



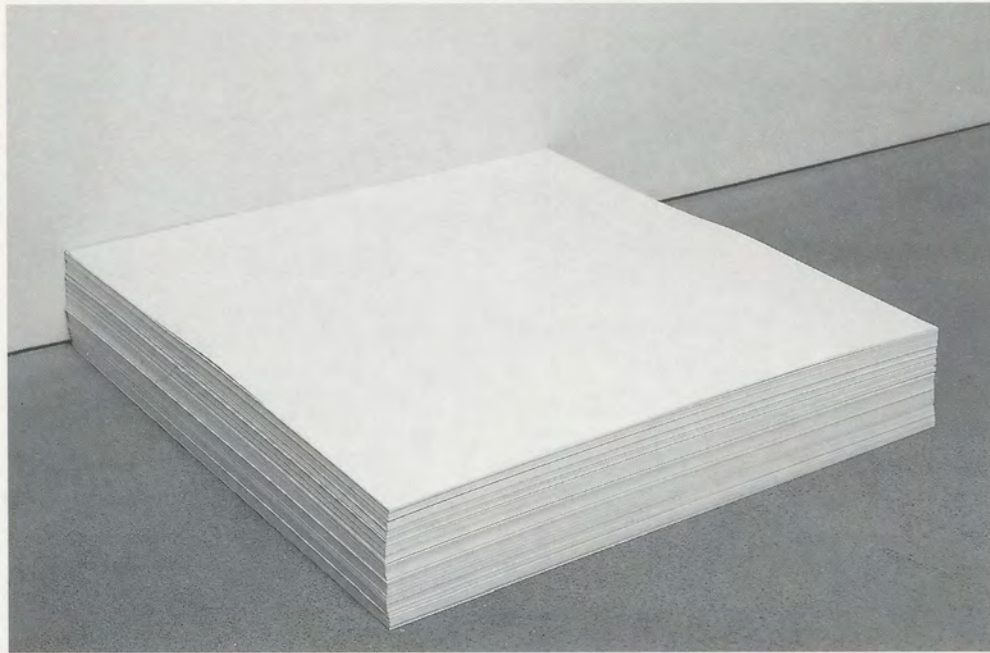
Felix  
Gonzalez-Torres

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, Detail: "UNTITLED" (Public Opinion), 700 lbs. black rod licorice, size varies with installation /  
Detail: "OHNE TITEL" (Öffentliche Meinung), 318 kg schwarze Stangen-Labritze, die Größe richtet sich nach der Installation.  
(COLLECTION SALOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JAMES FRANKLIN)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Passport), 1991, stack of paper, endless copies,  
 4 x 23 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 23 $\frac{7}{8}$  / «OHNE TITEL» (Pass), Papierstapel, unbeschränkte Auflage, 10,15 x 60 x 60 cm.

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Passport No. II), offset print on paper, endless copies,  
 ideal height: 8 x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ " / «OHNE TITEL» (Pass No. II), Offsetdruck auf Papier, unbeschränkte Auflage,  
 ideale Höhe: 20,3 x 80 cm.



NANCY SPECTOR

## FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES: REISEBERICHT

*[Diese Arbeit] handelt vom Verstreichen der Zeit und von der Möglichkeit des Erlöschens oder Verschwindens, also auch von einer Poetik des Raums... [sie] rührt ebenfalls an das Leben im radikalsten Sinn, seiner Begrenztheit: Tod. Wie bei allen künstlerischen Praktiken geht es darum, einen Ort zu verlassen, um einen anderen zu erreichen, der vielleicht besser ist als der erste.*

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, 1990

1990 stellte Gonzalez-Torres weisse Zwilling-Papierstapel her, die dicht nebeneinander aufgebaut wurden. Diese Arbeiten waren sich in Form und Grösse völlig gleich und erinnerten an andere enge Paarungen im Werk des Künstlers, vor allem an die synchron aufeinander abgestimmten Uhren in «UNTITLED» (PERFECT LOVERS) (1987–90). Bei genauerer Betrachtung stellte sich jedoch heraus, dass die beiden Papierstapel keineswegs ein harmonisches Paar abgaben. Ihre gegensätzlichen Untertitel – «Irgendwo besser als hier» und «Nirgendwo besser als hier» – erzeugten ein zwiespältiges Gefühl. Der eine Stapel beschwor eine Realität, die wünschenswerter wäre als die gegenwärtige Situation, während der andere versicherte, dass es nichts Besseres als das Gegenwärtige gäbe; so widerrief ein Stapel die Botschaft des anderen. Diese gleichwertigen, aber widersprüchlichen Untertitel lösten ein eigenartiges Gefühl der Gelähmtheit aus, eine Bewegungslosigkeit,

NANCY SPECTOR ist freie Kuratorin am Guggenheim Museum. Zur Zeit bereitet sie eine umfassende Schau mit Werken von Felix Gonzalez-Torres vor.

keit, die aus Umschweifig-Unentschiedenem hervorzugehen schien. Bei alledem aber schafft die Verbindung von Anderswo und Nirgendwo einen psychischen Raum, eine metaphorische Topographie, die genau das «Zwischen-allem-Sein» in Gonzalez-Torres' Kunst markiert.

Sein Werk balanciert seit je auf dem schmalen Grat zwischen gesellschaftlichem Kommentar und zutiefst persönlicher Enthüllung; es jongliert zwischen den zwei Bereichen und lässt dabei die kulturell gesetzten Grenzen zwischen beiden verschwimmen. Bei Gonzalez-Torres' neueren Objekten und Installationen macht gerade diese subtile Verschiebung vom kulturellen Aktivismus zur intimen, autobiographischen Darstellung – und die daraus folgende Auflösung der Grenzen zwischen beiden – das Wesen der Arbeit aus. Das Stapelstück «UNTITLED» (PASSPORT) (1991) weist auf das Moment solcher Übergänge hin, auf den Wechsel von Standorten, auf die unbefangene Bewegung zwischen abgesteckten kulturellen Bereichen. Als internationales Reisedokument ist der Pass ein unbeschriebenes Blatt, in das die absolvierten Reisen eingetragen werden. Die Eintragungen machen ihn zu einem Tagebuch der Bewegung, einer Chronik geographischer Wanderschaft, einem Palimpsest anderer Orte und Zeiten. In Gonzalez-Torres' jüngster Werkgruppe hat der Pass diese Schlüsselfunktion und erinnert daran, dass es sich dabei um eine gesetzliche Form der Identifizierung handelt, die kulturelle Identität in den beschränkten Normen von Nationalität, Geschlecht und Alter ausdrückt. Die unbeschrifteten weissen Blätter in «UNTITLED» (PASSPORT) lassen die Frage nach der Identität offen. Die leeren Seiten, die ihrer Beschriftung harren, künden von Reisen, die noch



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED", 1991,  
Location 4: 30 DeKalb Ave. at Flatbush Ave., Brooklyn, Billboard,  
dimensions vary. (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



nicht stattgefunden haben, und Grenzen, die noch nicht überschritten wurden. Doch als solch zukünftige Reiseziele kommen nicht bloss geographische Orte in Frage; auch innere, ontologische Räume sind gemeint – Bereiche der Auseinandersetzung von Psyche, Geschlecht und Gesellschaft.

