

SUSAN TALLMAN

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: SOCIAL WORKS

The interaction of parts within a whole is the essence of composition, and for generations we have been taught that good composition is identified by its unity, its integrity, and—a natural result of the first two—its lasting “power.” It is a measure of the subversiveness of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s art that its essential mechanisms are those of dispersal, and its central metaphors are those of ephemerality.

“UNTITLED” (1991), in the collection of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, sits on the floor as an apparently stolid Minimalist block, but for the photographic image of ocean that stretches from edge to edge on its top side. The ruffled surface of water, receding into the distance, is the stuff of poetic meditation and contemplation—a standard metaphor for the unfixable and evanescent stretch of life, where events rise and disappear, collect and dissipate. It is also an accurate reflection of the material nature of the piece, which is not the solid block it initially appears to be, but a stack of printed paper sheets, cumulatively imposing, but individually frail. And, as in all the artist’s “stack” pieces, viewers are allowed (and given the cheerful readiness of the Walker’s guards, actively encouraged) to take sheets away with them. Thus the stack is both a sculpture and an unlimited edition. The museum must reprint the sheets as often as is necessary for the work to retain

the dimensions specified by the artist. So no matter how covetous the crowd, the piece will not disappear, but neither will it remain the same from one day to the next. In place of the reassuring imperturbability that we expect of objects in museums, the stack represents a fluctuating state of participatory dissolution and regeneration.

Gonzalez-Torres is widely known as a “political” artist, and the democratic (not to say anarchic) impulse embedded in a work like “UNTITLED” is clearly visible. While there is nothing new in the desire to undermine the pseudo-sanctity of the museum or to strike a more candid relationship with the public (or even in using multiplicity and reproduction to do so), Gonzalez-Torres offers a diplomatic strategy that succeeds admirably in sabotaging the authority of the institution, and in soliciting a happy collaboration from the viewer. The stacks are, according to museum staff, broadly popular, and their leaves show up in the oddest of locations (Gonzalez-Torres recalls finding one posted in a toilet in Germany). In the sixties, the flourishing of “multiples,” with their movable parts, egalitarian economics, and game-like demeanor, brought promises of a new art that could be owned and co-created by Everyman. It also brought predictions of the imminent collapse of both the art museum and the art market, but in 1994 the most common outlet for artist’s multiples is the museum gift shop—a conflation of the very two institutions multiples were expected to destroy. Gonzalez-Torres makes no attempt to overturn the museum or the market—“I don’t want a rev-

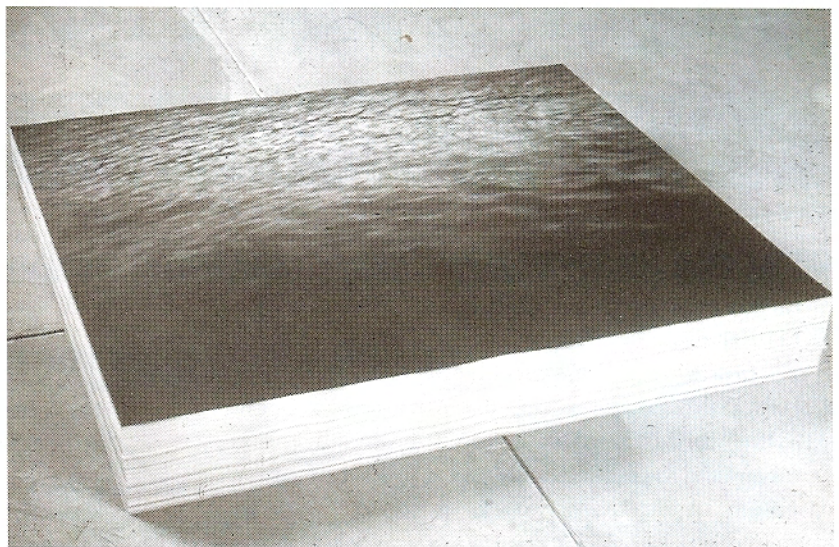
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olution anymore," he has said. "It's too much energy for too little"¹⁾—and has opted instead for subtle intervention. In fact, a work like "UNTITLED" depends upon its haughty museum setting to make its point: the desirability of its loose sheets has as much to do with the stack's status as a "museum-quality" art object, invaluable and forbidden, as it does with the appeal of the image itself. But while the treatment of the work by the owner or exhibitor is rigorously controlled, the individual sheets are gifts without encumbrance—they may be thumbtacked to the wall, archivally mounted and framed, or folded into giant origami cranes. However they are treated, they will continue, at least in the minds of those who took them, to be connected with the museum's stack—pieces, not reproductions, of the rock.

In 1991, Gonzalez-Torres made a "limited edition" stack piece with print publisher Julie Sylvester, its sheets lushly screenprinted in a dull opalescent silver meant to reflect the dying light of a switched-off TV. The twist was that the purchaser had to acquire the entire edition—all 190 signed and numbered copies, and ten artist's proofs.²⁾ Context is critical here: "UNTITLED" operates most effectively in spaces devoted to painting and sculpture, where the dismembering of a work is contrary to all expectation; "UNTITLED" (IMPLOSION) operates best in a print setting, where the renunciation of distribution appears equally contrary.

