

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

American, 1958–1996

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.

Excerpt from “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”

—Wallace Stevens¹

This poem was in a book given to Felix Gonzalez-Torres by his partner, Ross, in 1988. In 1991, after Ross died of AIDS, Gonzales-Torres installed a billboard of a just laid-in bed in twenty-four locations around New York City, a number that corresponded to the date of Ross’ death.² “*Untitled*” [Work 15] is both a space for dreaming and a statement about private and public space. For Gonzalez-Torres, even though this was his bed, it was always a public space, since as a gay man his personal space was legislated by the 1986 Supreme Court ruling that upheld that homosexual acts were not protected under the “right of privacy.”³

While Gonzalez-Torres did not want his work to be labeled “political,” he intended for it to provoke action. He also understood that meanings could shift and purposely created work that was personal, universal, and mutable. But this snippet of private life exposed on a city billboard reveals its immediate environment as much as the empty sheets invite a multitude of associations—birth, death, rest, sex, or fantasy—that are then dependent on who, where, and when it is seen. In New York in 1991 this image also came to speak about the city’s then high homeless population. Now, in 2013, in the Triangle region of North Carolina, it may come to mean something completely different in an America that has been living with ten-plus years of war, five years of a “great recession,” and similarly for the gay community, a continued struggle now over marriage equality.

An empty void that a viewer could complete was central for Gonzalez-Torres. It appeared repeatedly as literal voids, as mirrors, a blank page, a sea, sky, or landscape. He photographed love letters from Ross in such a way as to both show the intimacy of the correspondence and relationship, but also to cut them off, leaving them open and vulnerable. In “*Untitled*” (*Lover’s Letter*) [Work 17], we see only fragments of sentences and memories. They are his, but as fragments they become ours, too. There are fifty-five puzzle works that function as a kind of personal album,

filled with photographs of parts of letters Ross sent to Felix, void-like images, coupled objects, personal snapshots, newspaper clippings, bits of monuments, and crowds. The puzzle structure itself reinforces this—as a thing it is about piecing unique, yet fitted parts together.

In 1988, Felix wrote to Ross: “Dont [sic] be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous to us...We conquered fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain space...We are synchronized, now forever./I love you.”⁴ A drawing of two clocks topped the page. With “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) [Work 14], Gonzalez-Torres set two real clocks side by side. One will eventually run out of rhythm with the other. It was “the scariest thing I have ever done,”⁵ as he had to “face” the “two clocks right in front of me, ticking.” Creating a work with two identical ready-made objects side by side was also a way to sneak past the censors of the late 1980s then enraged by Robert Mapplethorpe and others. Homosexuality in this piece is implicit, not explicit, and is startlingly universal.

Like all of Gonzalez-Torres’ work, “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*), is an open work filled with dualities, life and death, fear and joy, personal desire and public protest, the everyday and the eternal. While his own personal life clearly informed his practice, he created the space and a strategy to allow the viewer to be an equal partner in creating meaning, meaning that could shift and be legitimate in all its permutations. His brilliance was that his work was never only about one thing, but love is there, explicitly and implicitly, as a way to capture and engage an audience and to express who and what he was.