Die Reise-Metapher prägte auch Gonzalez-Torres' letzte Ausstellung in der New Yorker Galerie Andrea Rosen 1993. Gemäss der Raumaufteilung war dort die Ausstellung in zwei Bereiche gegliedert: Im ersten Raum mit dem Titel «TRAVEL #1» befanden sich zwei wandgrosse Schwarzweiss-Photoplakate, auf denen ein einsamer Vogel durch einen düsteren Himmel gleitet. Der melancholische Tenor dieses riesigen Bildes, das zwei aufeinanderstossende Wände bedeckte, wurde gemildert durch ein zärtlich vereintes Paar aufgehängter Glühbirnenstränge (mit dem Untertitel A COUPLE), die in diesem Raum als einzige Lichtquelle dienten. Im zweiten Raum mit dem Titel «TRAVEL #2» arrangierte Gonzalez-Torres dreizehn identische Raster-Diagramme, auf denen jeweils eine rote Diagonale von der linken oberen Ecke in die rechte untere verlief. Der Untertitel dieser morbiden Arbeit – «UNTITLED» (BLOODWORK, STEADY DECLINE) [Blutwert, ständige Ver-

minderung] – verweist unmissverständlich auf die abnehmende Zahl von T-Zellen und stellt die Realität der zerstörerischen Kraft von AIDS in abstrakt-graphischer Form dar. Das Element der Wiederholung, welches gleichermassen das Schicksal von einem wie das von dreizehn Menschen offenbart, betont den verhängnisvollen Charakter dieser Krankheit – eine weitere Reise durch die Zeit.

So hat Gonzalez-Torres eine Raum-Inszenierung geschaffen, die sich auf beide Galerieräume erstreckte und die eine Begegnung mit den Grenzen von Raum und Zeit herbeiführte. Bei «TRAVEL #1» kontrastierte das ausgedehnte Bild eines weiten Himmels mit der häuslichen Intimität nackter Glühbirnen, so dass Innen und Aussen gleichsam aufeinanderprallten. Anderen Plakatwand-Projekten von Gonzalez-Torres vergleichbar, etwa dem eindrücklichen Bild vom leeren Bett des Künstlers, das er vor kurzem mit jemandem geteilt hatte,<sup>1)</sup> markiert das Photo des Himmels jenen Punkt, an dem «Privates» und «Öffentliches» sich durchkreuzen. Mit der gängigsten Art der Werbung im Stadtbild ist Gonzalez-Torres in das öffentliche Territorium eingedrungen, um dort von dem Intimen und Erotischen zu sprechen. Damit schafft er «Durchgangsorte», die ihr eigenes «Dazwischensein» demonstrieren.

Die getrennten, sich aber berührenden Bereiche der New Yorker Ausstellung von Gonzalez-Torres wurden später in Paris, als er gleichzeitig in den Galerien Ghislaine Hussenot und Jennifer Flay ausstellte, wieder aufgegriffen. Unter dem Titel «TRAVELS»: «TRAVEL #1» und «TRAVEL #2» gaben die jeweiligen Installationen die Vorstellung des Übergangs wörtlich wieder. Denn um die Ausstellung in ihrer Ganzheit erfahren zu können, wurden die Zuschauer gebeten, von einer Installation zur anderen zu gehen: In der Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot «TRAVEL #1» tauchte an der Wand eine riesige Reklametafel auf mit dem Untertitel STRANGE BIRD (Seltsamer Vogel), auf der zwei Vögel sich gemeinsam in die Lüfte emporschwingen; zudem gab es zwei identische Glühbirnenstränge (mit dem Untertitel LOVERS-PARIS [Liebespaar-Paris]), die an benachbarten Steckdosen angeschlossen waren, dem Boden entlang verliefen und sich dann zu zwei warm

leuchtenden Lichthügeln zusammenfanden. Im offenen Zwischengeschoss der Galerie befand sich «UNTITLED» (PLACEBO), ein grosser schimmernder Teppich aus golden eingewickelten Bonbons als einzige andere Andeutung von Licht. Bei Betreten der Galerie Jennifer Flay «TRAVEL #2» traf der Betrachter zunächst auf eine Gruppe von sieben Blutwert-Diagrammen, alle mit steil abfallenden Linien, welche die Veränderung innerhalb einer Woche registrierten. Nach dieser ernüchternden Einführung wurden Aussichten auf emotionale und physische Veränderungsmöglichkeiten evoziert mittels einer zweiten Version von «UNTITLED» (PASSPORT). Dabei geht es um einen Stapel von Photoheftchen – verteilbare Pässe sozusagen – mit Abbildungen frei fliegender Vögel. Seiner Praktik gemäss, die Aufmerksamkeit des Publikums und die persönliche Reflexion auf den Kopf zu stellen, errichtete Gonzalez-Torres eine für alle begehbare Tanzfläche mit dem Untertitel ARENA. An die beleuchtete GO-GO-Plattform von 1991 erinnernd, auf der ein Performer in Badehose und mit einem Sony-Walkman tanzte, war die Tanzfläche durch eine im Rechteck angelegte Glühbirnen-Girlande begrenzt, die über den Köpfen baumelte. Die Musik vom Walkman mit zwei Kopfhörern war nur für die Performer hörbar. Dieses Mal wurden die Galeriebesucher eingeladen, sich in Paaren auf die Tanzfläche zu begeben, um sich in einem nur für sie wahrnehmbaren Rhythmus zu bewegen. 1991 provozierte die (homo)erotische Show von GO-GO

voyeuristische Reaktionen, doch jetzt wurden die Zuschauer dazu verleitet, vor Publikum aufzutreten, wobei sie alle – und doch jeder für sich – im Pas de deux dieselbe Musik vernahmen. So funktionierte die Tanzfläche von Gonzalez-Torres als ein weiterer Ort des Übergangs, ein Ort für erotische Begegnungen, für Überschneidungen im Bereich des Intimen und des Gemeinschaftlichen.

