

REMEMBER ME:
FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY

By

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To my parents: Carlos and Lilly Wurst

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This thesis will look at the work of the Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his attempts to reconstruct memories and experiences from his life through visual, oral, aural and haptic responses. Influenced by Minimalism's interest in finding meaning through the relational, the artwork resists giving viewers a specific interpretation and instead allows them to understand a work in their own way. The thesis explores the relation of Gonzalez-Torre's work to Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, in which of images one's life story are triggered by sensual cues. Collective memory and melancholia are at the heart of several of Gonzalez-Torres' works which deal with the AIDS epidemic and the loss of his partner, Ross Laycock. These works become less about an event itself and more about the emotions surrounding the event. Gonzalez-Torres also uses traveling as a theme to explore the past, present and future. Finally, the thesis takes into account that the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torre, which maintains its social relevancy, goes beyond specific experiences and deals with basic principles of human interaction.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

One day I want to make something from what I read in the paper and the next day I want to make a work about a memory I have eating a delicious meal with my boyfriend in Italy.

-Felix Gonzalez-Torres¹

Felix Gonzalez-Torres told this to the art critic Robert Nickas in 1991 after debuting *Every Week There Is Something Different*, his second show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York City. In this quote, Gonzalez-Torres evokes a specific memory, what many would consider a banal moment with his partner. By including the pleasure of taste and travel, he is able to tease out the essential components of a memory: sight, taste and smell. He then writes here about incorporating memory into his art practice. His works are not just “souvenirs” of his own past. By concentrating on aesthetic cues, he is able to make his works markers for the audience’s own past.

Recollection and meditation are at the heart of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ work. He does not try to give viewers a definite point of view or experience that relates to him but allows them to succumb to their individual experiences. My thesis will focus on the connections between memory construction and reconstruction, and how sensual experience, travel and meditation, become vehicles for these processes in Gonzalez-Torres’ work. The fact that many of his works establish gift-giving as one of its central functions, I will show how these “souvenirs” are not only vestiges of the artist’s memories but also allow for the construction of the visitor’s own memories. With the

¹ Robert Nickas, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World,” *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November-December 1991), pp. 86-89.

parenthetical titles that vaguely recall personal references to Gonzalez-Torres, the visual, oral, aural and tactile cues that are at the forefront of these works will also evoke involuntary memories when one engages with them. Several of his pieces include this participatory practice or engage in a silent dialogue with the viewer, where temporality and experience become much more important than interpretation.

Influenced by Minimalism and Postminimalism's focus on the relational, Gonzalez-Torres takes it a step further by having people interact with the work as a key component. His work addresses death, AIDS, homosexuality and capitalist structures that are part of the day-to-day. All of these issues become ephemeral traces from his experiences as a gay Cuban-American living with AIDS in New York City, losing his friends and lover to this and the way society treated these events.² Throughout his career, Gonzalez-Torres kept an interest in engaging with the audience by inviting them to interact and discuss his work amongst themselves; he did not have an interest in strongly influencing or manipulating the viewer's a point of view. Travel is a major theme of his pieces, which are vehicles or catalysts to one's exploration of past memories.³ They also offer moments for meditation. The transportation of memories is implemented in his candy piles and paper stacks since gallery visitors are allowed to take a piece home as mementos, memories rendered materially manifest. In that sense, his works spread across the globe. I will discuss how memory, temporality and meditation are prevalent themes in these works. This paper will be organized thematically as I unpack his eight-year career—1987 to 1995—and point out themes in

² David Deitcher, "How Do You Memorialize a Movement that Isn't Dead?" *Village Voice* (June 17, 1989), p. 93.

³ Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995), pp. 39-87.

key works and exhibitions: memory in candy piles, traveling in the paper handouts and temporality found in exhibitions show how they were prevalent themes throughout his career.

Organization

The rest of this chapter will focus on Gonzalez-Torres' life: leaving home as a young teenager, transitioning from communist Cuba to capitalist countries like Spain, Puerto Rico and finally the United States. I will draw attention to events that resonate most in his work: his education; his relationship with his partner, Ross Laycock; the AIDS epidemic; and, finally, the culture wars of the '80s and '90s. In Chapter Two, the paper will turn its attention to Minimalism's influence on his exhibition and philosophical practices in regards to theatricality and temporality. I will compare Robert Morris' exhibitions from 1964 and 1967 at the Leo Castelli gallery in New York, which first stressed the importance of temporality with their exhibition spaces constantly changing, and Gonzalez-Torres' 1991 show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery, *Every Week There Is Something Different*. I will show that Gonzalez-Torres piece *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* from 1991 from that same show also relates to temporality, memory and ecstasy. In Chapter Three, I will discuss theories of involuntary memory through the work of Marcel Proust and how sensory stimuli allows individuals to recall unannounced abstract memories. Marcel Proust's fictional writings, most famously *Remembrance of Things Past (À la recherche du temps perdu)*, refer to these involuntary associations of memory and the retracing of events through sensual stimuli.⁴ This chapter will look at works like *Untitled (Welcome)*, a stack of welcome mats that contain small trinkets in

⁴ The term "sensual" here refers more to experiences specifically devoted to the senses rather than a gratification through the senses.

between each mat that the visitor is allowed to look through as well as the multi-colored candy pile, *Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in L.A.). Gonzalez-Torres incorporates his own memories into tactile, edible and interactive pieces.

Chapter Four, in keeping with the theme of memory, I will analyze his frequent use of the color “Powder Blue” or “Baby Blue,” which is a symbol of childhood and also has been read by critics as connecting to queer sexual practices. I will focus on a group of works from 1989 to 1991 that contained the parenthetical subtitle “*LoverBoy(s)*,” which exemplify this theme. Not only does blue connect queer sexual practices with childhood but also certain blue pieces can represent the collective memories of the gay community during the AIDS crises.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I will focus on traveling as a major theme for some of Gonzalez-Torres’ pieces and exhibitions. Travel is not only something we do in the physical realm but also something we convey in the transportation of ideas. Spiritual transcendence is also a kind of travel. As his career progressed, Gonzalez-Torres worked through this theme from the past to the present and, finally, his future. Toward the end of his life, his works became less concerned with social issues. Instead, through images of open skies and flying birds, his later works call for moments of contemplation and meditation. This is seen in his last traveling exhibition, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Traveling*, which exhibited bird and sky images on large billboards throughout Los Angeles. It is evident that toward the end of his career, knowing that death was imminent, his work evolved from contemplation of the past to acceptance and meditation of his future. He invited others to understand this experience in their own lives.

Biography, Education and Career

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Cuba in 1957. In 1971, during his early teens, he and his sister Gloria were sent to Spain, as living in Cuba became increasingly difficult for his family. The two stayed only a few years in Madrid and eventually moved to Puerto Rico, where they lived until Felix was in his early twenties. After graduating from Colegio San Jorge and attending the Universidad de Puerto Rico, Gonzalez-Torres moved to New York to pursue a fine arts education and begin his career as a conceptual artist. Due to traveling restrictions that prohibited Cuban-Americans from traveling to Cuba, it would not be until 1979 when the ban was lifted that he returned to Cuba to visit his parents.⁵ In 1983, while living in New York City, he received his Bachelors of Fine Arts from the Pratt Institute. His style would develop throughout the course of his education, being influenced by both Minimalism and Postminimalism, and well into his career as he continued to educate himself in theory that would become the questions he would arise in his work.