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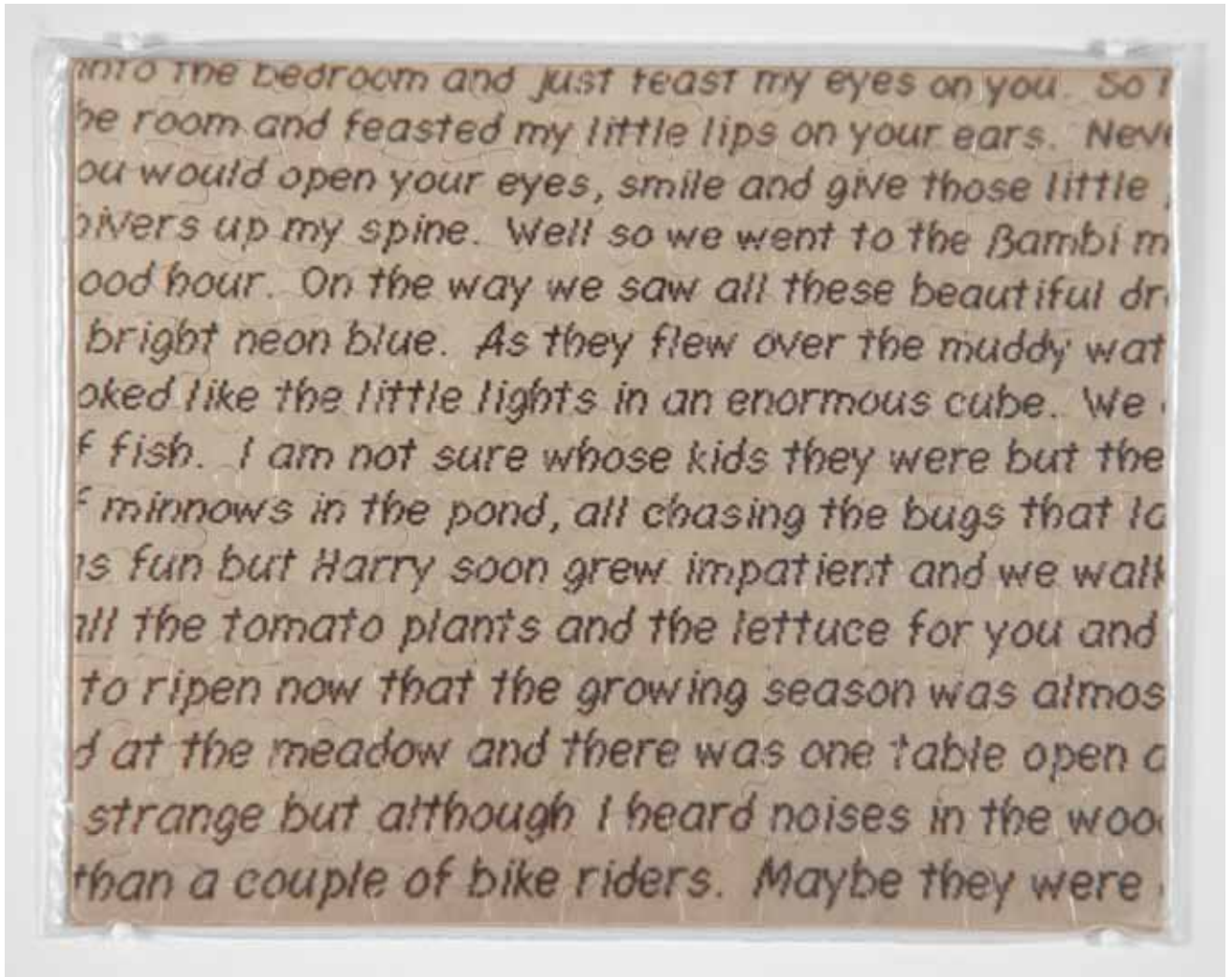
1. These lines were quoted in Anne Umland, “Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” (exhibition pamphlet), Museum of Modern Art, 1992, reproduced in Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 241.

2. When the work is borrowed it must be shown in a multiple of six up to twenty-four, with six as a minimum.

3. *Bowers vs. Hardwick*, which was then overturned in 2003 in *Lawrence vs. Texas*.

4. “Letter from Felix Gonzalez-Torres to Ross Laycock,” 1988. Ault, 154.

5. Robert Nikas, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World,” in Ault, 86–89.



Work 17
 Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled" (Lover's Letter), 1991
 chromogenic print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag
 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.

Next Page Work 15
 Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled", 1991
 billboard
 Dimensions vary with installation
 Installation at Steward and 83rd, Houston for
Felix Gonzalez-Torres Billboard Project.
 Artpace Foundation, San Antonio, TX, 2010.
 Cur. Matthew Drutt.
 Photo: Tom Dubrock







Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled", 1991
 billboard
 Dimensions vary with installation
 Installation at Korea Post Office, Seoul for Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Double*.
 PLATEAU and Leeum,
 Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea. 21 Jun.-28 Sep. 2012.
 Cur. Soyeon Ahn.
 Photo: SangTae Kim

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled", 1991
 billboard
 Dimensions vary with installation
 Installation at Neptune Avenue and Guider Avenue, Brooklyn for *Print/Out*.
 Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012.
 Curated by Christopher Cherix.
 Photo: David Allison

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled", 1991
 billboard
 Dimensions vary with installation
 Installation at Schermenweg 25, Bern for
Specific Objects without Specific Form. Fondation Beyeler, Basel,
 Switzerland, 2010.
 Version curated by Elena Filipovic.
 Photo: Mark Niedermann

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled", 1991
 billboard
 Dimensions vary with installation
 Installation at Shinchon Yonsei University Tunnel, Seoul for
 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Double*. PLATEAU and Leeum,
 Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea. 21 Jun.-28 Sep. 2012.
 Cur. Soyeon Ahn.
 Photo: SangTae Kim



Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled", 1991
billboard
Dimensions vary with installation
Installation at Jägerstrasse for *Specific Objects without Specific Form*.
Fondation Beyeler, Basel,
Switzerland, 2010.
Version curated by Elena Filipovic.
Photo: Mark Niedermann