Unser Verständnis vom Raum gründet immer noch in den uralten Gegensatzpaaren, die als unantastbar gelten; Unterteilungen zwischen häuslichem und geschäftlichem Bereich, zwischen Sakralem und Profanem, zwischen Stadt und Land stiften soziale/räumliche Subjektivität, (geschlechtliche) Differenz und Klassenidentität.<sup>2)</sup> Trotzdem können in den Räumen, die Gonzalez-Torres in seiner Arbeit durchwandert, unversöhnliche Domänen nebeneinander existieren und sich gegenseitig durchdringen. Derlei Orte nennt Michel Foucault «Heterotopia», Zonen, in denen das wechselnde Empfinden für Raum und Zeit Einsitz nimmt, «Gegen-Orte», in denen «all die anderen realen Orte, die in einer Kultur vorkommen, gleichzeitig repräsentiert, hinterfragt und umgestülpt werden».<sup>3)</sup> Nach Foucault setzt Heterotopia «in einem einzigen realen Raum mehrere Räume, verschiedene Orte nebeneinander, die miteinander unvereinbar sind».<sup>4)</sup> Die konzeptuelle Aufzeichnung solch eines mehrdeutigen Raumes lässt sich in Gonzalez-Torres' früher Serie von «Daten»-Arbeiten ausmachen: leere schwarze Blät-

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Arena), 1993,  
strings of light bulbs, walkman with two headphones /  
«OHNE TITEL» (Arena), Glühbirnenstrang, Walkman mit zwei  
Kopfhörern.





ter, auf denen unzusammenhängende historische Ereignisse und private Dinge mit Jahreszahl verzeichnet sind. Die Ereignisse sind in zufälliger Reihenfolge aufgeführt und stehen in keinerlei inhaltlichem Zusammenhang; sie durchbrechen die lineare Syntax und unterlaufen die Sprache selbst.<sup>5)</sup> Lose Erinnerungen, vereinzelte Orte und disparate gesellschaftliche Phänomene werden evoziert wie beim Zappen durch die Fernsehkanäle

*Alabama 1964 Safer Sex 1985 Disco Donuts 1979 Cardinal O'Connor 1987 Klaus Barbie 1944 Napalm 1972 C.O.D. or Bilberg Cemetery 1985 Walkman 1979 Capetown 1985 Waterproof Mascara 1971 Personal Computer 1981 TLC.*

Das Fernsehen, technologisches Fenster zur Welt, ist ja in sich selbst schon ein heterotopisches «Environment», das die Privatsphäre mit einem umfassenden gesellschaftlichen Panorama verschmilzt, ein Vehikel für die bewegungslose Reise durch Raum und Zeit. Der Fernsehzuschauer setzt sich einem phantasmagorischen Mosaik wechselnder Bilder aus. In der anhaltenden Oszillation zwischen privat/öffentlich, innen/ausen, gegenwärtig/zukünftig, die sich aus einer solchen zugespitzten visuellen Stimulation ergibt, wird die eigentliche Erzählung des Raumes, weil dauernd durchquert, wiedererfunden.<sup>6)</sup>

Der Begriff der Heterotopographie bezeichnet noch eine weitere Dimension in «TRAVEL #2», jener Serie aus «Blutwert»-Kurven, die den zeitlichen Verlauf der Krankheit nachzeichnen. Nach Foucault ist Heterotopia sehr oft mit Zeitstücken verbunden, und diese kommen erst dann wirklich zur Geltung, wenn die Kultur einen Bruch in ihrem traditionellen Verständnis von chronologischer Ordnung erfährt, wenn unterschiedliche Zeitbegriffe gleichzeitig wirksam werden.<sup>7)</sup> Der Verlust des Lebens – das Bewusstsein des äusserst Vergänglichen gepaart mit jenem der Endgültigkeit des Todes – ist ein solcher Zusammenstoss verschiedener Zeit-Wirklichkeiten. Die extrem hohen Verluste, die die AIDS-Krise verursacht hat, führen zu einem neuen kulturellen Zeitverständnis, einer «Heterochronie»: Die Zukunftshoffnungen der modernen Jugend treffen auf eine Lebenserwartung, die all ihren Hoffnungen und Träumen zuwiderläuft. Die abfallenden roten Linien in Gonzalez-Torres' Diagrammen bezeichnen die all-

zu vielen Reisen, die durch diesen neuen Topos des Lebens im Angesicht des Todes schon stattgefunden haben. Sie markieren ein Gebiet, auf dem die privaten Leiden jener, die ihre Toten beklagen, nicht länger mehr zu trennen sind von öffentlichem Handeln. (Übersetzung: Nansen)

1) Dieses Plakat wurde 1992 an vierundzwanzig verschiedenen Orten in New York gezeigt.

2) Solche Formen räumlicher Bipolarisierung finden sich beispielsweise im epistemologischen Konstrukt des homosexuellen «Verborgenen» (*Closet*); dieser gesellschaftliche «Ort» setzt, ungeachtet der Folgen, entweder ein «Drinnen» oder ein «Draussen» voraus. Zu diesem Raumcharakter des Verborgenen siehe auch Judith Butlers Aufsatz «Decking Out: Performing Identities», wo sich folgende Polemik findet:

«Üblicherweise kommt man aus dem Verborgenen heraus... aber wohin? In welcher neuen unbegrenzten Räumlichkeit...? Kurioserweise ist es gerade diese Verborgeneheit, die solche Erwartungen hervorruft und deren Nichterfüllung garantiert. Denn das «Draussensein» setzt immer ein «Drinnensein» voraus; nur in dieser Polarität bekommt es überhaupt einen Sinn. Das Verborgene muss sich also selbst immer wieder von neuem produzieren, um sich selbst als «Draussen» zu erhalten.»

Abgedruckt in Diana Fuss, Hrsg., *Inside / Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, New York und London, Routledge, 1991, S. 16.

3) Michel Foucault, «Of Other Spaces», *Diacritics* 16, Nr. 1, 1986, S. 24. Die Filmwissenschaftlerin Giuliana Bruno verglich kürzlich in einem Artikel den heterotopischen Raum mit dem Sehen im Kino. Stellenweise ist ihr Text für die vorliegende Erörterung von Gonzalez-Torres' Projekt relevant.

Indem das Kino eine nomadenhafte Dynamik verkörpert, entwirft es eine heterotopische Topographie. Die heterotopische Faszination des Kinos lässt sich verstehen als Ort ohne Geographie, der einen anzieht und den man vereinnahmt, als Raum, der in einem einzigen Raum mehrere mögliche unvereinbare Orte und Zeiten zueinanderbringt: ein Ort, dessen System des Öffnens und Schliessens ihn zugleich isoliert und durchdringbar macht, weil er eine Art *Hiernicht/Dortnicht* bildet.

«Bodily Architectures» in *Assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, Nr. 19, Dezember 1992, S. 110.

4) Ebd., S. 26.