Gonzalez-Torres attended the Whitney's eight-month Independent Study Program twice, once in 1981 and again in 1983. The program "provides a setting within which students pursuing art practice, curatorial work, art historical scholarship, and critical writing engage in ongoing discussions and debates that examine the historical, social, and intellectual conditions of artistic production."⁶ During this program he engaged deeply with readings in social and cultural theory, including works by Louis Althusser,

⁵ Roque Ruiz, "Chronology Cuba Travel Restrictions," *The Miami Herald*, February 25, 2011, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2009/04/10/994427/cuba-travel-restrictions.html>.

⁶ This quote is how the Whitney currently describes their current program. Whitney Museum of American Art, accessed January 19, 2011, <http://whitney.org/Research/ISP>.

Roland Barthes, post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon and many others. In 1996, Gonzalez-Torres said in an interview:

Without reading [these theorists], perhaps I wouldn't have been able to make certain pieces, to arrive at certain positions...These ideas moved me to a place of pleasure through knowledge and some understanding of the way reality is constructed, of the way the self is formed in culture, of the way language sets traps, and of the cracks in the master narrative – those cracks where power can be exercised.⁷

After the Whitney Program, he received his MFA from the International Center of Photography and New York University. His education allowed him to explore photography, means of reproduction and alternatives to the capitalist systems of the art market, which he would later incorporate in his art practices. The two other major influences in his life were the culture wars in the late '80s and early '90s and his eight-year relationship with Ross Laycock.

During Gonzalez-Torres' career, the art world in the United States came under intense scrutiny. What has been marked as the culture wars referred to the criticism that the art world received by the conservative right in the 1980s. Many conservatives during the Reagan era were trying to block government funding for the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) because they believed the NEA was funding what they called "inappropriate" art.⁸ Much of the art deemed inappropriate referenced the AIDS epidemic, (homo)sexuality, racism and non-mainstream religious beliefs. The NEA faced strict surveillance after it gave grants to Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. Politicians like North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms sought to close the NEA

⁷ Tim Rollins, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Interview," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, (Göttingen: Steidl/daing Publishers, 2006), pp. 68-69.

⁸ Philip Yenawine, *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. by Phillip Yenawine (New York: NYU Press, 1999), p. 9.

altogether. Though unsuccessful, he managed to cut \$45,000 from the budget in 1989.⁹ During many interviews and talks, Gonzalez-Torres pushed Americans to occupy their time with issues other than government-funded art. “Why worry about \$500 billion losses in the savings-and-loan industry when \$10,000 was given to Mapplethorpe? Because the threat to the American family, the ‘real threat’...is a photograph of two men sucking each other’s dicks.”¹⁰

Another event that proved significant to his work at this time was the 1986 U.S. Supreme Court case *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which deemed private homosexual acts, such as oral and anal sex practiced by two consenting adults, not protected under the Constitution.¹¹ A work like *Untitled* from 1991 (figure 1), which was exhibited by the Museum of Modern Art in 1992 criticizes the government’s intrusion on the private space of the bedroom. The black and white image of an unmade bed with the imprint of two people on the pillows was reproduced twenty-four times in publically displayed billboards all along Manhattan and the adjacent four boroughs. Written with the description of the piece for *Projects 34*, was a mention of his partner’s death as well as and overview of *Bowers v. Hardwick*.¹² The court decision became a public intrusion into his private space so he in turn he intruded the public sphere with his private image.

⁹ The specific works and exhibitions in question were Robert Mapplethorpe’s show, *The Perfect Moment*, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. that included some photographs that depicted homosexual S&M act. The show was partially funded by the NEA for installation costs. A \$15,000 fellowship from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art was given to Andre Serrano and funded the making of *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine.

¹⁰ Robert Nickas, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion,” *Art Press* no. 198 (January 1995), p. 27.

¹¹ “Chronology,” *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. by Phillip Yenawine, pp. 309-315.

¹² Exhibition information from Carlos Basualdo’s article “Common Properties,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, p. 190.

Both the culture wars and *Bower's v. Hardwick* are events that affected his personal life as well as his artistic practice.

Gonzalez-Torres met Ross Laycock in 1983 at Boybar, a typical New York City gay establishment. They lived in separate cities for many years during the course of the relationship; Gonzalez-Torres in New York City and Laycock in Toronto. Traveling across borders became a necessity in the development of their relationship. Eventually in 1990, they moved to Los Angeles, where Gonzalez-Torres becomes a professor at the California Institute of the Arts. He taught two courses, *AIDS and Its Representation* and *Social Landscapes*. Laycock was living with AIDS by the time they moved to Los Angeles; he eventually died in January 1991. Gonzalez-Torres describes his partner as being like a “horse...[with a] beautiful, incredible body, [an] entity of perfection [that] just...disappear[ed] right in front of [my] eyes.”¹³ At Ross' request, Gonzalez-Torres sent out a hundred yellow envelopes with his ashes. The body becomes a theme he works with time and time again, especially the abstracted and divided body that goes from a large mass to nothing.

The years after his partner's death, Gonzalez-Torres moved back to New York and continued to dedicate his work to him. After he watched Laycock die, Gonzalez-Torres also had to watch as many friends slowly disappear. Shows like *Every Week There Is Something Different* and *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby* revolved around the ephemerality of life and how quickly things can change.¹⁴ The artist died of AIDS in January 1996, which was a few months after his mid-career retrospective at the Guggenheim, his traveling exhibition and five years after his partner's death. He was

¹³ Ross Bleckner, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” p. 47.

¹⁴ “Exhibition History,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, pp. 381-392.

thirty-eight.¹⁵ From 1991 until his death, he had twenty international solo shows and seventy-seven international group shows.¹⁶ That number of exhibitions has since doubled as his art still remains culturally relevant and has the potential for shifting meanings.

In the next chapter, I will first explore Gonzalez-Torres' Minimalist influences and see how they reflect his interest in temporality and theatricality. Critics have often overlooked Minimalism's Influence in the artist's concepts of manipulating time and space. I believe that changes in the meaning of art occurring in the 1960s and '70s strongly influence Gonzalez-Torres' art and exhibition practices.

¹⁵ "Chronology," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, pp. 361-376.

¹⁶ "Exhibition History," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, pp. 381-392.

CHAPTER 2 QUEERING MINIMALISM, THEATRICALITY AND TEMPORALITY

Minimalist sculptures were never really primary structures; they were structures that were embedded with a multiplicity of meanings. Every time a viewer comes into a room these objects become something else.

-Felix Gonzalez-Torres¹⁷

Gonzalez-Torres gives this view of Minimalism to the artist Tim Rollins in 1993. “Primary Structures” is one of the many contemporary labels given to Minimalism in the late 1960s.¹⁸ In 1966, the name was part of the title for the Jewish Museum of New York’s show, *Primary Structures: Young American and British Sculptors*. Minimalists like Donald Judd and Robert Morris exhibited with British “primary” sculptors including Anthony Caro and Phillip King.¹⁹ The name and the show suggest that these works are the result of stripping down objects to their essential form. Judd rejects the use of this word in his exhibition statement because it alludes to self-contained reductive structures with no relation to their surroundings. He does not believe his work to be “reductive,” “primary,” or “minimal.”²⁰ A new way of looking at art develops with his and Morris’ writings; art that defies illusionism and functions through relationships with space, light and the viewer’s field of vision. In “Art and Objecthood,” the art critic Michael Fried assesses this movement as theatrical and “a new genre of theater,” because the beholder stands in relation as subject to, and keeps a distance from, the passive object.

