Surrealism. While paying necessary attention to the movement leader André Breton and artists that adhered to his agenda, Krauss and Foster also bring into discussion the “dissident” faction of the movement, centered around Georges Bataille. Unlike Breton who saw desire and the unconscious as the source of unconventional imagery and creativity in general, Bataille was mostly preoccupied with exploring the phenomena and forces capable of undoing forms and transgressing established structures. For him, artistic production consisted not in formative activity but in deformation and the undoing of the form. It is through the Bataillean notions of the “un-form” (l'informe) and transgression that recent scholarship has found the way of reincorporating Surrealism into Modernist histories of art.
As a result of this revived interest in *L’Informe* and transgression, the figure of Hans Bellmer has emerged. Classified for several decades as a peripheral surrealist, Bellmer has come to stand as an interesting artist whose work carries a strong transgressive, or even disturbing, character. In their attempt to reshape the established history of Modernism, both Krauss and Foster cite Bellmer as a prominent figure. In their discourse (especially Krauss’s), Bellmer’s art is presented as performing the work of the aforementioned Bataillean notions.

The conditions that allowed this new art historical discourse to occur have originated in the view of variety of developments in recent art that opened up the possibilities of going beyond the modernist formula of pure visuality. A significant body of contemporary art questions the very mechanism of visual reception. Recent artistic practices quite often do away with the white cube of a gallery space which is a premise of pure visual relation to the work. Furthermore, the very distance between the viewer and the work—a necessary factor to establish visual relation—is put into question.

One of the most manifest attempts to undermine these established modernist notions can be observed in the work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The transgression of the established economy of art reception (the viewer’s visual relation to the work in a neutral gallery space) is achieved through exploring the notion of art as a gift. The viewer is no longer a detached observer but an active
participant in the dynamics of the work itself. Although visual experience remains an integral part in González-Torres's work, the appeal to desire as well as the questioning of one's identity bring significant transformations in one's perception of the work. The space in which one encounters the work is more complex than the neutral white cube of a gallery. This space now is the social which necessarily involves the other and which has a power to put the identity and integrity of the viewer into question. The non-returnable gift transcends the boundaries of the totality of the self.
CHAPTER 2

BELLMER AND TRANSGRESSION THROUGH A SACRIFICE

Hans Bellmer joined the Surrealist movement rather late, in 1934, thus missing the period of its actual formation and crystallization that followed the publishing of The Manifesto of Surrealism in 1924. It was the time when Surrealism was no more a unified movement that sought well-established goals but rather an artistic and political enterprise best defined by considering its ever-growing inner discord between André Breton and Georges Bataille. Bellmer sent photographs of his first Doll to Paris, hoping that the Surrealists might be interested in his work. To his great surprise, Breton and other members of the group eagerly accepted his rather controversial images, and eighteen photographs, titled Doll—Variations on the Assemblage of an Articulated Minor, were published in the sixth issue of Minotaure. Then next year Bellmer made a visit to Paris where he was welcomed by the Surrealists. Furthermore, Paul Eluard expressed interest in writing poetic miniatures to accompany the photographs of Bellmer’s second
Doll, which appeared in the publication Les jeux de la poupee (The Games of the Doll).\(^1\)

One may be tempted to think that there was something particularly appealing for the Surrealists in Bellmer’s rather unconventional imagery, which made him the first artist to be accepted to the group even before his having visited Paris. It would perhaps be instructive to see just exactly what Bellmer wanted to achieve while constructing the Doll, his “entrance piece.” This work has an interesting history worth examining. If one attempts to trace back sources that inspired Bellmer to create his first Doll, one learns that it was not an art context that had the most direct influence. It seems that the doll was some kind of bizarre family affair, in which his family’s every member—Bellmer’s wife, brother Fritz, young cousin Ursula, and even his father, who was a member of the National-Socialist party—had a role.

The construction of the Doll was triggered when Bellmer saw The Tales of Hoffman, the opera by Jacques Offenbach, in which animate and mechanistic aspects of Olympia, a girl and a doll, are put on display.\(^2\) Other circumstances that surrounded Bellmer at the time were also significant. Upon Bellmer’s request, his mother sent him a box of toys that he used to play with as a child.

\(^1\) Even though Bellmer started photographing his second Doll in 1935 and Eluard wrote the accompanying poems in 1939, Les jeux de la poupee was not published until 1949 due to the war.
Since Bellmer was aware of Freud and the significance of infantile memories in psychoanalysis, it seems that he deliberately tried to recuperate some of his childhood experiences. Bellmer fed his imagination by working through his past experiences. Here to "work through" may be read as *Durcharbeiten* in Freud, i.e., going back to beginnings in order to bring to the surface the repressed contents of one's life.

It seems that through his art Bellmer was consciously engaged in a kind of self-analysis; or at least he thought that such a self-exploration was possible. And since a psychoanalytic treatment requires some associative data to refer to, it was Bellmer himself who provided most of the facts that are being mentioned here.

What is important to note here is not a question about the truthfulness of such facts but rather that of their relevance to the discussion of Bellmer's art. Having such a consideration in mind, it is perhaps also necessary to mention that the presence in the same house of Bellmer's young cousin Ursula, who arrived in 1932, was yet another source for his erotic fantasies concerning the transformation of a girl into a woman, of a playful child into an object of desire.

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Bellmer's brother Fritz, who was an engineer by profession, helped the artist construct the Doll. Surprisingly, even his wife kept encouraging him to finish creating the fruit of his imagination, and in certain ways even assisted him. Thus, Bellmer's first Doll originated as a product of family activity.

To a lesser extent, the second Doll was also a collective creation. Partly because of this, partly because of Bellmer's own intentions, domestic aspects happened to be quite prominent in many photographs of the Dolls. They came into view through somewhat familiar settings of a bedroom, kitchen, or yard. However, the total effect the Dolls produce is that of radical disturbance and violence. In the following pages, I would like to discuss this double effect of familiarity and foreignness, attraction and repulsion, from two complementary viewpoints: that of crime, and of sacrifice.

As mentioned, Bellmer's first Doll was presented not as a sculpture or any other three-dimensional object, but as a series of photographs (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Given that in the first image only the basic structural parts of the doll are shown, one may expect a progression in the series: the construction starting from a skeleton, continuing outwards to the flesh and finally being wrapped up in the skin (or in the case of a doll, in the surface of the body). The first three photographs in the series seem to suggest such a notion: image number two shows a part of a torso added to the skeleton; in the third photograph, there is an
already recognizable configuration of human figure, with one full leg, a profile of the face with a tuft of hair, and a hat. Beside this creature, a transparent silhouette of Bellmer, achieved through a double exposure, appears. It is as if the artist welcomes the arrival of his fantasy object. But this progression is readily disrupted in the next image, which presents us with a board on which the disassembled parts of the doll are hung. The pattern of construction followed by dismemberment and destruction continues through the entire series. While some photographs show somewhat familiar human shapes, the rest of them expose mutilated and deliberately mismatched configurations of human parts.

In addition to presenting a human body as a constructed entity, Bellmer originally intended to install a panoramic mechanism in it. One would have had to look into the doll’s navel to see “little objects, diverse material and coloured images of bad taste” which would coincide with “the thoughts and dreams of a little girl.”