5) Foucault schrieb zum Begriff Heterotopia:

«Fragmente einer grossen Zahl von möglichen Ordnungen funkeln vereinzelt in der Dimension, ohne Gesetz oder Geometrie... in einem solchen Zustand sind die Dinge an so unterschiedlichen Orten «gelegt», «plaziert», «arrangiert», dass es unmöglich ist, einen festen Standort für sie zu finden, um einen allen gemeinsamen Ort zu definieren... Heterotopien sind wahrscheinlich deswegen so störend, weil sie insgeheim die Sprache unterlaufen...»

Zitiert nach Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York und London, Routledge, 1988.

6) Bruno, op. cit., S. 110.

7) Foucault, op. cit., S. 26.

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, «UNTITLED» (Fear), 1991, blue mirror, 30% x 25% / «OHNE TITEL» (Angst), blauer Spiegel, 77,8 x 65,7 cm. (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)





SIMON WATNEY

# In Purgatory: The Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

*A testimony is something other than demographics. Neither does testimony attempt to substitute words for persons; that would be mere fetishism. Testimony is witness in front of an indifferent world about the worth and merit of persons.*

Timothy F. Murphy<sup>1)</sup>

*Death is insidiously present behind the most diverse masks, often silent, sometimes noisy, but always active along the paths of existence.*

J.-B. Pontalis<sup>2)</sup>

## Introduction: Death, Age, Memory

A recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* by the admirable Roz Chast epitomises a certain distinct sensibility of the '90s.<sup>3)</sup> We are shown a balding man from behind, seated at a table, looking at the obituary page of a newspaper which we also read (as it were) over his shoulder, just as one sneakily regards someone else's newspaper on a subway train or in a crowded café. The dead are provided with summary features, but no names are given. Instead we read only: "Two Years Younger Than You"; "Exactly Your Age"; "Three Years Your Junior"; "Twelve Years Older Than You"; "Five Years Your Senior"; and "Your Age On The Dot."

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European readers of American newspapers are frequently struck by two aspects of their obituaries. First, by the great age to which so many Americans evidently live. Second, by the sheer numbers of AIDS deaths, especially among young men in their thirties and forties. Chast's drawing does not require identifiable faces, since its subject matter is not so much the dead as individuals, but rather death as it is perceived by the living. Indeed, this is precisely how many hundreds of thousands of American gay men start their every day, reminded of their survivor status—so far. The endless routine of sickness, dying and death also ages the survivors prematurely, as entire networks of friends vanish, and with them "the wealth of accumulated memory, taste, and hard-won practical wisdom they shared."<sup>4)</sup> This is the immediate context that gives specific significance to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's characteristically laconic observation that "There is a lot of memory involved in my work."<sup>5)</sup>

Memory also has its history, both in the lives of individuals, remembering, and in whole collectivities of memory. Such collective memories will often be in sharp conflict with one another. Indeed, social collectivities are largely constituted by such bodies of accumulating memory. This is how history is lived in social relations. However, memory is never simply transparent. As I have argued elsewhere:

"Psychoanalysis refuses any notion of direct, unmediated vision, since it understands seeing as a constant site of unconscious activity (...) We cannot theorise the workings or nature of remembering without at the same time considering the systematic mechanisms of forgetting. Once we begin to think of both seeing and memory as primarily defensive and self-protective operations, saturated with fantasy, then the status of (...) imagery is affected rather radically."<sup>6)</sup>

Collective memory is also limited by concrete institutions, and the criteria they employ which privilege certain "angles" of memory, some elements to the exclusion of others, and so on. Moreover, memory is clearly culturally organised in the preferred likeness of those who possess the power to define the past. For the individual, memory thus always involves a degree of intersection between the seemingly irreducible immediacy of recollected experience, and the tug of institutionally sanctioned "official" memories. Thus each individual death takes place to a greater or lesser extent in the context of a wider culture of dying, in which memory and memorialising play an important function.

## Exemplary Bodies

British art historian Nigel Llewellyn has described how prior to the Reformation: "The traditional belief about Purgatory had created a popular image of the afterlife as a place where the souls of the dead might be imagined residing after the decease of their natural bodies, but before the Last Judgment. Purgatory also allowed the living a sense of contact with the dead through prayer (...) One of the Reformers' main grievances was against the whole corrupt practice of indulgences (...) Inscriptions on countless monuments which beseeched passers-by to pray for the dead—'orate pro nobis...'—encouraged this sense of contact, but such wordings were expressly

forbidden by reformist statute. The ending of Purgatory thus caused grievous psychological damage: from that point forward the living were, in effect, distanced from the dead (...) to balance the traumatic effect of the loss of Purgatory the Protestant churches gradually developed the theory of memoria, which stressed the didactic potential of the lives and deaths of the virtuous."<sup>7)</sup>

As Llewellyn notes: "Protestant monuments were designed to be read as examples of virtue. In skillful enough hands and given sufficient ambition on the part of the patron, the monumental body could invent for posterity a completely new persona."<sup>8)</sup>

In spite of regional and other variations, the Lutheran theory of memoria underpins the entire subsequent Anglo-American culture of death and memorial art.

There is no social constituency in contemporary Anglo-American society which is more likely to be considered to be without virtue than gay men, a situation which has been greatly aggravated by the advent of AIDS. In this context we may identify a deep, ongoing cultural crisis which co-exists with the AIDS epidemic and its many conflicting narrations. Ever since the medical classification of AIDS in 1981, the bodies of people with AIDS have been used as signifiers in an immensely complex contest concerning the supposed "meaning" of the epidemic. We may thus detect a significant slippage at work between the field of "scientific" medical photography, which identifies symptoms, and a wider form of what might be described as moralised seeing, according to which AIDS is a signifier of powerful non-medical meanings. AIDS thus becomes also a crisis of memory. For when the deaths of our loved ones are casually dismissed as "self-inflicted," it is the most fundamental level of our most intense experience of life and of love that is effectively denied.

Such issues of systematic remembering and forgetting, of memorialising and calumniating gay men who have died from AIDS, are absolutely central to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, now in his mid-thirties, and living at the epicenter of the AIDS crisis. His work is initially distinguished by his refusal to engage in a dualistic cultural politics which strives to



counter the widespread demonising of people with AIDS with an equally over-simplified (if understandable) tendency to heroise them. Rather, he has stepped away from contestation which is directly grounded on the bodies of people with AIDS and their representations. Instead, he has consistently drawn attention to the discursive formations which frame policy and practice in relation to the everyday lives of gay men in the AIDS epidemic. He sets out and reenacts discursive contradictions and conflicts, and all his work to a greater or lesser extent involves situations of tension between rival and conflicting potential meanings. In this respect his work does not offer the closure of meaning that has been widely understood as one marker of “political art” in the twentieth century. While his work is focused with extraordinary conceptual precision, he is never simply didactic.

