

FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES'S EPISTEMIC ART

*Robert Hobbs**

Latin-American, gay, and AIDS positive, Félix González-Torres seemed to be the perfect model for both the late 1980s and early '90s culture wars, which emphasized sex and diversity. Because González-Torres's life made him such an apt subject for addressing social and political wrongs, many critics and art historians premiered both him and his art when discussing these hotly debated issues. But González-Torres himself regarded these personal matters separately from his epistemologically oriented work. In an interview with fellow artist Tim Rollins, he discussed his desire to critique mainstream culture from within its structure and accepted practice rather than serve as one of its pawns: "I love the idea of being an infiltrator. I always said that I wanted to be a spy . . . I don't want to be the opposition because the opposition always serves a purpose . . ."¹ Because González-Torres understood the need to focus his energies within established art discourses rather than mounting attacks from the outside, his art, with its important epistemological and ontological innovations, places him in a direct line with such major twentieth-century artist-thinkers as dadaist Marcel Duchamp, minimalists Donald Judd and Robert Morris, and earth artist Robert Smithson.

Although he often alluded to his partner, Ross Laycock, in a number of works, González-Torres straightforwardly presented a series of HIV-positive blood count charts with their gridded formats resembling the look of Minimalism, and drew on Latino festivals in his works consisting of strings of light bulbs and Caribbean décor in his beaded curtains. These works, predicated on a dialectic of public and private spheres, were each drily presented, thus enabling González-Torres to focus on creating innovative epistemologically-oriented works that employ traditional concepts of the way art objects function and accrue meaning while challenging them. In addition, he generously found ways for viewers of

* Noted art historian Dr. Robert Hobbs has written widely on modern and contemporary art. He is the author of more than 40 books and numerous essays. His many major exhibitions have been shown at important museums nationally and internationally, including U.S. official representations at the Venice Biennale and the São Paulo Bienal. Hobbs has served as associate professor at Cornell University, long-term visiting professor at Yale University, and has held the Rhoda Thalheimer Endowed Chair of American Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹ Interview by Tim Rollins with Félix González-Torres, in New York City, N.Y. (Apr. 16 & June 12, 1993), in TIM ROLLINS ET AL, FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES 20 (William S. Bartman ed. 1993).

his work to participate actively in the process of artistic perception and to collaborate in the construction of the art's dynamic and changing relevance, even as he anticipated some of their responses. Admittedly, the subjects of his art may, at times, be romantic in their allusions to past intimacies and the themes may call to mind human fragility, but the works themselves comprise an astonishing groundbreaking rigor, and its effects are still inspiring artists thirty years later.

As an introduction to this overall discussion on art and justice that focuses on González-Torres's art, I would like to review in chronological order some of the extraordinary and progressive innovations he was able to originate in pieces created during the nine years—1986 to 1995—that he was able to create the cutting-edge art for which he has become justly renowned.

I start with his most secretive work, an early piece that he describes in the following way:

There's a piece where I mail the owner something every so often and it goes into this big box. This piece should never be shown. . . The person who buys this empty box gets these things in the mail. . . The piece [González-Torres reiterates] is not meant to be shown. . . I like working with contradictions: making completely private, almost secretive work on the one hand, and on the other, making work that is *truly* public and accessible.²

While German critic Jeanne Haunschild appends a political interpretation to this piece by viewing it in terms of the attempts to impose proscriptions against certain private love acts between gays and lesbians,³ this reading, as relevant as it is, does not recognize González-Torres's precedence in creating a work of art that focuses on communication, even though it is not intended to be publicly shown. González-Torres, in other words, has created a work of art that accords with the key fundamental idea of visual art's eminent perceptibility, and yet he has done so while restricting its communiqué to one specific collector.

While this very private work of art plays with the established public norm traditionally associated with western mainstream visual art, González-Torres's puzzle pieces literalize one of this tradition's ongoing truisms concerning art's ability to constitute a repository of special meaning in the form of mysteries needing to be solved, so that informed individuals, schooled in symbols, signs, emblems, and semiotic practices, are able figure out an artwork's meaning. But, instead of secreting meaning in a repository as the aforementioned box, González-Torres relies in

² *Id.* at 14.