The button on the doll’s nipple would have rotated the images, lit by a torch lamp (Figure 2.3). Bellmer’s brother Fritz helped the artist to design this mechanism inside the doll. It is not known whether Bellmer brought this idea to completion; however, at least two photographs published in Minotaure show that such a mechanism figured in the construction of his first Doll.

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Just like most mechanisms, for Bellmer the body can be reorganized (the Doll), utilized for warfare (*The Machine-gunneress in a State of Grace*, Figure 2.4), or exposed to numerous reconstructions and diverse applications (illuminations for *The Anatomy of the Image*). The inconstant state of relations between corporeal parts aims to undermine the notion of one’s body as a hierarchic and governed entity. Thus, the mobility and interchangeability of organs, and the resultant denial of the constancy of body structure, became Bellmer’s chief concern in designing his second Doll in 1935.

Unhappy with the difficulties in rearranging the parts of his first Doll, Bellmer invented a new way of construction based on the use of ball joints which replaced the earlier static connections. With this innovation, the Second Doll acquired a great deal of flexibility. The head, legs and arms of the first Doll were kept, but all other parts were remodeled. With some help from his brother Fritz, Bellmer manufactured new pairs of arms and legs as well as an upper torso and two pelvises. Dispensing with a skeleton in favor of ball joints allowed Bellmer to compose his second Doll without any preconceived structure or hierarchy of body parts.

Whereas Bellmer hesitated between photographic and three-dimensional presentation of the first Doll, his second Doll was intentionally and deliberately shown only as a series of photographs. In addition, this time Bellmer used
carefully staged settings into which the monstrous humanoid, his second Doll, was placed.

Already noticeable in the first version, the intention to create a scene is very prominent in Bellmer's second Doll. Both Dolls function as tools to arrange a particular setting, which is then documented by photographing. If looked at closely, some images (Figure 2.5) appear to be a bit out of focus and, intentionally or not, photographed without much care. While composition of some photographs seem meticulously arranged, in other images it seems arbitrary (Figure 2.6). The impression thus created suggests that these latter images were taken hastily and without much preparation, and that the only purpose was to document a particular configuration of body parts to keep it as a piece of evidence. In many pictures, the light is cast from the front which makes the figure appear rather flat, surrounded by impenetrable darkness (Figure 2.7). It is hard to determine whether Bellmer was familiar with works by other Surrealist photographers, such as Man Ray or André Boiffard, who paid a great deal of attention to the interplay between light and shadow, bright and dark areas of the image. Whether this was the case or not, Bellmer's photographs seem to ignore most of the principles for using light and shadow in a photographic composition. The images of the first Doll, published in Minotaure, and especially the second one, included in The Games of the Doll, are, more than anything else, direct imprints from reality, its mere documentation.
Having in mind Bellmer’s insistence on precision while *The Games of the Doll* was being translated into French,⁴ as well as his meticulous fine-line drawings, such a carelessness in his photographs may be a bit surprising. One may even think that it was Bellmer’s intention to present these photographs only as documents, as observations of what happened to the Doll, and that he deliberately downplayed “aesthetic” features of photography in order to convey this ideal. If such an assumption seems plausible, these photographs can be viewed as documents of a crime scene. The aforementioned trivial and seemingly accidental settings of the scene, like a garden, staircase, bedroom or kitchen, may only strengthen the atmosphere of crime. Even though there is no direct indication of what happened, one tends to think of these images as evidence of an assault against the human body: murder, rape, torture.

The theme of the transgression of an established body structure gains a great deal of prominence in Bellmer’s writings. In the *L’Anatomie de l’image*, his most sustained effort to explicate his visual imagery in the form of text, Bellmer sets out to undermine the notion of the human body as an established and unshakable structure. In this treatise, he implicitly argues against the notion of the body as a mere house for the soul and mind. For him, bodily sensations and

⁴ See Webb & Short, pp. 54-55.
desire are capable of providing various forms of knowledge; and just like human consciousness is connected to the unconscious, the human body is governed by what he calls the "physical unconscious." In fact, throughout the text Bellmer attempts to blur the traditional distinction between the body and the mind, stating that knowledge has never been a purely cognitive faculty but is rather importantly linked to desire and corporeal experience.

With the help of accompanying drawings, Bellmer demonstrates that body parts may behave much like letters in an alphabet: they don’t have any meaning by themselves, except in combinations that compose words. Subsequently, in the functions of the physical unconscious, body parts become interchangeable and able to create metaphors, palindromes, puns, abstract meanings and other products of linguistic variations: an armpit can be seen as a vulva, buttocks may turn into shoulders, etc. Also, the whole variety of body activities, such as eating, excrementing, ejaculating, or even gesticulating create traces which are detached from the body itself. Although mentioned in the *L’Anatomie* very briefly, the crime stands as another strong manifestation of how body loses its structure. The permutations and excesses of the body creates the image for which any hierarchic body structure cannot account.

Presented in series of changing settings and combinations, Bellmer’s Dolls seem to go against the grain of the notion of a stable structure. The inherent openness
of his second Doll to multiple variations of construction as well as Bellmer's methodical documentation of these variations show the intent to overcome the singleness and closeness of both the body and its image. *The Anatomy of Image* makes the case that the body never stops presenting its own image by duplicating itself. Among the most obvious manifestations of this process is, for example, the clinching of one's fists at the moment of experiencing acute toothache. The nails dig into the skin, thus transferring pain to one's hand. The real center of the pain (the tooth) is "decentralized" by creating the virtual center (the fist). Such phenomena are observed not only in the extreme states of bodily sensations (such as pain or ecstasy), but also in the most insignificant and trivial ones like a slight change in facial expression while thinking or lifting one's arms to show excitement.

Thus the body is more than what is limited by the skin and what has an established structure of organs. The body doubles itself in variety of ways to divert the expressions of bodily sensations from its actual centers into virtual ones. "This [body's ability to create illusory centers] seems certain, Bellmer declares, and means that we can now perceive our expressive life as a desirable continuum of liberating transfers or substitutions from the real source of discomfort to its image. Expression and whatever concomitant pleasure is contained within it, is the displacement of pain and a deliverance from it. This strange formation of such virtual centres of excitement seems to be the essential
factor at the birth of any expression." Thus the body inevitably carries its own image, resultant from the split of sensations. Unlike Breton who conceived of the image as a uniting and sublimatory manifestation, Bellmer sees the emergence of the image in the essential dividing, transferring and doubling of reality as well as human subject itself.

I would argue that Bellmer's Dolls are not only projections of male desires, as it is usually interpreted, but the putting into question of the stable identity of a human being. One may well imagine how in his workshop the artist carefully selects concave and convex parts of the female body, matches and connects them together, while hoping to construct a perfect object of desire. However, in the end, what he finds are only monstrous creatures which can hardly satisfy the lack, and which are the evidence of failure to achieve the whole. This evidence is photographed, and the artist sets out to search for another object of desire. The homogeneity of human body is sacrificed with an intent to put on display the virtual body—the body as the image of its own transgression.

As Bellmer states in *L'Anatomie* and elsewhere, the desire opens up the trivial and dormant reality to continuous permutations. On the level of human life, i.e., of one's being among others, the negating movement of desire "splits" the body: what desire desires of a body is never what it is at the moment. And this path

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5 Bellmer, Hans. *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique; ou, la petite anatomie de l'image.*
towards what is not present necessarily involves the sacrifice of what is. Hence, the transformative force of desire. Constructed on the principle of ball joints and multiple attachable parts, Bellmer's second Doll does not and cannot have a preconceived structure. Any of the large number of combinations of the Doll's body parts is just an instance on a way toward what it will not be in the next instant of its (re)construction. The Doll puts in a constant negation of herself—she is the work of sacrifice made visible.