Rejecting the whole idea of any single “truth” that might encompass the social and psychic reality of all gay men within single representations, artists such as Gonzalez-Torres, Robert Gober, Jack Pierson, Tom Kalin, John-Paul Philippe, Michael Jenkins, and others have tended to draw attention to the workings of the various social and psychic mechanisms of displacement, disavowal, and projection which are actively at work in homophobic discourses, and thus also in the larger cultural process which constitutes and maintains individual and collective subjectivities. Such work is thus intended to intervene at a level prior to the self-consciously “political.” In effect, Gonzalez-Torres returns us to a sense of demarcation between “politics” and a politics of representation and, in doing so, exposes the workings of homophobic discourse—in symptomatic repetitions, omissions, slippages, metaphors, substitutions, emphases, and so on—rather than opposing a supposedly universally gay “truth” to what may misleadingly be regarded as homophobic “lies.”

This is evidently difficult to understand for critics coming from an old Leftist political culture, which is determined to cling to the notion of economic determinism, and which denounces “consumerism” as stupid and greedy with all the vigour it had previously reserved for those it accused of “false-consciousness”—the ignorant masses who so routinely

fail to line up to justify the messianic pretensions of the Revolutionary Party leadership. In a recent article, British artist and critic Terry Atkinson describes “those who consume” as “transfixed by their addiction to keep doing it.”<sup>9)</sup> It is almost as if “producers” and “consumers” are imagined as distinct tribes, the former “good” class subjects, the latter wanton hedonists. From such a perspective, all objects (including art objects) are considered primarily as commodities, functioning in a distinct economy and epoch to be known as “Late-Capital.” Again, from this perspective both “the audience” and “the market” are regarded as invariant and monolithic. What is “good” about “good” art from this perspective would be precisely its capacity to somehow transform the viewer into a good, productive, socialist subject, rejecting the culture and values of Late-Capital. It would be closely akin to a religious conversion.

For Atkinson, Gonzalez-Torres’s candy pieces can only make sense as: “an area where gluttony, a kind of subspecies of Late-Capital, might be the order of the day. Shades of Hieronymous Bosch.”<sup>10)</sup> Yet it is hard to imagine how Gonzalez-Torres (or any other artist) is supposed to be “effective,” since according to Atkinson and his ilk: “The problem with all our critiques of Late-Capital is that in allowing the critique, Late-Capital can feel good about itself.”<sup>11)</sup> Late-Capital is thus depicted as an entity that can think for itself, and also feel “better” (and presumably “worse”?) about itself. Such a monolithic, totalising politics can hardly be expected to recognise the bizarre comic absurdity of its own reflections on “where Late-Capitalism sees itself.” If Atkinson truly believes that the entire developed world is currently “suffused with self-congratulation” one can only speculate on which nearby planet he might be living.

Such doubts equally involve his inability to begin to comprehend the historical and cultural circumstances that shape Gonzalez-Torres’s project. Thus his spectacularly odd reading of Gonzalez-Torres’s 1989 *Sheridan Square* installation, just round the corner from the site of the 1969 Stonewall riots which marked the emergence of the modern gay political movement. Placed on a billboard at the entrance to New York’s most celebrated gay strip, Christopher

Street, the piece substituted for the more familiar image of the Marlborough Man, which had famously occupied the same public space for many years. The piece reads as a low double horizon against an austere black ground: “*People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme / Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March On Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969.*” Atkinson contrasts what he insultingly describes as the “pathos” of this piece, which allegedly “comes from remembering the gains acquired through a tradition of political culture,” to another billboard project which simply shows a recently vacated double-bed with two pillows and a duvet. For Atkinson this is also an image of “pathos”—“personally rich and formally bleak.”<sup>12)</sup>

It is important to correct such fanciful interpretations, since the Stonewall riots were most decidedly not produced by any known “traditions of political culture,” at least not in the tradition of ultra-Leftist party politics espoused by Atkinson et al. (On the contrary, Stonewall was a community-based response to immediate police brutality at a community level, and it was led not by Marxists, but by black and Latino drag queens.) Nor is the bed piece an image which can adequately be described (and thus dismissed) as merely “personal” or “private.” On the contrary, as Gonzalez-Torres has pointed out:

“Someone’s agenda has been enacted to define ‘public’ and ‘private.’ We’re really talking about private property because there is no private space anymore. Our intimate desires, fantasies, dreams are ruled and intercepted by the public sphere.”<sup>13)</sup>

Thus the *Sheridan Square* piece rejects a conventional “political” roll-call of heroic achievements, and presents history in a far more complex way, out of chronological order, melding different types of events from the murder of gay San Francisco politician Harvey Milk to the formation of community-based organisations in response to HIV/AIDS. History is thus specifically not presented as a seamless progressive narrative, expressing some supposedly unified historical force or will. Rather, events and institutions coexist, as in memory, in no particular order or sequence beyond that of our own active interpretive making. The “private” defiantly invades “public” space.

When the *Bed* billboard was exhibited in Glasgow in 1992, similar criticisms were levelled against it, on the grounds that it was not sufficiently “informational,” that it was not sufficiently didactic. Yet what could be more powerful than the sight of a clean beautiful double bed on hoardings in a grimy, wintry industrial city? For beds are where most of us are born, where we most frequently have sex, and where, if we are lucky, we will eventually die. The image of a double bed, whose pillows clearly bear the imprint of the two people who had recently occupied it, carried over the widespread publicity surrounding the exhibition and its subject matter into the public spaces of a typical city. Gonzalez-Torres draws our attention to the sheer comfort of being in bed, and the intense pleasures we associate with bedrooms. Yet, as the *Sheridan Square* poster reminds one, the privacy of the bedroom is also intimately connected to the gender of those who sleep there. Hence the significance of the reference to the notorious (or forgotten) 1986 Supreme Court decision that American gay men have no constitutional right to privacy from direct police interference in their own homes. Moreover, the reference to Harvey Milk will also remind older gay men, and others, that Milk’s assassin, Dan White, received only a three-year jail sentence on the grounds that his judgment had been impaired by an excessive intake of Twinkies, a brand of sweetmeat popular with American children. (At the time, “twinkies” was also a derogatory term for gay men in the United States.)

In Britain we refer to candy as “sweets,” and children are sensibly exhorted never to take sweets from strangers. This is just one of the many levels of meaning which operate in relation to Gonzalez-Torres’s celebrated candy spills, such as his “Untitled” (Welcome Back Heroes) of 1991, a 400-pound stack of red, white and blue wrapped Bazooka gum, “memorialising” the Gulf War. Other candy pieces include portraits of his boyfriend and himself, and others, in which the candy has the same weight as his subjects. Who can resist candy? Thus the metaphoric associations of his materials permit Gonzalez-Torres to construct works which share what amounts to a formal invitation to the audience to participate by slowly ingesting them, sweet by sweet. Nor should we forget





in this context the gradual wasting, and loss of appetite, which is so often and so painfully experienced by people with AIDS.