¹⁷ Tim Rollins, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Interview,” p. 74.

¹⁸ Kynaston McShine, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors* (Jewish Museum: New York, 1966).

¹⁹ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 13.

²⁰ Donald Judd, “Statements,” in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* ed. by Donald Judd (Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 190.

This distance is similar to theater and negates the instantaneousness of Modern art.²¹ What Fried finds to be negative becomes positive in the eyes of post-modernists: especially conceptual artists and performance artists, who explore the notions of theatricality and temporal relationships with their art. The relationship that Gonzalez-Torres has with Minimalism is not one focused on just the reduction of objects to primary structures but one that emphasizes the way these objects have a relationship with the viewer. The subject/object relationship that Minimalism establishes is with a body in space and time. The physical body then becomes the subject in the emergence of feminist/queer theory in art. Gonzalez-Torres says in the same interview with Rollins, “after twenty years of feminist discourse and feminist theory we have come to realize that ‘just looking’ is not just looking but that looking is invested with identity.”²²

In this chapter, I will look at the development of the subject/object relationship that began with Minimalism through the writings and art practices of Judd and Morris. These ideas are questioned and reexamined by critics and artists alike. Relationality becomes a critical focal point for the next generation of artists. As the queer scholar, José Esteban Muñoz points out in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, desire also becomes an important part in the evolution theatricality and temporality for the understanding of queer utopianism. This is seen in the work of Gonzalez-Torres. In *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* from 1991, the artist incorporates Minimalism’s formal aesthetic and the temporality of performance to address queer notions of desire,

²¹ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 155, 167.

²² Tim Rollins, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Interview,” p. 74.

ecstasy and utopianism. The dancer's performance incorporates Fried's summation of theatricality with Muñoz' queer utopianism.

In his exhibition statement for *Primary Structures*, Judd does not believe that his works, nor those of other artists in the exhibition, should be called "Primary Structures." He views this label, along with "minimal" and "ABC" to be too reductive.²³ The artist states, "New work is just as complex and developed as old work. Its color and structure and its quality aren't more simple than before; the work isn't narrow or somehow meaningful only as form."²⁴ For Judd, meaning in his work was not just found in its formal qualities but extended itself outside the physical limits of each piece. In his seminal article "Specific Objects" from 1965, the artist describes his pieces as being neither sculpture nor painting but three-dimensional works or "specific objects." He discusses the limits to painting being its dependence on illusionism bearing little if no relation to its actual shape. He proposes that because of this new three-dimensional art that the definition of art needs to be expanded.

A work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be...anything in three dimensions can be any shape, regular or irregular, and can have any relation to the wall, floor, ceiling, room, rooms or exterior or none at all...A work needs only be interesting.²⁵

Judd's writings open up a more complex way of explaining this new movement that includes himself, Frank Stella, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris and others. *Artforum* later published a set of articles by Morris that explains his take on present-day sculpture.

²³ Donald Judd, "Statements," p. 190.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* ed. by Donald Judd, p.184. Originally published in *Arts Yearbook 8* (1965).

“Notes on Sculpture” parts one through three were written by Morris and published by *Artforum* from February 1966 through June 1967. One key difference between him and Judd is that Morris still retains the word “sculpture.” He points out that between the aim of Minimalism and that of late Modernism; Minimalism attempts to resolve the issue of achieving total autonomy and establishing a relationship with literal space. Minimalism is able to do this by creating works that are large enough that the viewer establishes a public relationship with it and avoids intimacy. Ways to avoid intimacy, which pulls the viewer in and out of the space, is through simplified forms like Tony Smith’s *Die* which are deplete of rich surfaces and intense color.²⁶ When these elements are in order, Morris describes the emergence of a relationship between the object and the subject: “The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer’s field of vision.”²⁷ The art critic Michael Fried uses this statement in his critique of Minimalism, “Art and Objecthood”

Published in 1967 for *Artforum*, “Art and Objecthood” took a different look at Minimalism and its impact on art. Fried points out differences between high Modernism and what he calls “literalist” works. One of the main characteristics that Fried uses to differentiate Literalists from High Modernists is “objecthood.” In his opinion, literal works focus on their physical presence or objecthood as oppose to painting and sculpture that try to defeat or suspend it.²⁸ He takes the idea of objecthood a step further by proclaiming that literalist art is a “new genre of theater.” He explains, “[Literalist art] is

²⁶ Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” In *Continuous Projects Altered Daily: The Writing of Robert Morris* ed. by Robert Morris (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 14-16. Originally published in *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (October 1966), pp. 20-23.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.15.

²⁸ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” pp.152-153.

concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters [it]...a theatrical effect or quality – a kind of stage presence.”²⁹ Stage presence stated here implies the way literalist work demands the attention of the viewer. The work does not just demand the viewer’s attention but needs it. The work is incomplete without the beholder, “once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone...it refuses to stop confronting him, distancing him, isolating him.”³⁰ This is essentially why minimalist work is theatrical because of its reliance on the viewer. Fried’s article is written at the moment when contemporary art breaks away from the notion of autonomy, as a new generation of artists begins to embrace the work and writings of the Judd and Morris.

Two years after Fried’s essay, post-minimal practices do away with easel painting and autonomous sculpture almost entirely to focus on the situational and temporal aspects of art making. Morris brings up this shift in “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4” which discusses the evolution of art since Minimalism. Published in 1969, the artist addresses recent trends in sculpture including the addition of “change, contingency and indeterminacy” which becomes the basis of process art.³¹ Works are no longer rigid structures but always in flux. This temporal unfolding becomes another component in the subject/object relationship. Artists in this post-minimal practice include Robert Smithson, Rafael Ferrer and Morris himself.

²⁹ Ibid, p.155.

³⁰ Ibid, pp.163-164.

³¹ Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects,” in *Continuous Projects Altered Daily: The Writing of Robert Morris* ed. by Robert Morris, 67. Originally published in *Artforum* (April 1969).

Morris not only writes about this post-minimal shift in art but also one of its originators. An early example of his incorporation of theatricality is found in 1961 (figure 2). This “performance piece” (no title) included a covered stage; once the curtains were parted, there was nothing but an eight-foot-high column standing straight up. The column eventually falls on its side, and a few minutes later the curtain closes. The use of the same kind of grey column exhibited in other gallery shows implies a theatrical component to his later work. “His work did not withdraw themselves into an aesthetic space...instead, [they] were clearly dependent upon a situation in which the beholder of the works was actually their audience.”³²

Leo Castelli galleries held two exhibitions of Morris' work in 1967 and 1969. The two shows share a basic premise; the artist changes the layout throughout the weeks of the exhibitions. During the first show (figure 3), Morris rearranges eight sectional fiberglass sculptures to make different closed and open shapes. The gallery visitors encounter the same pieces, but the experience would differ depending on the day they visited.³³ The viewer constructs meaning during a specific time and place; the artist imposes no rigid autonomous structure.³⁴ The second show (figure 4), in 1969, features *Untitled* (Scatter Piece), which consists of 200 different pieces constructed from various materials (zinc, copper, brass, steel, aluminum, lead and felt). Morris places the sections across the gallery floor; the artist continually updates them for duration of the show.³⁵ Coin flips and numbers picked from a New York City phonebook determined the

³² Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 201-203.