On a different view, Bellmer's Dolls represent a transgression of a larger societal "body." It is perhaps necessary to briefly discuss at first what is meant by such a body. One lives in a community where certain norms, laws and traditions establish a network of the conventional and acceptable. One is engaged in this network. In every society there is a vision (or plural visions) of its ideal functioning. However, this vision is possible only in the context of what a given society is not at the moment. That is, the set of conditions from which this vision originates necessarily differs from what it strives for. Regardless of this disparity, however, the institutions of a society keep constructing an ideal functional structure—or a body—with its established hierarchy of organs, a structure that will create laws and traditions. But for a law to be issued there should first be a crime against which this law would position itself. For a tradition to gain force, there should be activity perceived as irregular and untraditional—a chaotic

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matter the tradition will seek to shape. In other words, the vision of uninterrupted and sound functioning of a society is produced in the face of ruptures and transgressions the society undergoes. Or to put it differently, in a well-oiled machine of society there is an inherent possibility of its breaking down and rusting away.

Given the fact that Bellmer lived in Nazi Germany and that his father was a member of the National-Socialist Party, the Dolls can be understood as a revolt against institutional authority. Keeping in mind that the human body was used as a powerful symbol in the Fascist regime, the considering of body representation in art at the time seems a relevant issue. In his article "Armor Fou,"6 Hal Foster discusses at length the body politics in Germany of the 1930s. He states that the ideal subject of Nazi art was a sturdy individual with clear commitment: something comparable to the warrior of modern times. The complexity of human nature was replaced by a simplistic clarity imposed by the propaganda of the state. To secure certainty about one's identity—in this case, Aryan identity—the promoted image of the body was that of armor. "[T]his armoring, Foster continues, is developed against the other of the fascist subject, whether seen as a weak, chaotic interior (his unconscious and sexuality, drives and desires) or a weak, anarchic exterior (Jews, Communists, homosexuals, proletarian women, "the masses"). Its purpose is to defend against the

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fragmentary and the fluid, the disperse and the dissolute, as represented by the feminine. [...] The fear of the feminine within might also be the fear of this destructive and defusive drive within," as Hal Foster puts it.

Viewed in this context, Bellmer’s Dolls present themselves as precisely defying any such armor and liquidating promoted distinctions and separations. What is the inside or the outside in the Dolls is indeterminate because the continuous dismemberment and construction of the Dolls intentionally binds the interior and exterior together. Through this defiant and violent gesture, the conformistic identity of a strong individual as well as the clarity of mind promoted by Nazi propaganda are sacrificed. Such a sacrifice opens up a breach in the seemingly self-sufficient and homogeneous system of a totalitarian state.

It should be added that in Nazi Germany the whole apparatus of propaganda was directed at putting the production of material goods in the front of one’s goals in life. Part of the success of Nazi propaganda was actually grounded in the contrast between the economical instability of Germany in the 1920s and the rise of production and political strength in the 1930s. The utility of every kind of human activity was highly emphasized. Production had to contribute to the power and prosperity of the state, education to raising patriotic citizens, love to the procreation of the Aryan race, etc. In such a state, the sacrifice consisting in

7 Ibid. p. 95.
labor without utilitarian product or in expenditure without productive return did not and could not have a place. In their resistance to resort to a particular form and structure, the Dolls are explicit "anti-products" that serve to defy any utilitarian goal. In many ways, Bellmer's work parallels, and often has the strength of, the key concepts of the writings by Georges Bataille, who had an expressed interest in virtually everything that went against the grain of utilitarian logic. The personal friendship between Bataille and Bellmer sometimes led them to work in tandem, as for instance when Bellmer illustrated Bataille's novel *The Story of the Eye*. But for the purposes of this study, it will be more informative to look into how Bellmer's visual works and Bataille's writings structured themselves creating important parallels and supplementing each other. Bataille's thoughts on the notion of expenditure and waste, one of the key concepts in his entire oeuvre, seem particularly relevant here.

While discussing the principles of production and consumption in his article "The Notion of Expenditure," George Bataille notes the double-sidedness of the classical notion of utility. "On the one hand, he states, this material utility is limited to acquisition (in practice, to production) and to the conservation of goods; on the other, it is limited to reproduction and conservation of human life."8 The life of contemporary society runs somewhere in between these two poles, and deviation from this path to either side is not tolerated. A youthful man,
inclined to wasting and living with an excess of energy, may imagine himself sick because a utilitarian justification for his actions is not available. Furthermore, Bataille stresses that

In the most crushing way, the contradiction between current social conceptions and the real need of society recalls the narrowness of judgment that puts the father in opposition to the satisfaction of his son’s needs. This narrowness is such that it is impossible for the son to express his will. The father’s partially malevolent solicitude is manifested in the things he provides for his son: lodging, cloths, food, and, when absolutely necessary, a little harmless recreation. But the son does not even have a right to speak about what really gives him a fever; he is obliged to give people the impression that for him no horror can enter into consideration. In this respect it is sad to say that conscious humanity has remained a minor; humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle nonproductive expenditure.⁸

When the fascists came to power in Germany, Bellmer openly refused to engage in any activity that would profit the state. Moreover, his disapproval of his father’s political attitudes was one of the principal factors that led him to become a kind of artist, constructing mutilated human bodies that, at the first sight, may evoke only disgust. As discussed above, I tend to believe that in almost every aspect such an activity represents nonproductive expenditure, that is, the sacrifice of utility in a variety of ways: the sacrifice of time and effort, the sacrifice of conventional beauty, of conformist identity, etc. As Bataille argues in “The Notion of Expenditure,” such a sacrifice has as its goal the intention to secure

one's establishment as a noble being. At the same time, the sacrifice liberates
the owner from an impoverishment by need. However, Bataille adds, the
sacrifice does not provide a shelter from need. On the contrary, the function of
need remains intact, but the owner who sacrifices his possessions exposes
himself to "the mercy of need for limitless loss." And it is through this limitless
loss that the notion of utility and of practical living is secured.

In Nazi Germany, only the state possessed a means for ostentatious display and
spectacle (which, for Bataille, is yet another manifestation of conscious non-
productive expenditure), whereas the individual was limited to strictly utilitarian
living. In this context, Bellmer's art functions as a manifestation of non-
productive wasting that cannot be utilized to any practical goal promoted by the
state. The anti-productivity and the excess of non-utilizable matter serves as a
sacrifice that cuts through the image of the utilitarian machine and exposes
conditions that shape the familiar forms of practical living.

This function of undoing form, on the one hand, and being its dialectical support
on the other was given the name of informe (or formless) in the Bataillean
dictionary.