³ See *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186 (1986).

some of his more public pieces on the genre of puzzles as a foundation for snapshots and photo-journalist images taken from mass media and sometimes even on personal sources. At one point, he had photographs of segments of Ross's love letters made into jigsaw puzzles,⁴ thereby incorporating private biographical information in these works, so that they also reify and wryly comment on the concept of art as integrally connected with the artist and his own life.

González-Torres preferred to work within established art systems, becoming in his word, like a “virus,”⁵ which attacks and undermines from within a structure that he might at first appear to be only emulating. He has related: “I don’t want a revolution anymore, it’s too much energy for too little. So I want to work within the system. I want to work within the contradictions of the system . . .”⁶

As González-Torres’s New York dealer Andrea Rosen has perceptively concluded, “So many aspects of Félix’s work were groundbreaking that he felt that it was essential to house all the innovation within the traditional model of the art object.”⁷ Even though González-Torres wished to work with the established structure of art, he also intended to change and even desecrate it a little as he told then Guggenheim Museum curator Nancy Spector:

. . . [W]e should not be afraid of using such formal references [as Minimalism] since they represent authority and history. Why not take them? When we insert our own discourse into these forms, we soil them. We make them dark. We make them our own and that is our final revenge. We become part of the language of the authority, part of history.⁸

A classic example of González-Torres’s dissembling work from within the established artistic discourse of blue-chip Minimalism is his series of stacks, initiated in 1988 and continued for several years thereafter. Although these works might resemble simulations of Donald Judd’s and Robert Morris’s cubes, they are comprised of hundreds of sheets of printed-paper that visitors can choose to take if they wish. These works

⁴ 2 DIETMAR EGER & ANDREA ROSEN, FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES CATALOGUÉ RAISONNÉ 82-84 (Cantz Verlag 1997).

⁵ Interview by Hans-Ulrich Obrist with Félix González-Torres (1994) in 1 Hans-Ulrich Obrist, INTERVIEWS 315 (Charta 2003) (“I used to be the one that looks like something else in order to function as a virus. I mean, the virus is our worst enemy, but should also be our model in terms of not being the opposite anymore, not being very easily defined so that we can attach ourselves to institutions which are always going to be there.”).

⁶ Andrea Rosen, “‘Untitled’ (*The Neverending Portrait*)” in ROLLINS, *supra* note 1, at 44, 46.

⁷ ROLLINS, *supra* note 1, at 44, 46.

⁸ NANCY SPECTOR, FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES 15 (1995).

allow collectors to decide if they are going to replenish them during an exhibition to create the aura of perpetual generosity or if they are going to allow the sheets making up the stacks to dwindle. The act of incorporating time in these pieces, as well as collectors' responsibilities and viewers' desires to participate in the work of art by taking part of it, significantly modifies the traditional ontological structure of Minimalist work as it transfers sole responsibility for its creation by the artist and permits collectors and viewers to collaborate in generating these pieces that assume the character of scores to be performed. In this way, Minimalism is restructured ontologically, and the artist's creative role is shared with future audiences.



Félix González-Torres
"Untitled" (National Front), 1992
 Print on paper, endless copies

14 cm at ideal height x 125 x 91 cm (original paper size)
 (5½ in. at ideal height x 49 1/8 x 35¾ in. (original paper size))

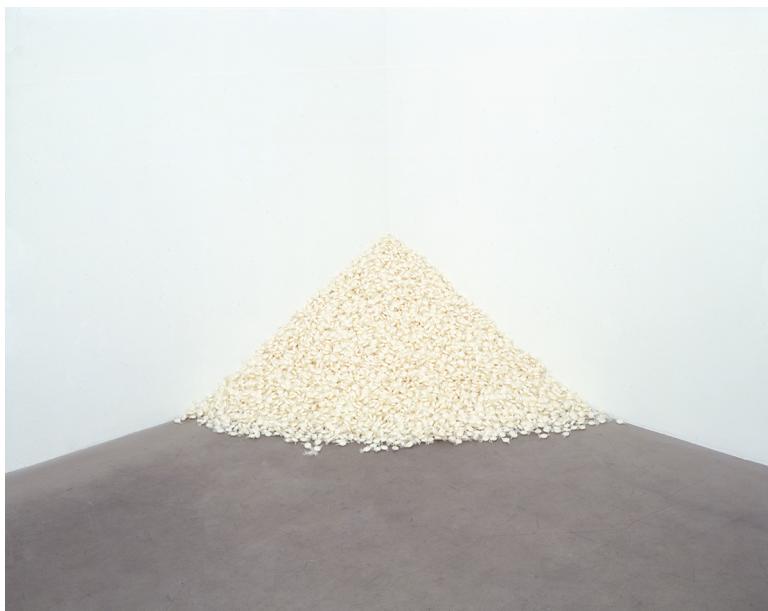
Installation view: *Paper*. Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain.