³³ *Robert Morris* (April 20 – May 11, 1968) at 4 E 77th St.

³⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, p. 267.

³⁵ *Robert Morris: Continuous Project Altered Daily* (March 1 – 22, 1969) at Castelli Warehouse.

placement of each piece. These calculations also determined the length and thickness of each cut.³⁶ The process turned into another performance as visitors saw the artist arrange each piece during the three-week show. The experience and interaction with the work and the space become important.

The focus on relationality continued in post-minimalism but as Hal Foster notes in 1996, during the 70s and 80s there arose another critique of Minimalism, not in opposition to autonomous art, but a reexamination of the subject/object relationship. Foster explains, “as minimalism turned from the objective orientation of formalism to the subjective orientation of phenomenology, it tended to position artist and viewer alike not only as historically innocent but as sexually indifferent.”³⁷ From this began the development of Body, Performance and Installation art centered on sexual difference and questions of authority.³⁸ Artist and critics in the decades to come would take Minimalism’s ideas of relationality to examine the contingencies found in sex and gender relations. These interpretations emerged in the late twentieth century out of Feminist readings of art and the advent of LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender) studies. From this perspective, José Esteban Muñoz writes an account of the performance, conceptual and visual art world in New York City during the last four decades of the twentieth century.

³⁶ Information from Press Release for a February-May 2010 exhibit at Leo Castelli found in the Leo Castelli website, accessed January 19, 2011.
http://www.castelligallery.com/press_releases/RM_ScatterPiece_Feb10_email.html.

³⁷ Hal Foster, “Crux of Minimalism,” *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press: 1996), p. 59.

³⁸ Hal Foster, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames& Hudson, 2004), pp. 570-574.

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz argues that a queer interpretation can be exercised in looking at many post-minimal works. Performance, conceptual and visual art of the last forty years refuse to accept reality's structured hierarchies, e.g., heteronormativity, socioeconomic structures and linear temporality, or as he calls it "straight time."³⁹ This queer utopianism is found in the poems of Frank O'Hara, choreography of Freddy Herko, and the nondiscriminatory environments found in public toilets, dancehalls and punk rock stages. In their ability to breakdown non-hierarchical relationality, all of these moments open up the possibility of a queer futurity.⁴⁰ Muñoz points to the work of Gonzalez-Torres' art as an example of queer utopianism. Gonzalez-Torres takes the language of Minimalism and the post-modern/queer theory of the past four decades to make work that establishes a gendered relationship with the viewer, addressing personal experience in order to open up what Muñoz calls a potentiality of "queer world-making."⁴¹

To begin we will look at one of Gonzalez-Torres' earlier exhibitions in New York. Fascinated by the issues that Minimalism confronted, the artist incorporates them it into his work. *Every Week There Is Something Different* show at Andrea Rosen in 1991 follows similar notions of temporality, theatricality and experience to Morris' shows at Leo Castelli in the '60s.⁴² The show does exactly what it promised: every week the artist takes down certain works and changes the layout. Some pieces he adds while others

³⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University, 2009), p. 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 37.

⁴² *Every Week There is Something Different*. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. May 2 – June 1 1991. Andrea Rosen website, accessed January 19, 2011. <http://www.andrearosengallery.com/artists/felix-gonzalez-torres>.

are removed. This causes the works to take on different meanings when placed against other objects.

In week three of the show, Gonzalez-Torres included *Untitled* (Go-Go Dancing Platform) (figure 5). This piece consists of a sky-blue box placed in the center of the gallery. The top of the box is lined with lights. Unbeknownst to visitors, for a few minutes each day, a man with a perfectly toned body clad only in sneakers, a Walkman and a silver lamée swimsuit dances on top of the lit platform. When the song is over, the man steps off and leaves the gallery. It is clear that Gonzalez-Torres references several historical and personal events in this piece like the Minimalist look of the stage and to the place he met his partner, Boy Bar. The stage's theatrical presence acknowledges the subject/object relationship. The relationship is one of desire, in many ways sexual desire, not previously addressed in Minimalism between viewer and "object." Desire is part of Muñoz' queer futurity, it takes the viewer out of the present by the anticipation of the future. Fried's polemical ideas of theatricality and presentness unite as the relationship with the work takes oneself out of reality through the anticipatory realm of desire or ecstasy while still retaining a sense of theatricality and performance.

Desire is presented in two moments of the work. One, the queer potentialities are found in the empty stage; the longing for the performance which does not occur in the present but always in anticipation, always on the horizon.⁴³ It then also resides in the dancer's appearance. When he is present however, he manages to take himself out of time through his performance. In his movements, the dancer gives us brief moments of

⁴³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 99.

ecstasy; a state of self-consciousness and obliviousness when one removes oneself from what Muñoz calls “straight time.”⁴⁴

One reason why Gonzalez-Torres would take on this process could be read in Simon Watney’s experience of *Every Week There is Something Different*. In his article “In Purgatory: The Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” he describes the placement of *Untitled* (Go-Go Dancing Platform) in the show. According to Watney, it was juxtaposed with another work, *Untitled* (Natural History) from 1990. This piece consisted of photographs of the words used to describe Theodore Roosevelt in front of the Museum of Natural History in New York. The photographs, which read, “SOLDIER,” “HUMANITARIAN,” and “EXPLORER,” among others— were hung in previous weeks. But during the third week, only those three photographs remained in the room with the platform. Now, instead of the photographs referencing Roosevelt, they gestured toward the dancer. With the juxtaposition of both pieces, Watney describes the dancer as “...a soldier...manning the post, in a war zone of homophobia...a humanitarian...in relation to the [AIDS] epidemic...an explorer who has dared to leave home, to set out against all the dreadful pressures of homophobic education....”⁴⁵ For Watney, who wrote about the AIDS epidemic during Gonzalez-Torres’ career, the work resonates a utopian moment at a hopeless time. Its brief inclusion in the show as well as the unannounced appearance of the dancer once a day presents the work in a state of constantly vanishing, making the stage an ephemeral trace of the performance. This is only one instance how the artist manages to suspend time. In the following chapter, I will show

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 81.

⁴⁵ Simone Watney, “In Purgatory: The Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *Parkett* no. 39 (March 1994), pp. 38-44.

another way how one can step out of time during memory reconstruction triggered by haptic responses.

CHAPTER 3 SOUVENIRS AND SWEETS

No sooner had the warm liquid, and crumbs [of the madeleine] with it, touched my palate...An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin...the visual memory, which being linked to that taste, has tried to follow it into my conscious mind.

Marcel Proust⁴⁶

Gonzalez-Torres has...crafted friezelike text “portraits” of various friends and collectors. Cross-referencing the public events of our epoch with Pop/Proustian “madeleines” that bring back not just the facts but the feel of times past, he has invented a graphic stanza form composed of raw but carefully selected data.