The informe describes a transgressive movement that blurs the boundaries
between the meanings and dichotomies established by rational discourse. This

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9 Ibid., p. 117.
term, Bataille states, does not and cannot have a fixed meaning. Instead, it has a job to undermine every form and formed meaning.\(^{10}\)

While discussing Surrealist photography in her essay "Corpus Delicti,"\(^{11}\) Rosalind Krauss takes up this notion to make a point that many works by the photographers associated with the movement can be viewed as manifestations of Bataillean informe, which is often at odds with Bretonian objective chance. Krauss argues that the mechanization of production in photography undermines the very possibility of producing a metaphor by objective chance.\(^{12}\) As defined by Breton, objective chance is not really produced, in the literal sense of the word. Objective chance happens for the surrealist artist, "who waits for dreams, his doodles, his fantasies to bring him the outlandish similes of his unconscious desires."\(^{13}\) Such an image of the Surrealist artist implies his/her fundamental passivity. Contrary to this, Krauss argues, the photographers associated with the movement frequently engaged in the very conscious transformation of the image (for example, the solarization of positive prints in Raoul Ubac's The Battle of The Amazons). Unlike the "technique" of objective chance that allows the surrealist artist to discover a meaning beneath another meaning, or create a new

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\(^{10}\) "A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing has its form." George Bataille. "Formless," in Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939. Translated by Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 31.

\(^{11}\) In Krauss, Rosalind and Jane Livingston. L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism, New York: Rizzoli, 1985, pp. 56-100.

\(^{12}\) "Corpus Delicti," p. 60.
meaning by using already established ones, the efforts of the movement's
photographers were rather directed toward undoing the established categories
and the very meaning itself, to liquidate ideas into the informe. The
aforementioned example of Ubac's The Battle of the Amazons can be read as
the work of light and its effects that undo the figure and blur the object in the
photograph.

Since the privileged object in Surrealist art was a human (mostly female) body,
the work of informe was mostly directed to undoing the corporeal structure.
Thus, Rosalind Krauss argues, a transformation of the body happened to be
commonplace in Surrealist photography. Moreover, there were two basic modes
whereby such a transformation could occur. First of them is the transformation
of the body by the inner state of mind. The subjects of the Surrealist
photographs are often presented as overcome by what they experience from
within. For instance, Raoul Ubac's Ophelia (1938), Salvador Dalí's The
Phenomenon of Ecstasy (1933) or Man Ray's works for Facile (1935) would be
examples of the assault on body from within, i.e., from one's inner state of mind.
It seems as if the human body becomes somewhat too small to contain all the
experience an inner psychic state brings about. The body emanates. The point
of view that the artist assumes and subsequently presents to the viewer remains
somewhat invisible and passive. Neither the artist nor the viewer seem to

13 Ibid. p. 60.
partake in what is going on in the photograph itself. The viewer's position is in no sense a part of the photograph itself. The transformation of the body shown in a photograph comes about through the body's being possessed by some interior state: dream, ecstasy, fear, etc. If the viewer nevertheless feels engaged in a photograph, such an involvement is most probably owing to the expressive force of the work itself, rather than the implied viewer's intervention into the space of the photograph. Although distantly, such an approach to image making in photography recalls the Surrealist automatic writing technique. Such photographs are suggestive that the photographer may have waited for a psychic state to occur to and overcome his subjects before he opened the camera shutter, just like the Surrealist painter may have had to play for some time with his doodles for an image to emerge. It seems to be further implied here that the artistic image happens as if by objective chance.

If the impulse to transform is received from within, Krauss continues, the "consumption of matter by a kind of spatial ether is a representation of the overturning of reality by those psychic states so courted by the poets and painters of the movement: revery, ecstasy, dream. But while some of these images would support this reading [...] , others clearly do not. They do not seem to depict bodies seized from within and transformed, but, rather, bodies assaulted from without."14 By invoking Roger Caillois's studies of insect mimicry

14 Ibid., p. 70.
and Lacan’s theory of gaze, Krauss states that a significant body of photographic work in Surrealism bears evidence about subject’s self-projection into the photograph’s space. Maurice Tabard, for instance, does that by using a variety of reflective surfaces in his works, thus defying the notion of a single-viewpoint vision and destabilizing the position of the viewer-subject. Bellmer’s photographs of the Dolls, Krauss argues, can be seen as the fear of a wound to the eye, in that they are “endless tableaux-vivants of the figure of castration.”

The subsequent doubling and multiplication, resulting in monstrous and threatening imagery, is only a means to conceal what is feared more than any monstrous imagery: namely, the revealing of the locus of castration, which is an opening towards nothingness. Krauss compares the multiplication of body parts in Bellmer’s Dolls and the following piling up, bulging and swelling of a composite body to what Roger Caillois describes as “the call of space” in the phenomenon of animal (especially insect) mimicry. While arguing against the interpretation of mimicry as a means of adaptation, Caillois proposes that mimicry—the insect’s changing of appearance to blend with the colors and patterns of its surroundings—is not a natural camouflage used for self-protection but rather the loss of “centers of representation and voluntary action,” which leads to a kind of dissolution of a body in the space. To put it differently, the phenomenon of mimicry is not a strategy of disguise undertaken by the animal, but the

\[15\] Ibid., p. 86.
encroachment of the space itself (i.e., of the outside) on the physical identity of the animal.

But here it should be asked what exactly is the outside for Krauss. Is it only a space around recognizable objects in the photograph (Ubac)? Is it only a double image on the same photographic print (Tabard)? If so, then the claim about the outside's taking over the inside is no more dramatic than a puppet show inside a theater box, or the dissolution of an ice cube inside a cocktail glass. The strife between the inside and the outside would take place only inside (and as the inside of) the photograph and the work of the informe would be no more than a mere illustration to look at, if a new dimension that exceeds the physical frame of the photograph were not included. One of the ways a photograph may negate its physical limits (a feature that Surrealist painting may not be able to produce) is to present itself as something more than just a simple image to be looked at. It seems that Bellmer was well aware that a photograph is perceived as an extension of reality, as a straightforward presentation of a fact. The aforementioned "un-artistic" lighting and compositions in his numerous photographs of the Dolls tend to produce the look of crime scene evidence. On the other hand, the cool detachment of documented evidence is counterbalanced by the aura of domesticity—of something painstakingly familiar and personal. Hand-colored images of trivial settings seem to have a kind of
appeal that decorated lockets or old photographs of one’s relatives would have, i.e., the extensions of one’s identity.

This effect of having the character of both evidence and intimacy is due to the fact that the modality of the outside in Bellmer’s works also includes the viewer. This outside, however, is not a mere statement of the fact that the photograph and the viewer are two different entities, and thus the viewer is outside in relation to the image. On the contrary, the factor of intimacy of these works puts the viewer into a kind of continuous space with the photograph. The Doll thus ceases to be a mere object. The limit between the object-status of the Doll and the subjecthood of the viewer becomes transgressable.