Nice, France. 30 Jun. – 30 Sep. 2012. Cur. Joao Tovar.

© The Félix González-Torres Foundation

Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Thus, González-Torres's art is no longer lodged strictly within the confines of the traditional art object, but instead assumes an emergent, transcendental status dependent on the social, political, and economic status of his future viewers, who can collaborate in the artwork's ongoing and very dynamic recreation.



Félix González-Torres
“Untitled”(*Portrait of Dad*), 1991
White candies, individually wrapped in cellophane, endless supply
Overall dimensions vary with installation
Ideal weight: 175 lbs.
© The Félix González-Torres Foundation
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

As with the stacks, so with the spills, the responsibility for the perpetuation and collaborative recreation of the art is shared with prospective curators and collectors, as well as with viewers. Members of the former two groups are able to decide where to situate these pieces and even the brand of candy to use as long as they accord with the artist's instructions, while viewers can choose whether to sample a piece of the wrapped confection or not and thus partake of the signified body, codified at times by titles referring to the overall weight of a person important to the artist, such as Ross or his father.

González-Torres's works also reflect knowledge of the contracts that conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner requires collectors to sign so that they affirm their role as responsible stewards, not just mere owners of the work they are purchasing.⁹ The conceptualist Joseph Kosuth, whose work and friendship were of great importance to González-Torres, is also apposite in regards to the topic of accompanying documentation. Kosuth questioned the ontological status of different aspects of his early *Definitions*. He considers, for example, the Photostats, comprising the exhibited face of his *Definitions*, to be simply placeholders of the art idea,

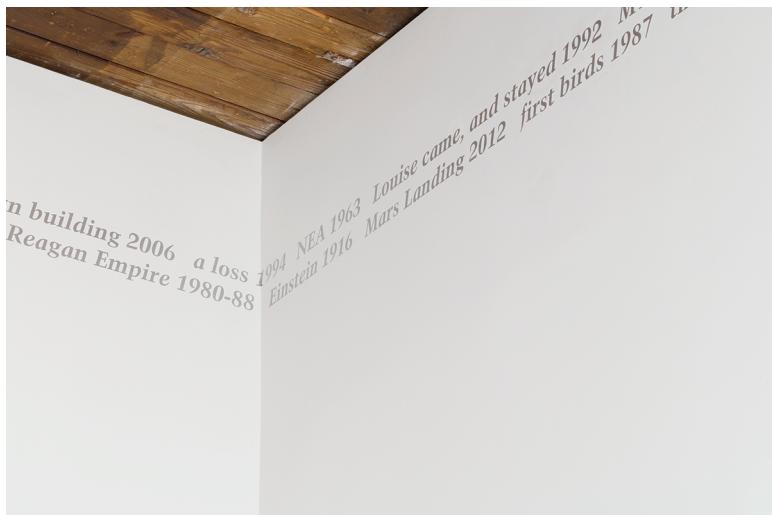
⁹ Telephone Interview with Shaun Caley Regen (Jan. 15, 2015).

which is manifested by his first concept when he would cut out dictionary definitions, glue them to a 4 x 6" index cards, and sign them, thereby ensuring their preeminent role as official and authenticating documents. Apropos Kosuth's example, González-Torres did not consider each sheet of paper in a stack freely offered to gallery and museum visitors to constitute an artwork, and he even refused to regard the overall stack itself as a work of art, choosing instead to point to the initial overarching concept for a given piece as the work of art. Because the stacks and spills, as well as other works, did not have the advantage of Kosuth's initial type of verification, the idea of legally ensuring a work's authenticity resulted in the need for González-Torres and his gallery to issue contracts.