Robert Storr⁴⁷

The first quote comes from the novel *Remembrance of Things Past* by famed 20th century French author Marcel Proust. His writing captures the brief and fleeting moments of involuntary recollection caused by a somatic encounter, from the taste of the *petite madeleine* to the sensation of stumbling over a cobblestone. Proust’s work is known to stop the progress of the story line and suspend time with prolonged and eloquently written descriptions of people, places and various memories.⁴⁸

The second quote comes from the art critic Robert Storr. Storr is describing Gonzalez-Torres’ series of “text portraits” that he saw during the artist’s retrospective at New York’s Guggenheim Museum in 1995. These portraits are composed of vaguely illustrated events labeled with a year, here painted frieze-like along the walls of the

⁴⁶ Marcel Proust, Frederick Augustus Blossom, Joseph Wood Krutch, and C. K. Scott Moncrieff, *Remembrance of Things Past*, (New York: Random House, 1934), pp. 34-35.

⁴⁷ Robert Storr, “Setting Traps for the Mind and Heart,” *Art In America* (January 1996), p. 74.

⁴⁸ José Ortega Y Gasset and Irving Singer, “Time, Distance, and Form in Proust,” *The Hudson Review* 11, no. 4 (Winter, 1958-1959), p. 507.

museum. They portray public events in history along with the personal events of the sitter. Gonzalez-Torres would meet with the “sitter” and ask questions about their life. In the end, the personal events chosen would resonate with the individual. Storr describes these vignettes as “Proustian” and deeply personal. What I take him to mean by Proustian is their ability to invoke memories to those who come in contact with the work. A date like “Red Canoe 1987” from the artist’s self-portrait is personal but that does not mean that the date would not summon another memory to someone else. I believe that Gonzalez-Torres does this not only in his “portraits” but also engages with this theme in other work.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres not only uses visual cues to evoke memories from the artist but other senses as well. He branches out of the visual arts, which has certain limits to sensual experience, and includes touch and taste in order for the visitors to project their own memories onto the pieces. While much of his work functions as snapshots from his own life, the personal experiences from the public are as important to him. “Without the viewer, without a public, this work has no meaning...this work is about an interacting with the public, or a large collaboration.”⁴⁹ In these pieces, the term “souvenir” stands for both a keepsake and an object to extract memories.

Se souvenir is a French term which means “to remember,” it comes from the Latin word *subvenire*: sub (under) and *venire* (to come). Souvenirs are just that: objects that are used to recall memories from one’s subconscious. These objects can be trinkets, or relics, from past trips or experiences. They cannot only store past experiences but can

⁴⁹ Gonzalez-Torres was talking about *Untitled* (Passport #1) from 1991, but the idea of the interaction between the audience and the piece is valid for most of his work. Quote from Obrist, Hans Ulrich, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” In *Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews Volume 1* ed. by Thomas Boutoux (Milan: Charta, 308), p. 2003.

allow people to extract memories from them.⁵⁰ I will focus on three works from 1991 through 1992, *Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), *Untitled* (Welcome) and the puzzle piece *Untitled*, which incorporate haptic interactions that not only allow the audience to explore the vestiges of Gonzalez-Torres' feelings of past memories but also become souvenirs for the audience to explore and place their own personal memories.

Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (figure 6) weighs 175 pounds and is one of Gonzalez-Torres' first candy piles. First exhibited at the Lühring Augustine Hetzler Gallery in 1991, the piece consists of individually cellophane-wrapped hard candy, *Fruit Flashers* that came in assorted flavors (Grape, Lemon, Lime, Pineapple, and Cherry) and assorted colors (Blue, Green, Pink, Red, Yellow and White).⁵¹ The parenthetical subtitle references the time that Gonzalez-Torres spent living with Laycock in Los Angeles. Its ideal weight was the same as his partner's weight: "If I do a portrait of someone, I use their weight."⁵² The use of multi-colored wrapped candies is consistent with other "Ross" portraits by Gonzalez-Torres; it's rainbow-like suggests Laycock's homosexuality, not to mention "fruit" is also considered a slang term for a gay man.⁵³ Gonzalez-Torres often represents the body in abstracted ways; either in candy piles, "text portraits," graphs or puzzles. These abstractions allow physical objects to bond with the abstracted memories associated with them. The memory from this piece in particular comes from the last year Ross was alive and his weight was slowly dissipating. The artist left instructions stating that the intention of the piece was to give

⁵⁰ *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 11th ed.* (Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, 1998), p. 1194.

⁵¹ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 147.

⁵² Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," p. 29.

⁵³ *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, p. 504.

the candies from the pile away to visitors of the gallery.⁵⁴ The piece works like a relic; it stands in for a person no longer alive that becomes divided and spread among several people and carries the power of memory and experience with it.⁵⁵ Going back to Proust's experience with the tea and *petite madeleine*, the taste was able to evoke specific memories from his past that included minute details.

The connection between Proust's prose and Gonzalez-Torres' practices is their focuses on *sense*-ations, the ability for taste to recall experiences. There must be a reason why Gonzalez-Torres chose these specific multi-colored, fruit-favored hard candies to represent someone he cared for deeply and why countless reproductions have to follow certain specifications. I believe that *Fruit Flashers* are connected with a memory of Laycock, one during the last years of his life. It is not just that idea of the candy but the appearance, feel and taste of them are connected too. This process can be recreated inside the gallery with *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*. The shimmering effect of the multi-colored cellophane is meant to entice to visitor. By first using visual cues, followed by other senses, recollection begins to take shape. The fact that it just looks like candy can immediately evoke abstract or generalized associations. This vague memory would be further intensified by the act of reaching into the pile and touching the crinkly cellophane that combine both tactile and aural cues until finally the taste of the sugary substance within the wrapper and eventual dissolve into the palate allows all aesthetic cues to stimulate the recollection of a deeply personal memory to

⁵⁴ Each piece taken freely by the visitor did not equate ownership nor the loss of the complete work of art. The piece came with a certificate of ownership. Gonzalez-Torres specified in his contracts that the owner of the piece, or the institution that housed it, needed to replenish the piles thus restoring it back it its ideal weight. The information was provided by Miwon Kwon's article, "The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truth," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* ed. Julie Ault, p. 297.

⁵⁵ "Cult of Relics," in *The Dictionary of Art Volume 8* ed. Jane Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 259.

the gallery visitor. This feeling can leave someone as quickly and easily as it arrived, slowly dissolving in the back of his or her mind. As Proust wrote, “now that I feel nothing, it has stopped, has perhaps gone down again into its darkness, from which who can say whether it will ever rise?”⁵⁶

This work recalls both the innocent pleasure of childhood and the body of his lover, the sweets reconstructing the now absent body. Gonzalez-Torres talks about the oral pleasure that comes from putting a piece of candy in your mouth: “I’m giving you a sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and suck on [Ross’] body. And in this way becomes part of so many other people’s bodies...that is very sexy.”⁵⁷ Visitors are not only receiving enjoyment by reflecting their childhood but also pleasure from the candy in their mouths. This body is the lover of the artist, dissolved and reconstituted into a pile of sweets, a trace of the artist’s memory. “I wanted to make an artwork that could disappear, that never existed,” Gonzalez-Torres told *Art Press*.⁵⁸ Since a trace is only a vestige or memory of something completely gone: the portrait of Ross is never really there. *Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) is a memory, a memory triggered by the sight, touch and taste of a candy pile. He continues with this series of portraits, including some of his father. Gonzalez-Torres’s father had died from throat cancer three weeks after Laycock’s death. With the incorporation of death, oral gratification and sexuality, Gonzalez-Torres utilizes candy’s ability to open up new experiences when engaging in his work and its power becomes fleeting, like an orgasm, it might also be no coincidence that the French name for orgasm is *le petite mort*, or “little death.”