The intent to shatter the boundaries between the subject and the object in order to put this distinction in question was not common in Surrealism. Breton, a leader of the main faction of the movement, insistently wanted to endow Surrealist enterprises with productive activity. Claiming the discoveries of Sigmund Freud to support his ideology, Breton saw the sublimation of sexual drives into artistic production as the chief goal for Surrealism. Just like Freud, Breton understood sublimation primarily as a binding and uniting activity, which protects the human being from the chaos of instinctual drives. The uncanny that Breton and his circle courted was defined as an object originating in some distant realm of the unconscious but retrievable through artistic production.
Even though it has never been openly stated, it seems that Breton thought of the unconscious as a realm emulating symbolic/metaphoric patterns and imposing its estranged structures onto visible reality. His novels *L’Amour fou, Nadja* and others are replete with various observations of uncanny phenomena that pierce through the familiar reality. For instance, Breton is delighted to have discovered that the wooden spoon with a little shoe at the top of its handle that he bought in a flea market is capable of suggesting shoe, resembling a slipper of the dancer, through the shape of the negative space between the handle and the surface of the table. For him, it is not an everyday coincidence but a piece of evidence of another order that underlies the visible and the familiar:

Then it became clear that the object I had so much wanted to contemplate before, had been constructed outside of me, very different, *very far beyond* what I could have imagined, and regardless of many immediately deceptive elements. So it was at this price, and only at this price, that the perfect organic unity had been reached.\(^\text{16}\)

Thus, it is through the “organic unity” coming from the world removed from the subject that the Surrealist object originates. Consequently, the unconscious must have a structure of its own, and it is a task of the Surrealist artist to find a way to make it visible. Although presented in a very succinct way, it is clear that

\(^{16}\) Breton, André. *Mad Love*. Translated by Mary Ann Caws. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, p. 34.
for Breton art is a synthesizing activity and the artist is an oracle that brings the message from the beyond.

Bataille did not seem to believe in any of these propositions. As Foster stresses in Compulsive Beauty, his extensive study on Surrealism, Bataille sees the effect of the unconscious not as a binding sublimatory activity but as the force of desublimation which is destructive. Unsurprisingly, art then is thought in very different terms too. Art, for Bataille, is not substantial or substantiating: it does not create an object. Quite the contrary, what is created (and what, for Bataille, in the end always amounts to the sacred) is what turns away from the stabilized reality:

...[i]t is necessary to insists upon the fact that it [i.e., art] could never have been a substantial reality; on the contrary, it was an element characterized by the impossibility of its enduring. The term privileged instant is the only one that, with a certain amount of accuracy, accounts for what can be encountered at random in the search; the opposite of a substance that withstands the test of time, it is something that flees as soon as it is seen and cannot be grasped. The will to fix such instants, which belong, it is true, to painting or writing is only the way to make them reappear, because the painting or the poetic text evokes but does not make substantial what once appeared. This gives rise to the mixture of unhappiness and exultation, of disgust and insolence; nothing seems more miserable and more dead than the stabilized thing, nothing is more desirable than what will soon disappear.

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17 Compulsive Beauty, pp. 110-114.
Bellmer’s Dolls capture this ephemeral quality of desire’s function. In front of Bellmer’s work one is given an opportunity to see how one is as limitless desire to negate and sacrifice the given, “the stabilized thing.” The size and value of a particular offering in one’s economy of being is often determined by practical reasons, but sacrifice as such knows no limits.¹⁹ Sacrifice as objectified desire is a locus of nothingness, a space where things cease to be. By spending and wasting, one acknowledges oneself as living from the excess of one’s desire.

Bellmer, perhaps more than any other surrealist, opens up a way of seeing the human body as the incessant work of desire. The body is conceived not as a hierarchical structure governed by certain laws but as an expansive entity which aims to exceed conventional limits. The body strives toward something other than itself and thus undergoes transformations.

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Bellmer was an extremist in the Surrealist enterprise to metaphorize the work of desire. His work is situated already outside (but not far) of the Surrealist movement and its premises. His achievement consists mostly in refusal to sublimate the negating force of desire into the “convulsive beauty” that Breton championed (or any other beauty, for that matter). Preoccupation with otherness

¹⁹ In his extensive ethnographic study, The Gift, Marcel Mauss points out on several occasions that it is not uncommon that massive destruction of goods for a sacrifice may lead to an economic hardship or even famine in a community.
as a cause of desire was a characteristic shared by many surrealists. However, in many cases the other was diminished to a play with a metaphor which in the end resulted into a mere concealment of the other.

As I see it, Bellmer’s work is a partial failure too which was almost inevitable because of the tradition from which he came. His work tends to deal with otherness, to make it somehow visible, but in the end the other is conceived as a hidden place where desire originates. In many cases, this location is presented as identical with the unconscious (and not only in his writings). His art carries a strong didactic character about how a metaphor is created or how desire works. Perhaps it is not by chance that in his career he often used his art to illustrate certain literary/philosophical works (Bataille’s, de Sade’s, his own). However, it is because of this didactic tendency that I see Bellmer’s art as standing aside of mainstream Surrealism.

Bellmer’s art has value precisely in its ability to invoke an acute awareness about (self-) sacrifice, wasting and giving. However, it is in Gonzalez-Torres’s art that the radical transgression of a commodity exchange system is put to work. One may say that the place where Bellmer ventured in his art is a dead end. It cannot (and doesn’t need to) be followed. However, it is also a place from which the force of Gonzalez-Torres’s work is most convincingly visible.
CHAPTER 3

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES: THE WORK OF ART AS A GIFT

Around half a century separates the production of Bellmer's first and second Dolls from the emergence of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work in the 1980s. There is little, if any, historical relation between the two artists. Even fewer similarities exist between the two artistic milieus: Paris of the 1930s and the American art scene of the late 1980s and 1990s. It may thus seem a bit surprising to find these two artists discussed together. However, as outlined in the introduction, the purpose of this study is not to draw historical parallels or unveil influences but to construct a conceptual picture of how the bold explorations and inevitable shortcomings of the one prepares a ground for the achievement of the other. The apparent unrelatedness between Bellmer and Gonzalez-Torres becomes much less striking if one succeeds in unravelling the commensurate underlying structures, or "behavioral patterns," that both artists' works produce. The sacrifice and the undoing of form that surround Bellmer's work are given a new force in Gonzalez-Torres's art. In this chapter, I will focus on how Gonzalez-Torres's work seeks to create structures that closely echo some fundamental modes of existing in the world. Already present in Bellmer, the inside/outside
and personal/social dialectics acquire a new dimension in Gonzalez-Torres. Just as in the previous chapter, it will be shown that these dyadic structures are not stable concepts, and that they exist in a dynamic relationship. It will also be argued that this new dynamism Gonzalez-Torres's art espouses presents itself as a gift.

3.1 The Sensible, the Living-From

If one attempts to define what the most obvious characteristic of the entire body of Gonzalez-Torres's art is, one will perhaps be tempted to say that a vast number of his works defy the notion of the artwork's solidity and stability. Among the best examples of such an inherent instability are the stacks of prints or paper sheets. Such works as the *Untitled (Aparicion)*, the *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, the *Untitled (Republican Years)* and many others (Figures 3.1 - 3.4) balance between their being perceived as flat and spatial at the same time. The viewer is free to take a copy from any stack, bring it home and treat it as one pleases. One can easily imagine a situation in which a visitor to the exhibition goes from one stack to another, takes a sheet, and rolls it up into a tube. From that moment on, one considers that print one's property. No doubt, many of these offset prints find their place in bedrooms, kitchens and other spaces of private use. It seems that a limit between the public (museum, gallery) and the private is
overcome without any specific effort. The question here is what becomes of these prints when such a limit is traversed. Even though the Untitled (Aparicion), for example, may well be seen as a thing to be looked at (as one of many bric-a-brac things on one’s bedroom wall), it should be asked whether such a print is still a part of an artwork. I would tend to think that the ever-supplied stack of prints remains in a gallery. Interestingly enough, every one of these constantly vanishing and always replenished stacks is given the ideal height of eight inches. Whichever institution exhibits these works, it assumes a responsibility to keep the height as close to its ideal as possible. Thus, such a work exists both as a surface and as an abstract measurement in the third dimension. One cannot separate the two. Even though the Untitled (Aparición) or the Untitled (Republican Years), for example, may at certain moments present themselves as surfaces (i.e., ordinary posters), as works they exist only as long as they preserve their volume in the form of a stack, their visible three-dimensionality.