Such latent implications were most powerfully mobilised in his 1991 "Untitled" (Placebo), which consisted of 1000–1200 pounds of silver-foil wrapped candies, laid out like a huge carpet across the floor of the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. Like several other pieces, including "Untitled" (Bloodworks), Placebo immediately involves us in the cultural field of the medical clinical trials of potential treatment drugs. A placebo is an inert substance, indistinguishable from a pharmaceutical compound in comparison to which the effects of a drug may be measured, after a sample of individuals have agreed to enter a clinical trial in which they do not know whether they are receiving the potentially therapeutic drug, or the placebo. And yet a placebo is never just an inert substance, for it inevitably carries with it a profound supplement of hope. Moreover, as a participant in a clinical trial, one does not know whether or not one is taking a placebo every four or eight hours, sometimes for years on end. Furthermore, the pharmaceutical compound may eventually turn out to be an effective treatment which, by receiving a placebo, one has in effect lost the opportunity to take. On the other hand, the compound may have unintended side-effects, and even do one harm. There is also the more straightforward question of the sheer quantity of such pills one ingests in the course of a clinical

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED", 1991,  
Location No. 11: 31–33 Second Avenue, East 2nd Street,  
Manhattan, billboard, dimensions vary.

trial, or any long-term therapy. There is thus a complex, shifting relationship among Gonzalez-Torres's various candy pieces, which has not been apparent to critics who regard his use of sweets as if they were traditional, fixed iconographic symbols.<sup>14</sup> These are works of art which enact and embody the instability of life, and its extreme unpredictability and transience. There is no false optimism here, no self-deception. Rather, Gonzalez-Torres finds and mobilises materials which may function as analogues for experience and emotions which are not "explained" in any extended biographical supplementary exegesis. They are works about love, desire, loss, death, and mourning, and much of their extraordinary power derives from the artist's refusal to retreat into didacticism. They are works which try to take us seriously as spectators, and which encourage us to make as many associative connections as we like in relation to the materials assembled before us, as well as in relation to previous works.<sup>15</sup>

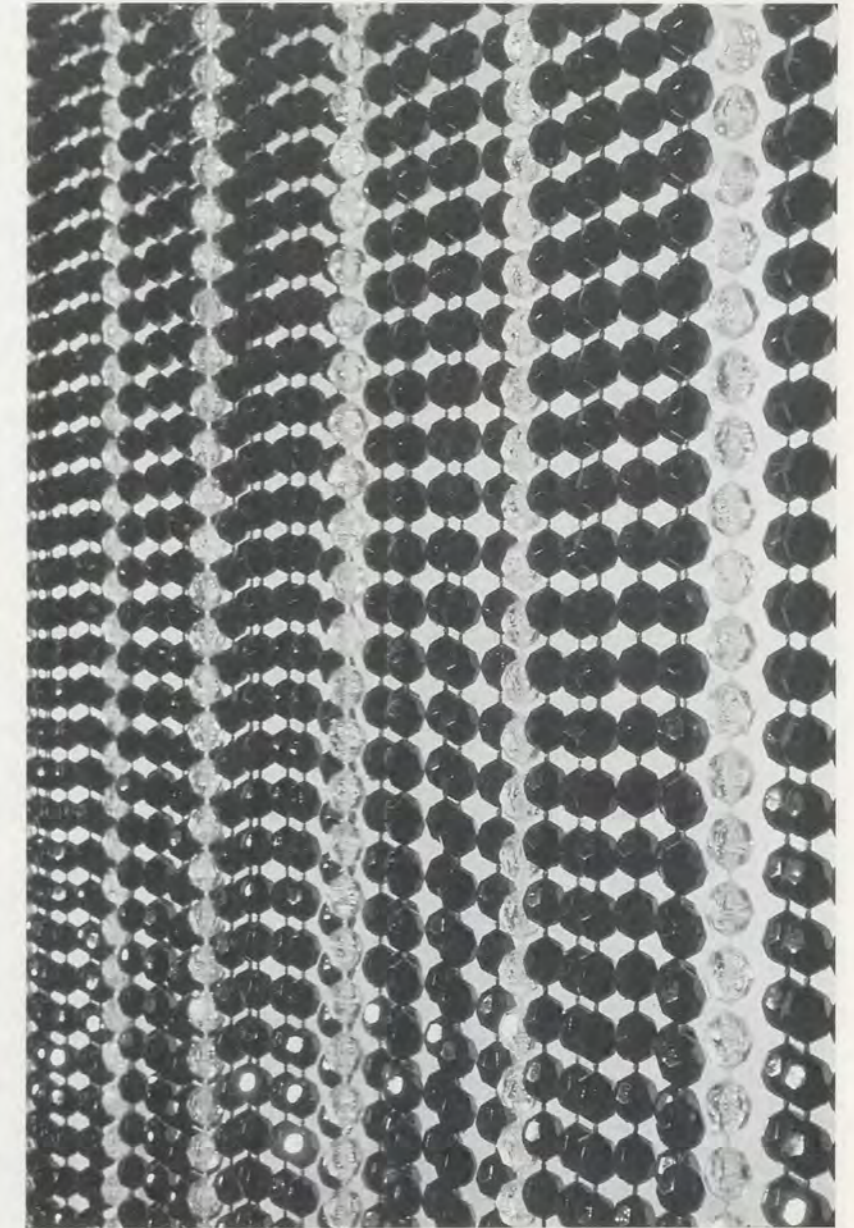
Thus "Untitled" (Placebo) also needs to be considered in the context of its exhibition in 1991, when it was installed for five days at the end of a one-month constantly changing show entitled "Every Week There Is Something Different," which had begun with a display of conventionally framed and displayed photographs of the carved inscriptions that form the backdrop to the Teddy Roosevelt monument outside New York's Museum of Natural History. These elicit Roosevelt's various attributes of public virtue in his roles as "Statesman," "Scholar," "Humanitarian," "Historian," "Patriot," "Ranchman," "Naturalist," "Soldier," and so on. In the second stage of the exhibition a powder-blue wooden platform was installed, unlit, in the middle of the room, whilst in the third week the gallery walls had been repainted white, and a line of light bulbs around the top edge of the platform was switched on. Every day a professional male Go-Go dancer arrived and danced for a short period of time to the almost inaudible accompaniment of his Walkman. Three of the origi-

nal photos were retained on the walls—"Soldier," "Humanitarian," and "Explorer."