⁵⁶ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, pp. 149-150.

⁵⁸ Robert Storr, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion,” p. 32.

The father's portrait, *Untitled* (Throat) (figure 7), placed his father's handkerchief on the floor with a small pile of cough drops on top. This portrait incorporates Gonzalez-Torres' associations of Luden's Lemon Honey Cough Drops and how they were "the only type of candy that helped [his father] feel any better."⁵⁹ One can clearly see that in this portrait, a particular brand of cough drop and a personal handkerchief are meant to stand in for a person at a specific moment in time even if the title does not suggest such a reading. I believe that both portraits represent memories and associations suspended in a certain time and place.

This next work allows the visitor to literally explore snapshots and vestiges of the artist's life. Placed against the wall of the Andrea Rosen Gallery during Gonzalez-Torres' show *Every Week There is Something Different* were four stacks of "welcome" mats.⁶⁰ Each stack gets larger the closer they are to the wall. At first glance, it seems like a humorous take on Minimalist sculpture and Duchamp's ready-mades. Gonzalez-Torres discusses his appreciation of Minimalism and the reason he decided to use welcome mats: "I've always wanted to work with rubber...how it smells, how it feels. But how could I at this point in history? It had to have a certain irony, a certain edge."⁶¹ The "edge" would be the inclusion of biographical information. These mats are not free to take like the paper stacks from his inaugural show at Andrea Rosen Gallery. Initially, one does not know what to do besides inspect very closely to see whether they are actual welcome mats. He bought them at the local hardware store near his apartment.

⁵⁹ Quote by Jon Ippolito in Sylvia Hochfeld's "Sticks and Sontes and Lemon Drop," *ARTnews* (September 2002), p. 118.

⁶⁰ Julie Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 38.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 39.

If a person dares to touch them and lift up to see what is in between, they would be pleasantly surprised. Between each mat are small trinkets and objects the artist placed during the installation (figure 8). The objects vary from snapshots, pressed leaves, typed letters, soap, metal, matchboxes, etc. They are souvenirs of trips, people and moments in time. The work is a model of his life. The visitor is able to explore physically the several layers of welcome mats as they uncover more and more memories from the artist. “There’s a lot of meaning and freedom to be found there,” said the artist.⁶² The description of the piece does not explain what these trinkets mean. The artist does not try to give visitors an explanation but encourages them to ask questions like, “Where did this leaf come from?” and “Who is holding the teddy bear against the wall in this picture?” With the mats, Gonzalez-Torres is welcoming his audience to his memories. To dig around and wonder what these pieces meant to him and what they mean to them. For Gonzalez-Torres, these objects carry significant meanings; for the audience they can mean something completely different. The contact with the rubber mats engages the audience with the artist as he recounts his past through these objects. This dialogue is not given away freely; the explorer must feel, smell and look through each rubbery layer to conceive a history of the artist much like a direct and detailed physical engagement with someone. Many of the photographs included in this piece are reproduced countless times; one in particular, *Untitled* (Florence) (figure 9), was also used in his photographic puzzle series from the late 1980s (figure 10).

Photography in general is about the capture and suspension of moments in time with the use of light. Aside from a few quickly staged compositions, his collection of

⁶² Ibid.

personal photographs and publically exhibited images are mostly made up of candid moments in his life. These snapshots are hard to interpret: shadows, footsteps, obstructed faces, animals, buildings, clouds and water are just a few examples of what he photographed. Many were not given a proper title or description until they were reproduced as something besides a photo print. *Untitled* (Florence) depicts a human figure behind an incandescent curtain as the light from outside projects a shadow; not much else is visible besides a partial chair and lamp. The photograph, first dated in 1985, comes from Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock's trip to Florence that year.⁶³ The photograph is not a picture of Ross but of the light from outside that helps project his shadow onto the curtain. Like a sensation that at first only reminds you something vague, this photograph becomes an impression of an impression of a moment only partially captured, not entirely shown. This is also seen in his many photographs that focus primarily on footprints, either in snow or sand, that are only traces of distinct bodies photographed before they dissolve.

His candy piles, rubber mats and puzzles are three-dimensional snapshots of the artist's life, specific memories that he can recall with these works. Like memories that are just remnants of events and experiences, these pieces function only as the catalyst for remembrance. The inability to communicate these experiences fully to others is also characterized in their media, which allows the visitors themselves to recount their own experiences. The next chapter will discuss Gonzalez-Torres' works that incorporate

⁶³ Looking through FGT's Chronology provided by Julie Ault in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (2006), includes entries provided by the artist in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (1993). This allowed for my deduction of "Florence" to allude to Florence, Italy. An entry after he included for 1985 reads, "first trip to Europe, first summer with Ross."

“collective memory” in their use of color, more specifically his use of “sky blue” or “baby blue” and references to queer sexual practices.

CHAPTER 4 SKY BLUE, CHILDHOOD AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Taking a look at Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work over that last ten years of his life, one finds that his use of color is very limited. Mostly using black, white, red, gold and blue, he sticks with primary colors to strip the work down to its bare essentials. This chapter will focus on his use of sky blue, which appears in his work more than any other color. During Gonzalez-Torres' inaugural show at Andrea Rosen Gallery in 1990, as well as other shows in the early '90s, several critics have added their own brief interpretation of this hue. "[He] celebrates masculine identity, without glorifying a phallocentrism, and relies on an infantile, presexual state...." wrote Anthony Innacci in *Artforum* in 1991. "Pale blue represents infantile masculinity."⁶⁴ Steven Evans describes the blue as "a color of both romance and melancholy, love and memory.... [It is] also a color that symbolizes boy or boys...refer[s] to homosexual desire [in *Untitled* (Loverboys).]"⁶⁵ Finally, Peggy Cyphers wrote "Pale blue, white and black are the colors used in this show, perhaps indicative of a male sexual identity and masculine (blue for boys)...as well as the censorship of information to the innocent."⁶⁶ All these critics equate the color with his (homo)sexuality but it is important to ask if these comparisons are valid ones and if there are other ways into reading his use of blue. Childhood and sexuality often become tied together in all these critiques without an explanation of how they are connected.

⁶⁴ Anthony Innacci, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Massimo de Carlo," *Artforum* 30, no. 4 (December 1991), p. 112.

⁶⁵ Steven Evans, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Massimo de Carlo, Milan," *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November-December 1991), p. 160.

⁶⁶ Peggy Cyphers, "New York in Review," *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 8 (April 1990), p. 112.