On the surface, these stacks seem to bear quite easily understandable implications. The Untitled (Republican Years), with its edge of two black lines, may be seen as an obituary for the anonymous, and it lines up quite well with the Untitled (Death by Gun). The other two stacks— the Untitled (Aparición) and Untitled (Figure 3.4)—expose transparency and depth (sky and water). They do not immediately present themselves as surfaces and thus are closer to the status of ordinary photographs.
If viewed together, these four stacks of prints appear to be situated as if on two opposite sides of the same pair of scales. The *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, as a concept, refers to a span of one week, during which all the people depicted died from gun injuries. It then may seem that it has a clear reference to a particular time, place and activity, but in fact these rows of anonymous faces present themselves rather as a text in a foreign language: one can discern punctuation, limits of words and sentences, but the message itself remains unintelligible.

As mentioned, the *Untitled (Republican Years)* may be perceived as an obituary: a sign of absence—absence in a frame. If such an interpretation seems likely, then both the *Untitled (Death by Gun)* and *Untitled (Republican Years)* may be seen as definite limits of a location without a name. The visible boundaries of the obituary and the period of seven days establish themselves as frames that border absence. Furthermore, not only is it a void within a two-dimensional plane, but it is also the absence of depth. These two artworks show themselves as mere signs on paper: a eulogy in a newspaper, a text in a book, or something comparable. They refuse to be taken as merely visual, and not only because there is little to be looked at. For something to be visual—that is, to be seen as a picture—there should be a screen as a surface onto which something is projected. In the two works under discussion, as it seems to me, this ‘something’
refuses to be there. They present themselves as empty frames. Even though the *Untitled (Death by Gun)* shows the faces of human beings, it tends to be looked at as a transparent sign (of violence, for example) that is seen through.

The other two stacks—the *Untitled (Aparicio)* and the *Untitled, 1991*—weigh on the opposite side of the scales. These works refuse to be taken as visual but in a different way than the previous two. Here it is due to the fact that these two works tend to be perceived as if having no frame. The edge of either print is not a limit of anything. That particularly this, rather than another, segment of the sky was photographed is deeply arbitrary, just as a place and time of photographing water do not have any specific bearings on the content or expressive qualities of the *Untitled, 1991*. They both are cuts from the boundless and, despite their established dimensions as prints, appear as unframed. Perceived as bottomless and unlimited, the sky and water are abundances into which one can dive. One cannot even call them places because in the middle of the ocean there is no point according to which one could situate oneself. When one is in the midst of such space, everything presents itself as a limitless quality rather than as objects or things. One can dip one’s hand into the ‘carpet’ of candies of the *Untitled (Placebo)* (Figure 3.5), but it is hardly possible to apprehend this installation as a mere object to be looked at. The viewer is allowed to literally get a ‘taste’ of this installation, to take part in its inner life, even though as a work, the *Untitled (Placebo)* remains laid out on a floor in front of one’s eyes as inexhaustible.
plentitude of sweetness. These 2000 pounds of wrapped candies catch one’s attention not so much as an object or a thing, but as a brightly illuminated sparkling mass in the middle of a room. At the beginning it is even difficult to discern that this luminous carpet consists of many individual pieces; it is rather seen as a formless mass.

Gonzales-Torres’s work involves, at least at the initial point of its reception, the aspect of basic contentment. It is as if the viewer is given a side of a thing, with which s/he is satisfied, and does not question what is on the other side of it. By this I mean that many of Gonzales-Torres’s works provoke a material contact as an act of welcoming the viewer. Even though, as will be discussed later, it is just one aspect of his work, onto which further structures and connotations are built, it is important to clearly articulate this mode of enjoyment in order to reveal its role in the construction of human identity. I would argue that the order of the social is ignored when one engages in enjoyment of the sides of the world, i.e., in its qualities. For this, I would like to refer to Emmanuel Levinas’s discussion on sensibility (sensibilité) presented in his philosophical work Totality and Infinity. Levinas sees sensibility as one of the modes of inhabiting the world. It is a modality of being when the world one lives in is apprehended without thinking of it, as if one were inside the thing and thus unable (and unwilling) to generate a thought about that thing. Because the thing does not show itself in a perspective of thought, it is not seen as limited and complete but rather felt as “unsupported
quality.” The sky is vastness, the ocean is depth, the candy is sweetness, etc. It is not, however, some kind of poetic inclination that produces such a view of one’s ambiance, but rather an integral mode of being in the world. Sensibility is the welcoming of one’s world by diving into its elements and letting things (as represented by the thought) be of little concern.

Sensibility, Levinas states, does not constitute the world, because the world called sensible does not have as its function to constitute a representation—but constitutes the very contentment of existence, because its rational insufficiency does not even appear in the enjoyment it procures me. To sense is to be within, without the conditioned, and consequently of itself inconsistent, character of this ambiance, which troubles rational thought, being in any way included in the sensation. Sensibility, essentially naïve, suffices to itself in world insufficient for thought. The objects in the world, which for thought lie in the void, for sensibility—or for life—spread forth on a horizon which entirely hides that void.²⁰

There is, it seems to me, a dimension in a number of Gonzalez-Torres’s works where the horizon of perception is filled and covered with an elemental quality. They are seen as if from inside. Although such works as the Untitled (Placebo) or Untitled (USA today) (Figure 3.6) are shown in a gallery to be seen, their interiority renders them, in a sense, as not visual. For something to be seen, there has to be a background that in some unmistakable way is different from what is looked at. The eye should have something to distinguish from in its field of vision. Whereas certain Gonzalez-Torres’s works, presented as stacks or

piles, are perceived as marked by repetition and sameness: a paper sheet after a paper sheet from the same eight-inch-high stack, a candy after a candy from the same 2000-pound pile. When seen from such an angle, these works may seem to defy a representation of ... To represent is to substitute one thing for another, and thus admit that something is absent. This is a necessary condition of representation. If perceived in a sensible mode as described above, these works do not seem to lack anything. Palpable qualities permeate them throughout without leaving any space that could be considered a void or internal background. Such qualities do not stand for anything but themselves.