In 1989, González-Torres initiated his portraits, which are biographical combinations of the most important events in the life of a person (or institution). They are then presented as a running band of text adjacent to the ceiling of a room or as small-sized Photostats. Interrupting the individual's biographic facts are contemporaneous political occurrences that serve the important function of placing the particular subject's life on the far grander and ultimately more broadly meaningful stage of history. The portraits are then presented as strings of unrelated events—unrelated, perhaps, except in the mind of the person whose portrait González-Torres is commemorating. The artist, therefore, collaborates with the portrait's subject in making these works, leaving the individual, ultimately, with the option of changing the terms of his or her portrait by adding or removing particular events as they wish since, as González-Torres's instruction suggests, one “‘is allowed’ to change one’s view of one’s life.”¹⁰

In a world glutted with mass media and later the influx of digital visual imagery afforded by the Internet, a verbal portrait goes against this formidable tide and is thereby all the more arresting and memorable for its difference. Well versed in French theorist Roland Barthes's widely read book *Camera Lucida* González-Torres is well-aware of the fact that photographs can be mute testaments that require explanations or captions in order to generate specific meanings. Instead of supplying pictures without verbal descriptions, González-Torres resorts in his portraits to captions, so to speak, and the emergent images created by viewers' imaginations.

¹⁰ ROLLINS, *supra* note 1, at 52.



Félix González-Torres
“Untitled” (Portrait of the Fabric Workshop, a gift to Kippy), 1994
Paint on wall
Dimensions vary with installation
© The Félix González-Torres Foundation
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



Félix González-Torres

“Untitled” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*), 1991

Wood, lightbulbs, acrylic paint and Go-Go dancer in silver lamé bathing suit, sneakers and personal listening device

Overall dimensions vary with installation

Platform: 21 1/2 x 72 x 72 in. (54.6 x 182.9 x 182.9 cm)

Installation view: Every Week There is Something Different. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. 2 May – 1 June 1991. [A four-part project by Félix González-Torres].

Photographer: Peter Muscato

© The Félix González-Torres Foundation
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Félix González-Torres

“Untitled” (*Natural History*), 1990

Framed black and white photographs

Overall dimensions vary with installation

Thirteen parts: 16 3/4 x 20 1/4 in. each

Image: 8 7/16 x 12 in. each

Edition of 3

Installation view: Every Week There is Something Different. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. 2 May – 1 June 1991. [A four-part project by Félix González-Torres].

Photographer: Peter Muscato

© The Félix González-Torres Foundation
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



“Untitled” (Natural History), 1990

Framed black and white photographs

Overall dimensions vary with installation

Thirteen parts: 16 3/4 x 20 1/4 in. each

Image: 8 7/16 x 12 in. each

Edition of 3

Installation view: *Félix González-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form*.
Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland. 21 May – 25 Jul. 2010. Cur. Elena Filipovic
31 Jul. – 29 Aug. 2010. Cur. Carol Bove.
Photographer: Serge Hasenboehler
© The Félix González-Torres Foundation
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

In 1991, González-Torres created two intermedia works that are often installed together “*Untitled*” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*) of 1991, a totally different type of installation consisting of a live male performer, and “*Untitled*” (*Natural History*) of 1990 a group of historic black-and-white photographs that were first shown in his Manhattan gallery. The photographs are of chiseled inscriptions taken from the Theodore Roosevelt Monument in front of New York’s American Museum of Natural History that celebrate the former president as “Soldier,” “Humanitarian” and “Explorer.” The conjunction of a male dancer and the photographs of this Roosevelt monument set up a dialectic between different ways of being male in the late and early twentieth-century. Moving beyond the obvious contrast between present and past accepted roles for gay male dancers and Roosevelt’s “strong manly man,” the work sets in motion tensions between presence and absence as well as now and then that are both arresting and poignant, at the same time that it initiates the fourth dimension — time — into its consideration.