It is important to take into account the time and place in which these reviews were written. What were the trends, the controversies of the day? Who were the artists producing work at this time, and how do they contribute to a collective memory in which Gonzalez-Torres is also a part? I will look at three different pieces all with the parenthetical name “Loverboy” or “Lover Boys” from the late 1980s and early 1990s to show how they connect with childhood, queer sexuality and collective memory.

The connection between childhood and homosexuality is not something new. Sigmund Freud explained homosexuality as a state of “arrested development,” in which a child does not fully grow into adulthood but remains “stuck” in a queer child-like state.⁶⁷ With the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars of the 1980s, more and more artists focused on homosexuality and its representation in society. Robert Mapplethorpe unapologetically photographed queer subcultures and nude children to the dismay of the mainstream and conservative American public. David Wojnarowicz’s used his art to reveal the silent anguish of growing up gay and then watching as AIDS took the lives of so many of his friends. Both artists had drawn attention to the sexuality of children; with Wojnarowicz, it meant recalling his own past in the future tense with *Untitled* (One day this kid...) from 1990. Many exhibitions also centered around art and AIDS along with several publications. A few examples of shows during the early ‘90s include *From Media to Metaphor: Art About AIDS* and *Drawing the Line Against AIDS* was an exhibition during the 45th Venice Biennial at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection to benefit American Foundation for AIDS Research. The *New Art Examiner*’s May 1991 issue published “Art, AIDS, & The New Altruism” by Kristen Endberg as their cover story about AIDS-focused exhibitions and the new AIDS fundraising culture.

⁶⁷ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 23.

At this time, the AIDS epidemic had reached a fever pitch; everyone, especially gay men, had become paranoid of coming in contact with bodily fluids. Groups like ACT UP/New York, formed in 1987 by people who sought government funding for AIDS research and also distributed information on prevention.⁶⁸ It was not until 1996 that new protease-blocking drugs would help combat AIDS among people who were HIV positive; unfortunately, Gonzalez-Torres would die six months before the drug was announced.⁶⁹ In the eighties, Gonzalez-Torres joined Group Material, a group of politically motivated artists that organized guerilla exhibitions and demonstrations to reclaim public space during the Reagan-Thatcher era; Group Material also worked on other social projects like AIDS awareness.⁷⁰ Gonzalez-Torres made “politically-driven” art during ACT UP’s most prolific years and presented an “ephemeral network of friendships and publics...” that epitomized New York in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s.⁷¹ This notion of collective memory can be seen in these groups. A series of three works done in the late 1980s and early 1990s that incorporate the color blue, not only illustrate the collective memory of gay men during this time but also references childhood and sexuality.

During week four of *Every Week There Is Something Different*, if someone were to walk towards the end of the exhibition at Andrea Rosen, they would end up in a small room with two windows. In this room, where one would see *Untitled (Welcome)* on the floor, they would also see windows covered with diaphanous powder blue curtains; this is one of the first renderings of *Untitled (Loverboy)* (figure 11). As stated in Chapter

⁶⁸ ACT UP website, accessed January 19, 2011. <http://www.actupny.org/>.

⁶⁹ “Chronology,” *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* ed. Julie Ault, p. 376.

⁷⁰ Hal Foster, *Art Since 1900*, pp. 605-611.

⁷¹ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 159.

Three, Gonzalez-Torres is known to take objects to represent specific memories; this curtain in particular could stand in for the same moment seen in *Untitled* (Florence), which depicts Ross behind a curtain. Of course very few people would make the connection unless they were both exhibited at the same time.

The curtain is allowed to flow freely with the window open, the sounds of the busy streets and gusts of wind enter and fill the room with movement, sounds and smells of the city. It is as if the curtain itself, activated by outside elements, becomes an ethereal presence in the gallery space, its movements standing in for something not tangible. Kathryn Bond Stockton has called this presence the “ghostly gay child.” Given the parenthetical subtitle “*Loverboy*” and its powder blue color, it is easy to make a connection with childhood masculinity and sexuality. What Stockton calls this “ghostly gay child” is the admittance of the grown homosexual’s queer past. “I was a gay child” is something that many adult gay and lesbians mention when looking back on childhood. Stockton considers this the backward birth of the gay child. With the emphasis on “was,” the child is now born, but also dead, in the present. Thus the curtains stand as this, now deceased, queer presence, a queer childhood revisited.⁷²

This is not the only queer way to see this work; considering the astounding number of AIDS-related deaths in New York City at the time, the piece could be a memorial to all those “*Loverboys*” who lost their lives through this sexually transmitted disease. One critic stated that the color “recall[s] the blue paper gowns worn during medical exam, or the paper place mats used to cover hospital meal trays.”⁷³ The

⁷² Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*. This is one of six different representations of the queer child. She uses literature and films to reinforce her ideas of children queered in the 20th century, not just sexually.

powder blue not only becomes a sign of queer childhood but the sterility of hospital visits. It is clear that this piece is an object that is infused with a collective feeling of melancholy. This melancholia is also reflected in Crimp's essay "Mourning and Militancy," in which he states that gay men during this time could not properly mourn due to the number of funerals they attended and the thought of their own impending deaths. "It is probably no exaggeration to say... that during the AIDS crisis there is an all but inevitable connection between the memories and hopes associated with our lost friends and the daily assaults on our consciousness...." Crimp writes.⁷⁴ There is a tension here that makes mourning impossible, the time used to reflect on lost loved ones is interrupted by the thoughts of one's own immanent death. Seeing people die, staying alive and preparing for the inevitable is wrapped up in Gonzalez-Torres' mental processes when creating work at this time.

As I briefly mentioned in Chapter Three with *Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), Gonzalez-Torres' candy piles balance aspects of mourning, childhood and sexuality. In *Untitled* (Lover Boys) (figure 12), these themes are addressed in a broader way to represent the collective memory of queer subcultures. Like *Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), *Untitled* (Lover Boys) from the same year also consists of candy spilled on the floor. The difference is that instead of the multi-colored hard candy pile whose ideal weight was one hundred and seventy-five pounds, the white and blue ribbon candy pile has an ideal weight of three hundred and fifty-five pounds, the combined weight of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock. While the piece also alludes to the breakdown of their bodies due to AIDS, the "double portrait" is a more affectionate and sensual piece; it

⁷³ Lynda Barkert, "New Humanism," *Chicago Reader* (May 23, 1990), p. 30.

⁷⁴ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October 51* (Winter 1989), p. 8.

deals with homosexual pairing and the fusion of bodies. According to interviews, Gonzalez-Torres never stated that he had AIDS or was HIV positive. It was not until his death that it became publicly known. Not only is it the combination of two lovers, now sharing a deadly disease that is causing both of them to disappear but also the union of several strange bodies through the act of consuming a symbol of childhood indulgence. Eating these pieces of candy causes both oral gratification and symbolic sexual unity. This sexual unity was acted by homosexuals in the past through venues for public sex, e.g., bathhouses, dark theaters and public restrooms.