This is not, of course, to say that certain Gonzalez-Torres’s works are not visible. Quite on the contrary, they tend to evade anything that would add a dimension of the invisible to them, i.e., their inside is continuous with their outside. When one tries a candy or takes a print from a stack, one extends oneself into a quality that the work exposes. With some reservations it could be said that by doing so, the human subject becomes almost one with the work, and thus sees the work also as a part of itself. The subject disperses into a limitless quality and partly loses itself. Because there is no distance between the work and the viewer, the work does not render itself as visual, but merely sensible (even though such sensibility might involve seeing). For something to be visual, there should be a separation that would set a difference between the seer and the seen.
It is necessary to emphasize, however, that the above described aspect is not the only and final mode of perceiving Gonzales-Torres's works. Such a homogeneity of inside and outside (which renders this distinction almost unnecessary) acquires different contours when the work is viewed in a social context it originates. The dimension of sensibility, as Levinas notes, does not present one with anything that could be called a horizon. One does not situate oneself in the world, because without seeing a horizon as a limit of one's possibilities everything presents itself as extensions of what one senses. Thus it is not a world but rather an ambiance continuous with the subject. And in it the subject is content with its finitude of existence without wondering about its limits. “Finition without reference to the infinite, finition without limitation, is the relation with the end [fin] as a goal. The sense datum with which sensibility is nourished always comes to gratify a need, responds to a tendency. It is not that at the beginning there was hunger; the simultaneity of hunger and food constitutes the paradisal initial condition of enjoyment. […] An existence that has this mode is the body—both separated from its end (that is, need), but already proceeding toward that end without having to know the means necessary for its obtainment, an action released by the end, accomplished without knowledge of means, that is, without tools.” Such a orientation towards end without knowing the goal itself, is a mode of “living from…”, as Levinas puts it. To live in such a way is to be ignorant of the other in the world. What is crucial here is the distinction

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21 Ibid., p. 136.
between two modes of being: one acquires consciousness of things as qualities by living *from* one’s body, but the realization of one’s selfhood is only possible with the acknowledgment of one’s living *in* the otherness. For someone to be *in* is to acknowledge that one differs from one’s surroundings, i.e., that these surroundings are not mere extensions of one’s body.

3.2 The Social, the Living-In

So far, my discussion has been focusing on the *living from* aspect of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work. That is, I have tried to show that a number of his works tends to be perceived as readily available qualities that overflow perception and make the maintenance of distance, necessary for their being taken as mere objects to be looked at, nearly impossible. When the viewer takes home a print from a stack in an exhibition or tries a candy, s/he engages into an internal structure of the work and becomes coextensive with the work itself.

The *living in* mode is possible only with the presence of the other, i.e., when the viewer sees these works as something different from his/her own engagements. The *living in* makes a claim on the viewer to acknowledge that his/her vision is conditioned and, moreover, that it is a condition of vision that it cannot be a basis for itself. The work is visible only as far as it shows itself against the background
of the invisible. Consequently, there should be an agency of the other that would
grant the viewer (the self) what s/he can see. The living in still is, I would argue,
relation with oneself in the world, but the premises of this relation differ
considerably from the discussed living from.

Gonzalez-Torres did a number of conceptual portraits consisting of the lines of
dates and events, that contain references to both public history and one’s
personal life. These works, it seems, put into question the possibility of
distinguishing between private memories and social history. It is interesting to
observe the way these portraits are created. Except for the portraits of the artist
himself, his lifemate Ross and few close friends, these works are created as
commissions of sorts. A person whose portrait is being composed is asked to
submit a list of significant memories from one’s personal life. Then, the artist
selects what he wants to include in such a portrait while also adding sometimes
one or two date and event combinations of his own choice. Chronological order
is most often ignored in such a portrait-making. The outcome is the friction
between the public and the private. For instance, the Untitled (1988) reads:


_Munich 1972 Waterbeds 1971 Jackie 1968_
The events of war and political scandals intertwine with significant events in popular culture and with individual memories thus creating the uneven and heterogeneous image of one’s life. It is the task of the viewer to fill gaps to make some kind of sense of such a portrait.

A segment from one of the artist’s self portraits that he installed at the Hirshhorn in 1995 acts in a similar way too:


Important public dates, like the fall of the Berlin Wall, interweave with the personal memories: the artist’s meeting with his friend Ross in 1983 who died from AIDS in 1991, etc. By juxtaposing a number of very loosely related (or absolutely random) public events and intimate memories, the artist seems to emphasize a difficulty of establishing a solid identity. One might be tempted to think that this line provokes a still uneasy thought about the identity of gay men, that not long ago was considered only as otherness in itself, and how it is bound with the development of attitudes in a society. No doubt, one may find references to Gonzalez-Torres’s personal identity in many of his works, but particularly these lines appear as general signs of some inner impossibility to reconcile the public and the individual. In my opinion, many of his lines of events deliberately expose a difficulty to establish identity: although two following
each other events suggest to be read as a text, there is always a mismatch between them—as if at every moment one were deeply dissatisfied with and uncertain about one’s place in the world. A line is disrupted almost at every step: it seems as if any two consequent segments rub against each other. The order of the social protrudes into that of the individual and brings an unexpected rupture in the perception of one’s world. The living relation with the world appears to be at least problematic.

When displayed publicly, such portraits will always appear incomplete. The gaps between events and dates will always provide the viewer with the infinite space for imaginary completions, which in fact will only attest to the impossibility of creating a portrait identical to the real person.

In the late 1980s Gonzalez-Torres created a number of jigsaw puzzles based on photographs. These are mostly black and white photographs (some of them—originals, others—re-photographed images) that either depict some well-known people or refer to artist’s personal experience. Arranged like an ordinary family photo, the _Untitled (Klaus Barbie as a Family Man)_ , 1988, (Figure 3.7) represents Klaus Barbie, the “butcher of Lyon” famous for his cruelty, in a seemingly happy setting with his family. Beside its unmistakable irony, this work also appears as an overt statement that what is given to see here has been artificially constructed, and thus this work’s visibility is mediated. Always in a danger of
disintegration, the surface of the puzzle undermines the perception of this photograph as a faithful imprint from reality. Despite its documentary nature, this photograph/puzzle serves as an indication that what is on the surface (i.e., Klaus Barbie as a happy father) does not necessarily extend into the photograph's depth, as if into reality itself. The reality of the photograph is presented as lacking some essential element and thus leading the vision towards the invisible—the beyond—of the image. It seems then that this work as well as the Untitled (Paris, Last Time, 1989) (Figure 3.8) embody in their structure the impossibility of overcoming the invisible in vision: that is, to be able to see both the object and the conditions that made this object, as it exists now, visible. With a zeal to see the image in its completion, one meticulously constructs the puzzle piece by piece, but the outcome, brought into view by the image, appears to be deluding and unsatisfactory. There is something withdrawn from the photograph of two empty chairs in the Untitled (Paris, Last Time, 1989). The trace of loss and incompleteness is made visible.

It seems then that these two photographs/puzzles aim at nothingness, that is, at making one aware of the dimension of invisibility in the field of the visible. It is as if, at certain instance, the structure of vision involved desire not to see the image, as if the sutures of a jigsaw puzzle pointed to the presence of the other side of the image. However, this other side will always remain other, as any attempt to
widen these sutures will immediately destroy the image and, by the same token, the very possibility of the other-than-the-image.

3.3 The Gift

Such a structure of relationship with the other in the work of art exceeds the limits of mere visibility. The work does not end in its visible dimension but continues to the beyond of the surface. The work opens up the breach in a totality of the viewer’s being with oneself in front of the work. This should not be understood, however, that the work offers a window to another space that one’s perception can enter. Such a Renaissance notion of art would not change anything: everything in the image would be readily available to the viewer, the space of the image would become his space at the moment of perception. The otherness Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s works present us with cannot, I want to argue, be appropriated to the “I” of the viewer. That the viewer can take a piece of an installation and eat it or bring it home does not mean that s/he can have—make a possession of—the work. The work extends beyond a single candy or an offset print. For instance, when one eats a candy from the pile of 350 lb., which represents the weight of the artists and his partner Ross together, one exceeds a simple subject/object relationship with the work. One is implicitly asked to compromise one’s safe distance of mere visibility from the work and to put one’s
preconceived identity into parentheses. The seamless and solipsist world emanating from the "self-ness" of the viewer is put into question.