The ocean image of "UNTITLED" has also appeared in one of Gonzalez-Torres's many jigsaw puzzle editions made from C-prints. The puzzles, which arrive preassembled and hygienically sealed in plastic, are not meant to be taken apart and, in any case, their photographic surface is one that we have been taught from earliest childhood not to touch. There is something perverse about this: the jigsaw puzzle, after all, is supposed to be an occasion for social interaction, "fun for the whole family," a collaboration between manufacturer and player. It offers a safely predictable challenge, and the pleasant illusion of having made something, if not from scratch, at least from a kit. But in Gonzalez-Torres's jigsaws these homely pleasures are denied in favor of the cooler and more distant satisfactions of "art." In place of pseudo-creative satisfaction, the owner is given the responsibility of preserving the picture's fragile coherence. The untouchable jigsaw is, in fact, the perfect collector's object: fragile, precious, rarefied. Most of the photographs used to make the puzzles emphasize intimacy—angels in the snow, fragments of love letters—and even the most public of them, such as the news photo of Kurt Waldheim receiving communion from the Pope, suggest not a media blitz, but a private scrapbook enclosing mementos of friendship, love, or moral outrage. Variations on the scrapbook paradigm appear in "UNTITLED" (ALBUM), an edition of gray leather pho-

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES,
 "UNTITLED", 1991, *offset print on paper*,
endless copies, ideal height: 7 x 38½ x 45½" /
„OHNE TITEL“, Offsetdruck auf Papier,
unbegrenzte Auflage, ideale Höhe:
18 x 97,8 x 115,5 cm.
 (COLLECTION OF THE WALKER ART CENTER,
 MINNEAPOLIS, PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



to-albums replete with mounting corners; and in the artist's ongoing works in which collectors who purchase a wooden box from Gonzalez-Torres's gallery are periodically sent items to fill it—letters, photographs, “things that I collect, or live with.”³⁾

The stack “UNTITLED” eloquently addresses the grudgingly public space of the museum, while the jigsaw “UNTITLED” articulates the private dramas of collecting. In the first of the projects he has designed for the stridently public space of the billboard, Gonzalez-Torres chose to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, in a brief list of dates and events significant in gay history. Next to Oscar Wilde's name ran the date 1895, when Wilde chose to remain in London to face trial. But when Gonzalez-Torres made a limited edition screenprint after the billboard, this date was changed to 1891, the year of a famous photograph of Wilde in his prime. The change of date marks a shift of emphasis from public exposure to private pleasure, reflecting the intimate satisfactions of the print rather than the distant public power of the billboard. But the import of neither date is explained, and both lists present an essentially private history, periodically joining up with the mainstream of public, newsworthy events, then branching off into rivulets of personal significance. Gonzalez-Torres has subsequently used billboards often, most recently as part of a commission for Austrian Airlines (he is also redesigning their giveaway timetable which will double as one of the largest edition artist's books in existence). On 3,000 billboards he has presented a long list of the cities and dates, from Amman 1992 to Zurich 1958, recording the airline's routes.⁴⁾ The list is a corporate portrait, an advertisement even, but once again the unifying key is missing; viewers are left free to connect any of the innumerable events that would have occurred in those cities during those years, of which the arrival of Austrian Airlines planes is but one.

Like the perfect dinner guest, Gonzalez-Torres knows how to introduce a subject without boorishly directing the conversation: his titles always begin with the word “Untitled,” often followed by some parenthetical handle that offers a hint but not a statement of intent; his stacks invite the viewer's participation, but don't require it; the imagery he

chooses (which is always machine-made, whether abstract, photographic, or typeset) is suggestive without being restrictive. On a greeting card, the picture of ocean surface that appears on the stack and the jigsaw could be used to offer congratulations to the bride and groom, or condolences to the bereaved. It could mark solidarity or separation, love or loss.

In the sculptural spills of colored candies that are another of Gonzalez-Torres's favorite forms, the quality of a *memento mori* is plain: Once again viewers are invited to help themselves, but the initial volume of candies is based on the weight of specific people, and therefore in some sense represents human bodies. In the stacks and jigsaws, such intimations of mortality are more muted, but still present. So, however, are intimations of regeneration. The threat of disintegration lends them poignancy, but the works don't actually disappear—even the stacks merely change shape, spreading out into a scattering of instances that carry on separate lives of their own. There is no need for “unity,” except as a temporary and contingent condition amid the ongoing assembly and disassembly of parts. In this material distribution, as in his elegant cognitive pauses, Gonzalez-Torres has profoundly affected the power balance between the artist and the public. In class terms, he has undermined the assumption that ownership purchases privileges (purchasing Gonzalez-Torres's work tends to entail responsibility more than privilege; and in many works non-owners can become owners at a flick of the wrist). Even more subversively, he has challenged the belief that it is the job of art to confront the viewer (usually by being physically difficult to ignore); to state its emotional, intellectual, or phenomenological case in no uncertain terms; to change the viewer in some regard, without in any way being changed itself. In place of such an anti-social model of behavior, Gonzalez-Torres provides one of reciprocity, social responsibility, and social grace.

1) Interview with Tim Rollins, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Art Resources Transfer, 1994.

2) Marcel Broodthaers also once released an entire edition as a single work: *Paysage d'automne*, 1973, was a set of 140 copies, numbered 1/1.

3) Interview with Rollins, *op. cit.*

4) This PORTRAIT OF AUSTRIAN AIRLINES was initiated by the museum in progress, Vienna.