For the Go-Go boy in his shiny silver briefs is indeed all of these things, and more, as the piece implies. Like so many others, he is soldier, on active service, manning his post, in a war-zone of homophobia, censorship, anxiety, hatred, fear and loss. He is a humanitarian in his ordinary, unremarked, everyday relation to the epidemic as it affects himself, his friends, and complete strangers, and in his insistence that he is perfectly entitled to his own sexuality, just as anyone else is entitled to theirs: an explorer who has dared to leave home, to set out against all the dreadful pressures of homophobic education and popular culture. He has come out as a gay man, explored his sexuality, and has now stepped courageously into the spotlight of exhibitionism, knowing himself confidently as an object of desire for other men, daring to be shockingly sexy in a world that must go on. And his HIV status? We don't know. Nor is this the issue. Which is precisely the point. Gonzalez-Torres is not providing us with ordinary, political analysis dressed up, as it were, in artworld terms. This appears to be his major crime, to those who expect and require "good" political art to remain within the broad Lutheran tradition of memorialising the "exemplary body" of the heroic man—the "good" class hero, the good "AIDS victim," and so on. In this "poetics of AIDS," there is no question of a humanist/expressionist aesthetic rooted in notions of "sincerity." For many of us, the dead are so intimately codeterminous with the living that the direct meaning of both terms is radically upset.

In any case, as Stravinsky pointed out long ago, sincerity is the sine qua non that guarantees nothing. Rather, we may consider the great variety of strategies and modes of signification being mobilised in

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Blood), 1992,  
plastic beads and metal rod, size varies with installation /  
«OHNE TITEL» (Blut), Plastikkugel und Draht, Größe von der  
Installation abhängig. (PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)





relation to HIV/AIDS, from Gonzalez-Torres's foregrounding of the US health insurance industry in his "Untitled" (Blue Cross) stacks from 1990, to the drama of police lines fighting to prevent young men from leaving the remains of their loved ones outside the President's bedroom window. Unsurprisingly perhaps, critical commentary concerning Gonzalez-Torres has overwhelmingly concentrated on his supposed "appropriation" of Minimalism, and his re-wiring of its cultural connotations. Yet how terribly desiccated and precious much seventies Minimalism looks by comparison with his work. What we should notice is the way in which he relays meanings between different works, by means of the formal development of individual elements. Thus the row of light bulbs from "Untitled" (Go-Go Dance Platform) from 1991 have now taken on a formal life of their own in numerous subsequent light pieces involving strings of light bulbs, just as the gently chiming curtain of glass beads that gave access to the platform has been reworked with red and transparent beads in a visually and conceptually stunning analogue of red and white blood cells, blood vessels, and medical technology. Thus the light pieces also carry with them, as it were, memories (and forgettings) of their original context and its associations. And all his light pieces, with their poetic connotations of garden parties at night, discos, the Fourth of July, as well as boxing arenas and operating theatres, also carry with them an ever more ghostly shadow of the beautiful Go-Go boy on Prince Street in 1991, proudly and expertly dancing to his favorite Pet Shop Boys remix, and by contingency on the associative field of Placebo, which is also a packed dance-floor...

#### Conclusion:

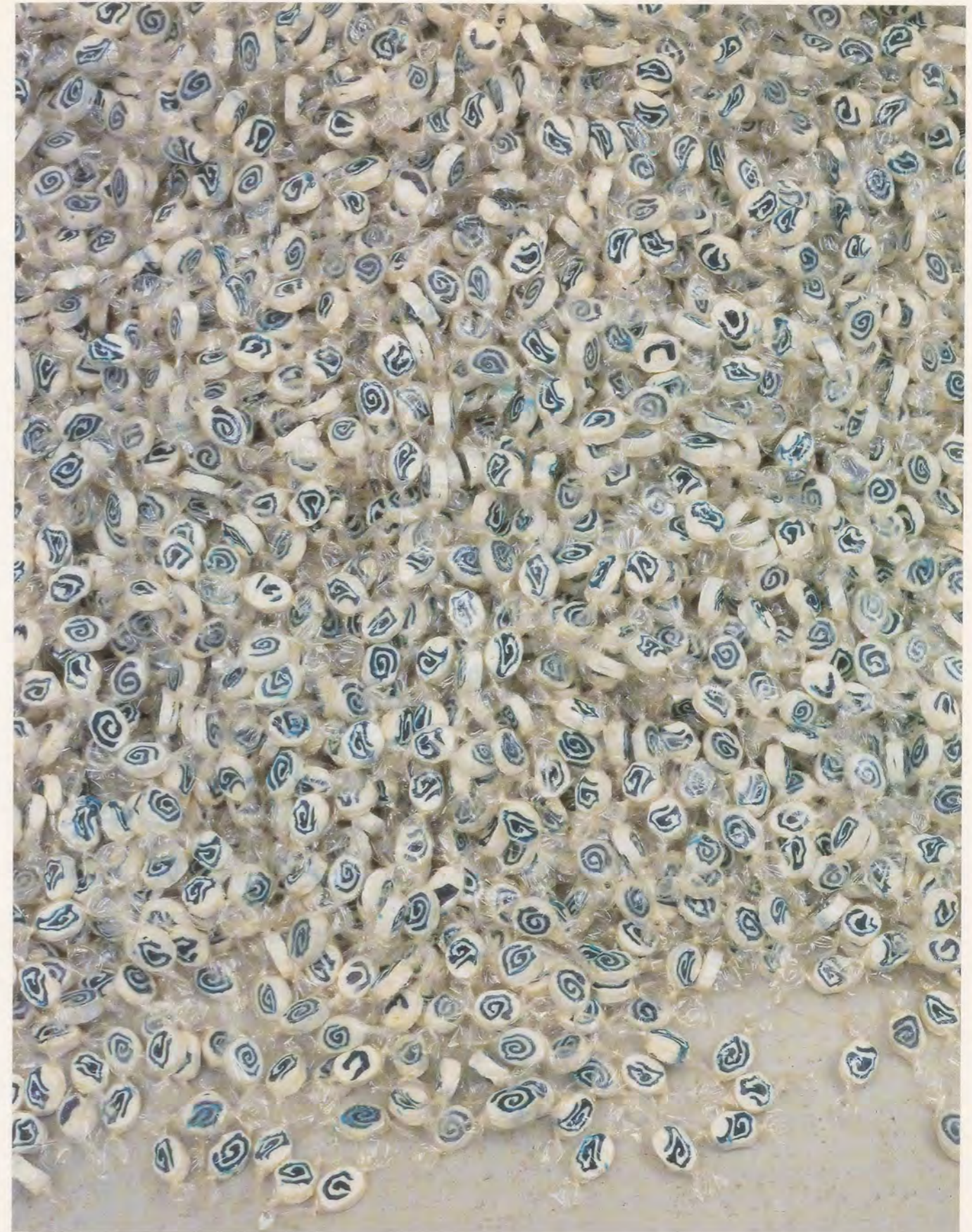
##### A Note on Friendship

It would be difficult in the extreme to exaggerate the significance of the impact of HIV in the lives and identities of gay men around the world—the extraordinary uncertainty and complexity and determination to which it leads us as individuals facing a frankly appalling reality. In this respect certainly we are not like other people. In these circumstances we often feel that we owe one another "a terrible loyalty," to borrow from Tennyson. Without marriage and

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Lover Boys), 1991,  
355 lbs. wrapped candies; dimensions vary /  
161 kg eingewickelte Bonbons, variable Größe.