In this piece, González-Torres finds a way to update one of his favored artistic strategies: Bertolt Brecht's defamiliarization or *Verfremdungsettekt*, this twentieth-century German playwright and director's artistic technique of forcing audiences to see things in unfamiliar or strange ways in order to enhance both a perception of the work and its potential role in the actual world in which his audiences live.¹¹ In this way Brecht was able to break through his audience's habitual vicarious participation in fictive theatrical productions and think about the relevance and the consequences of what they are seeing. In his interview with Rollins, González-Torres describes his understanding of Brecht's tactic:

. . . [A]s Hispanic artists we're supposed to be very crazy, . . . extremely colorful. We are supposed to 'feel,' not think. Brecht says to keep a distance to allow the viewer, the public, time to reflect and think. When you get out of the theater you should not have had a catharsis, you should have had a thinking experience. More than anything, break the pleasure of representation, the pleasure of the flawless narrative. This is not life, this is just a theater piece. I like that a lot: This is not life this is just an artwork. I want you, the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved, and informed.¹²

In this manner González-Torres underscores differences between art's traditional suspension of belief and the need to remain critically aware.

¹¹ Cf. Bertolt Brecht, *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting*, in BRECHT ON THEATRE 91-99 (John Willett ed. & trans., Hill and Wang 1964).

¹² Interview by Tim Rollins with Félix González-Torres, in New York City, N.Y. (Apr. 16 & June 12, 1993), in ROLLINS, *supra* note 1, at 5, 10-11 (1993).



Félix González-Torres
“Untitled”, 1991
Billboard

Dimensions vary with installation

Installation view: Félix González-Torres: “Untitled”. Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ. 21 Oct. – 16 Dec. 2013.

Photographer: James Ewing

© The Félix González-Torres Foundation

Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

One of González-Torres's most reproduced works is his 1991 billboard picturing an empty bed with two empty pillows still marked by the depressions of the two people who had slept there. Presented without any commentary about whose bed is represented, although we now know it was the one the artist shared with his partner, the billboard evidences the Brechtian type of distanciation González-Torres admired. In this work, an intimate subject is placed in a number of highly public commercial billboard sites, thereby breaking down traditional boundaries separating the two. This piece follows the genre of billboard art inaugurated in the mid-'60s, even as it contravenes this tradition with its deeply personal subject. Instead of advertising, it reveals a personal setting ubiquitous enough to be recognized and understood by the great number of people seeing it. In place of an immediate and easily assimilated message, it poses uneasy questions concerning the function of this private domestic scene in a venue usually reserved for selling products and services.

My brief, peripatetic look at several of Félix González-Torres's particularly important pieces and series, including his stacks, spills, puzzles, and also one of his billboards, is intended to suggest how his work enriches our overall understanding of art and its epistemic possibilities by playing on differences between the public and the private, the customary and the unexpected, art's materiality and immateriality, the visual and the

conceptual, and the breakdown and reestablishment of different boundaries between artists and collectors. González-Torres's work represents his ongoing development, as well as his continued questions about art's status, its way of functioning, and the legal ramifications of the art that he and Andrea Rosen developed in their efforts to protect it, while ensuring collectors and others future opportunities to collaborate with it.



Félix González-Torres
"Untitled" (Album), 1992
 C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag
 $7 \frac{1}{2} \times 9 \frac{1}{2}$ in.
 Edition of 3, 1 AP

Installation view: Félix González-Torres. Serpentine Gallery, London. 1 June – 16 July 2000. Cur. Lisa G. Corrin. Catalogue. [With satellite venues: Camden Arts Centre, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, Royal College of Art, Victoria and Albert Museum, and Royal Geographical Society, London].

Photographer: Stephen White
 © The Félix González-Torres Foundation
 Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

In closing, let me point out that González-Torres created, in 1992, a work of art that eloquently demonstrates his willingness to encourage others to take responsibility for the work's ultimate meaning for themselves. It is a limited edition, empty, leather bound photo album that collectors were invited to fill with their own private photographs, so they could personalize and collaboratively complete the work of art that Gon-

zález-Torres so welcomingly planned. In doing so, they participated in establishing the position from which one can speak with authority—French critic Émile Benveniste's *énoncé*—the place where one stands, figuratively speaking, so that his or her voice can be heard and understood in terms of established cultural conventions. It is this type of socially ratified position that González-Torres has so admirably identified, resulting in the fact that his works, which might at first appear arbitrary or merely whimsical, assume the force of culturally sanctioned statements.