Such a relation with pure alterity, resistant to be appropriated to the "I," is given much attention in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* too. The encounter with the other, Levinas argues, is always the encounter with the other's face, with the other's expression, which counteracts the possibility of its being grasped as a mere object.

The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This mutation can occur only by the opening of a new dimension. For the resistance to the grasp is not produced as an insurmountable resistance, like the hardness of the rock against which the effort of the hand comes to naught, like the remoteness of the star in the immensity of space. The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers but my ability for power [*mon pouvoir de pouvoir*]. The face [...] breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it. This means concretely: the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised...  

One's "ability to be able" is possible only in the world accessible for one's body actions or for a grasp by reason. In the face of pure alterity, one's ability to exist is put into question. One is forced to abandon one's powers to expand one's selfhood in one's dealings with the world. One puts down one's possession on the demand of the other, the demand comparable to lay down one's arms in surrender. However, this surrender is not an impoverishment but, on the
contrary, it opens up the infinity brought about by the other that breaks the solipsist totality of one's being. For Levinas, this mode of social existence is accomplished only if the possessions one abandons do not fall into the economy of equal exchanges but retain the character of the gift. In his analysis of the gift status in Levinas's and Derrida's writings, Robert Bernasconi rightly points out that Levinas does not entirely agree with the notions of "pure expenditure" and "pure loss" in a sacrifice that Bataille proclaims. Whether it leads to the appeasement of gods or to the establishment of oneself as a "noble being" (Bataille), a sacrifice for Levinas still remains tied to the profit and the acquisition of merit. It still serves to achieve a particular goal.

The only way the gift can transcend the closed system of commodity exchange is to establish oneself in a time different from the one of the giver. It is in "a time without me" that the possessions one gives away estrange themselves completely from the giver. The gift exists in passing to the temporal structure of the other.

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22 Ibid., pp. 197-198.
24 Bernasconi, p. 258.
I would argue that in Gonzalez-Torres's work such a passage into a different temporal structure is put to work. The print a gallery visitor takes from a stack passes into a time without the artwork itself, away from the "I" of the artist. The billboard showing a lonely bird in the Untitled (Strange Bird) (Figure 3.9) may not always be seen as an artwork per se. It may well be understood by a passer-by as a part of some enigmatic advertising campaign.

It has been noted by many critics that Gonzalez-Torres's works often function as extensions of his personal life. They frequently deal with the issues of his identity as a gay, his being sick with AIDS, the loss of his partner Ross, the political climate he lived in, and so on. But how then does his work avoid becoming a mere sentiment, a personal scrapbook of sorts or a photo album the artist shows to the viewer? The answer here is that Gonzalez-Torres's works as extensions of his life leave the continuum of that life and enter the time of the stranger from the outside (i.e., the time of the viewer). One feels the sweetness of a candy in one's mouth but it does not lead to the imagining that one is devouring someone's body because this candy is already estranged from the artist-and-his-body continuum.

One may well picture the following imaginary (but not impossible) scenario: a group of children come to, say, the Hirshhorn Museum and they see the Untitled (Placebo), a carpet of candies, laid out on the floor; with the encouragement of
gallery guards they happily take a candy (or two, or more) and eat it; they go home; several days later they coincidentally happen to be in the same subway car or the same public park with the artist himself; they pass each other by without even looking at each other. What is the relation here between the giver and the receiver? Or is there any? They remain complete strangers, they do not recognize each other. Debt, gratitude, expectation of a reciprocal favor, or any other principle of commodity exchange is thus eliminated. The inability to recognize each other is an ideal relationship between the giver and the receiver. The gift took place in a time separated from the artist.

What one gives—what one offers as a real and not returnable gift—must not be thought of as a gift but rather needs to be immediately forgotten. The donor and the recipient ought to remain strangers that do not recognize each other.

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If Bellmer conceives of desire (for the other) as inexhaustible, as something that produces the profusion of matter, Gonzalez-Torres builds his work on the notion that desire cannot be fulfilled because it is directed toward other than the self, toward something not reducible to the economy of exchanges and appropriations. For Gonzalez-Torres, otherness comes about not as an anonymous and formidable force (a notion shared by Bellmer and many other surrealists), but as a place where one is not alone with oneself. It is a space
where one sees a breach in one’s existence and realizes oneself as being surrounded by otherness. In order to prevent the other from becoming the same, one needs to avoid temptation to appropriate and control it. And it is through the gift and giving that one is able to see oneself beside the other.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The intent of this thesis has been to explore varied possibilities of transgressive practice in art. Works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Hans Bellmer have been analyzed to show how two most forceful modes of such transgression—sacrifice and gift giving—can function.

In discussing Hans Bellmer's art, I have argued that such a transgression is made manifest by endowing a work of art with the power to transform and undo established structures. In both his works and his writings, Bellmer shows that a license for such an artistic gesture can be found in the dynamism of human desire whose function consists in negating every established form.

Interest in how desire works was common among surrealists. Their artistic production was mainly aimed at making this work visible. However, quite often Surrealist artistic practice tended to limit itself to metaphorizing the work of desire, i.e., a visual image would be substituted (or exchanged) to show its actual transformative force, whereby the force itself would be compromised.
Bellmer and several other “dissident” surrealists who espoused Bataillean ideas in their art tended to make their artworks work as if they were desire or informe themselves. One of the most powerful attempts to achieve this was exemplified in Bellmer’s works, especially his Dolls, that carried the force of invoking the structure of sacrifice.

It seems that Gonzalez-Torres’s work grows out of a conceptual network which is not foreign to what Bellmer was doing half a century ago. Although historically unrelated, both Bellmer and Gonzalez-Torres deal with the issues of desire, otherness and the transgression of closed commodity exchange system in their works. Gonzalez-Torres, however, picks up this issue at the place where Bellmer left it. If Bellmer conceives of such transgression as conscious wasting and (self-) sacrificing through which a human being comes at grips with how s/he exists as desire, Gonzalez-Torres’s work, it seems, refuses to carry reference to any definable end. Gonzalez-Torres’s art presents itself as a gift which resists any utilitarian goal. As a gift to the viewer, Gonzalez-Torres’s works transgress the hermetic continuum of exchanges in the art world. By abandoning the time of a creator and entering that of the viewer, the work assumes a new existence and thus estranges itself from its own identity. This type of movement secures its status as a work of art and prevents it from falling into the fallacy of commodity exchange.
Figure 2.1: Hans Bellmer, *The Doll*. Eighteen photographs published in *Minotaure*, Paris, winter, 1934.
Figure 2.2: *The Doll* (continued)
2.3: Hans Bellmer, panoramic mechanism of first *Doll*
Figure 2.5: Hans Bellmer, second Doll, 1935
Figure 2.6: Hans Bellmer, second *Doll*, 1935
Figure 3.1: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Aparición)*, 1991
Figure 3.2: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (Death by Gun), 1990
Figure 3.3: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Republican Years)*, 1992
Figure 3.4: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled*, 1991
Figure 3.5: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Placebo)*, 1991
Figure 3.6: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (USA Today)*, 1990
Figure 3.7: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (Klaus Barbie as a Family Man). 1983
Figure 3.8: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Paris, Last Time, 1989)*, 1989
Figure 3.9: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Strange Bird)*, 1993
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