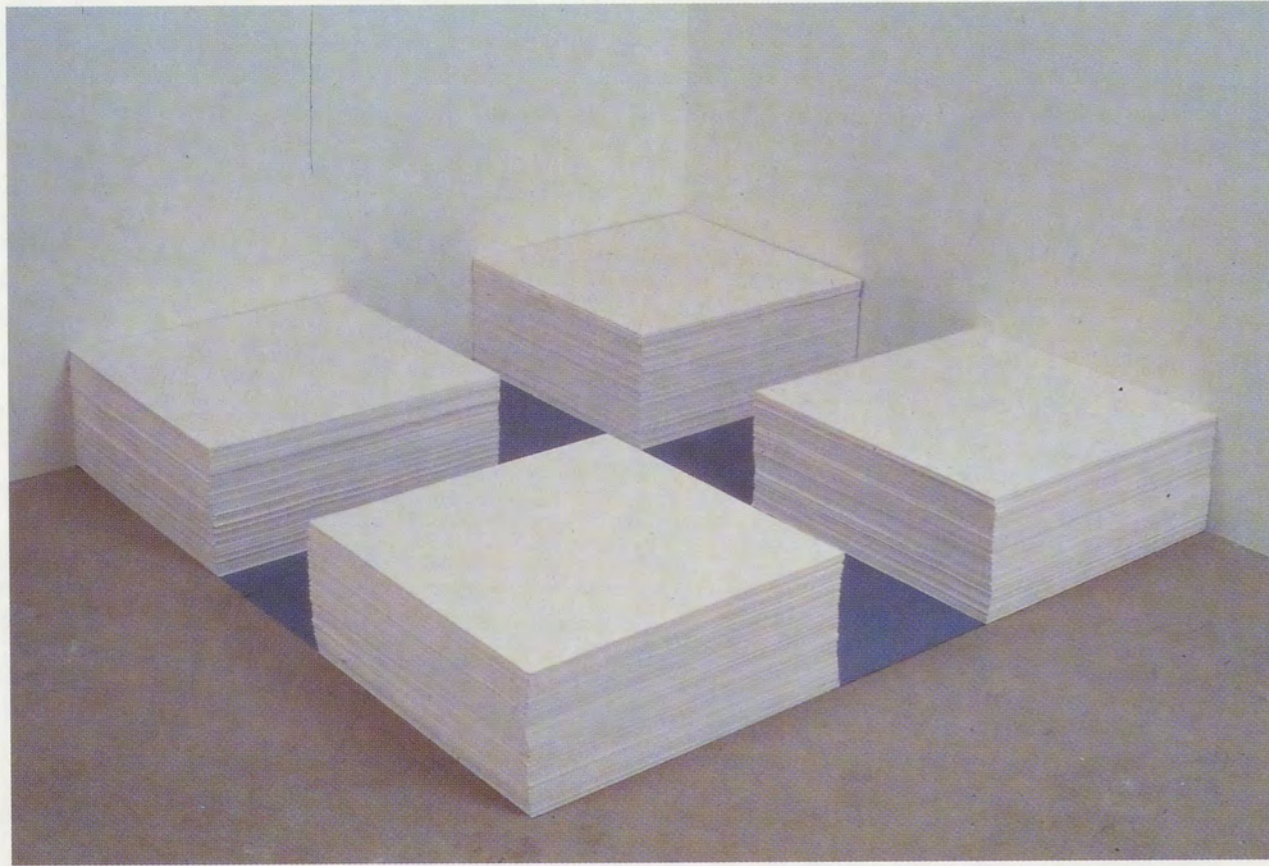
its attendant rituals and institutions, gay men's most intimate and important relationships are frequently misunderstood and undervalued by heterosexuals, who simply cannot understand what one is actually saying when one tells them that a "friend" is sick or a "friend" has died. When old friends of mine die now I eventually come to picture them quite easily seated on clouds in some heaven designed by Pierre et Gilles, talking, laughing, having sex. This is not denial. We know they're dead. We also know we have to continue to fight on behalf of the living. This is what Felix Gonzalez-Torres's extraordinary work is "about." We have rediscovered Purgatory.

- 1) Timothy F. Murphy, "Testimony," in eds. T. F. Murphy and S. Poirer, *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language and Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 317.
- 2) J.-B. Pontalis, "On Death-work," *Frontiers in Psychoanalysis: Between the Dream and Psychic Pain* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), p. 184.
- 3) *The New Yorker*, October 25, 1993, p. 124.
- 4) Simon Watney, "Preface: My Project," *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1994).
- 5) Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* Vol. XXIV, no. 161, Nov./Dec. 1991, p. 86.
- 6) Simon Watney, "The Image of the Body," *Figures* catalogue (Cambridge, England: The Cambridge Darkroom, 1987).
- 7) Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual c. 1500–1800* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), pp. 26–28.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- 9) Terry Atkinson, "Rites of Passage," *A & D*, 1/2, Jan./Feb., 1994.
- 10) *Ibid.*
- 11) *Ibid.*
- 12) *Ibid.*
- 13) Nickas, *op. cit.*
- 14) For example, for Anthony Iannacci the candies "call to mind the ritual of communion, the consumption (of) the body and blood of Christ," and death itself is seen "as part of a sublime cycle, mirroring the Christian belief in the circularity of Christ's existence and resurrection." (*Artforum*, December 1991, p. 112)
- 15) In this context we might also consider the ways in which the titles of other pieces by Gonzalez-Torres (such as "Untitled" [Blue Placebo]), and the work itself, introduces the metonymous shade of Andy Warhol, and connotations of blue Marilyns, Liza, Electric Chairs, and so on. This is only to observe that here, as elsewhere, Warhol emerges as the most genuinely enabling of all the great post-War American artists, in relation to Gran Fury as much as to Gonzalez-Torres or Gober.





FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, "UNTITLED" (Blue Cross), 1990,  
offset print on paper, endless copies, cloth, 9 x 59 x 59" aprx./  
«OHNE TITEL» (Blaues Kreuz), Offsetdruck auf Papier, unbegrenzte Auflage, Tuch, ca. 22,8 x 150 x 150 cm.  
(PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, «UNTITLED», 1992,  
individually wrapped candies, ideal dimensions: 2 x 48 x 48" /  
«OHNE TITEL», verschieden verpackte Bonbons, ideale Größen: 5 x 122 x 122 cm.  
(PHOTO: PETER MUSCATO)