With the inclusion of the parenthetical subtitle “*Lover Boys*,” queer sexual practices and public sex come into play that suggest, what Michael Warner names, a queer counterpublic space that is now lost.⁷⁵ Before the time of AIDS, these sexual practices took place in underground establishments and the dark corners of Central Park. Crimp describes “a culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tea rooms, movie houses, and baths...Sex was everywhere for us....”⁷⁶ The time of bacchanalian pleasure had seized and was replaced with disease, prophylactics and paranoia about bodily fluids. Like the communion wafers at a Catholic church, these candies develop intimacies that “bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to [traditional] couple form, to property, or to nation.”⁷⁷ With his candy piles, Gonzalez-Torres mirrors the effects of an unrestrained queer sexual community that results in the disappearance of its participants. The last *Untitled* (*Loverboy*) from 1991, whose medium and portability also

⁷⁵ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 199.

⁷⁶ Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” p. 11.

⁷⁷ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 199.

gives visitors the opportunity to use the sheets of paper as meditative tools for mourning.

A powder blue stack of paper sits quietly on the floor. As people walk through the gallery, the stack becomes smaller and smaller. By the end of the day, there could be nothing left. Many will see *Untitled* (Loverboy) (figure 13) as a gift from the artist to the viewer, but underneath this generosity is melancholia, as Gonzalez-Torres pointed out in 1995:

This work originated from my fear of losing everything. This work is about controlling my own fear. My work cannot be destroyed. I have already destroyed it from day one... This work cannot be destroyed the same way other things in my life have disappeared and have left me.⁷⁸

This work becomes cathartic for the artist; he put memories of a failed relationship into stacks and watches them disappear. Like the other “lover boys” piece mentioned above that deals with the collective loss gay community at that time, *Untitled* (Loverboy) stands for the loss of his partner. Not only does it represent Laycock but functions as a way to cope with that loss. “I had control over it and this is what has empowered me. But it is a very masochistic kind of power. I destroy the work before I make it.”⁷⁹ Universally, *Untitled* (Loverboy) represents all lost partners who died in their blue hospital gowns, frail and delicate like a single sheet of paper.⁸⁰ What happens to these meanings once the sheets of paper leave the gallery space and the artist has no control?

⁷⁸ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 122.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Other pieces also allude to medicine and hospitals like his beaded curtains, *Untitled* (Chemo) and *Untitled* (Blood), and his “bloodwork” series of framed graphs. Having his partner and both his parents going in and out of hospitals towards the end of their lives strongly influenced these works. FGT’s father died of throat cancer and his mother of leukemia in 1986.

Gonzalez-Torres uses the stacks as a form of release: “I want to ask [visitors] what they are going to do with it. At the same time, you have to let it go.”⁸¹ Monica Amor explains how “each sheet of paper which the spectator takes and recontextualizes according to his own desires and situation articulates new meanings which develop on the way between the museum or the gallery and his apartment, office, bedroom, bathroom etc.”⁸² Considering that *Untitled* (Loverboy) is a blank sheet and has little to no obvious context, memory can also stand in for meaning. When a person takes a sheet from *Untitled* (Loverboy), what they are getting is a blank powder blue sheet that they can do whatever they want with it. Draw it, fold it, frame it or throw it away, the artist does not tell you what to do. The blank sheet is there for the person to project his or her own memories onto it. Like a memory, the sheet of paper does not last; it is fragile, and its vividness fades over time.

In this chapter, I discussed three works that relate to the union of individual and collective memory, as well as mourning and childhood. The ghosts of the past are still among the living, and with Gonzalez-Torres, they reside in his art. The AIDS epidemic claimed many lives, and mourning was not an option when you feared for your own health. This sentiment is shown in these three “loverboys”; the curtain moves ethereally as the sights and sounds of the city enter the gallery space, the consumption of candy invites people to join a pleasure-seeking queer public that results in its own disappearance. The sheets of paper become the memorials that people take with them.

⁸¹ Robert Nickas, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World,” In *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, p. 45.

⁸² Monica Amor, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Towards a Postmodern Sublimity,” *Art Nexus* (January-March 1995), p. 57.

In the next chapter, I will look at Gonzalez-Torres' theme of traveling as it transcends the physical realms to include transportation of ideas, memories and the spirit. This theme shown in works, installations and exhibitions, would be one of the last ones that Gonzalez-Torres explores before his untimely death.

CHAPTER 5 TRAVEL: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

How can you be feeling if you're not in love? You need that space, you need that lifting up, you need that traveling in your mind that love brings, transgressing the limits of your body and your imagination. Total transgression.

-Felix Gonzalez-Torres⁸³

This was Felix Gonzalez-Torres' answer after artist Ross Bleckner asked him if love was important in finding inspiration for his work. His answer raises many questions about Gonzalez-Torres' artistic practices and views on inspiration. What does traveling have to do with either? It is true that, beginning as a child, the artist spent years traveling around the world; later he traveled widely for international shows. But the kind of travel that he talks about in the quote above has more to do with a psychological excavation of emotions and out-of-body experiences that comes with profound connections. The interview was conducted the year before Gonzalez-Torres died in 1996. At the time, he was well aware that AIDS would soon take his life, and this realization shows up in his later works. The self-proclaimed atheist started to incorporate a kind of ambiguous spirituality to his work.⁸⁴ Traveling moves away from the literal to the spiritual as he began incorporating pictures of flying birds and blank passports. This final chapter will tie Gonzalez-Torres' use of memory reconstruction and meditation as acts of traveling into one's own mind. I will look at key pieces from his early career and show how the artist tackles the notion of travel in installations and exhibitions as he comes to term with the prospect of death: "[Traveling] is, after all,

⁸³ Ross Bleckner, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," p. 47.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

about death,” he said in 1995.⁸⁵ Dying for him is the last trip one takes out of their physical body. In order to start looking at his work through the lens of travel and why he would choose such a project, one must first look at his childhood. How does travel and national identity become so important when recounting his life? After focusing on his past, the artist starts to focus on the present with works that capture experiences and thoughts that are then physically transported to an intimate audience. Finally, his focus shifts to the future and spirituality with bird imagery.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, Gonzalez-Torres spent a great deal of his childhood, adolescence and early adulthood moving from country to country. Because of travel restrictions to and from Cuba, he was unable to visit his family and lived with his sister for most of that time. He had involuntarily become an expatriate at the age of nine and one of the only physical objects that linked him to his country was his Cuban passport. One of his works from 1988, *Untitled* (Madrid 1971) (figure 14), is composed of two picture puzzle pieces and a label in red letters, “MADRID 1971,” attached to the wall. One photograph consists of a picture of a neatly dressed boy, 13 or 14 years old, in front of a plain sheet giving a deadpan expression right at the camera. The photograph looks like a passport photo we might imagine to be the young Gonzalez-Torres. The other image is of statue, possibly some form of explorer, placed outside on a high pedestal; the photograph was taken from a very low perspective, which gives the statue a backdrop of a simple grey sky. Both images, tied with the parenthetical subtitle, suggest that the photographs used for the puzzle pieces were taken in 1971 or at the very least are associated with that year. 1971 was the year Gonzalez-Torres,

⁸⁵ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 81.

then 13, and his sister departed from Cuba to Madrid.⁸⁶ This piece allegorizes his attempt to puzzle out his past through the visual act of reconstruction to explore the intersection of travel and national identity. The frightened boy staring at the camera, caught in the passport photo, is thus couched as the brave explorer charting new terrain.

A few years later, Gonzalez-Torres began to transport bits of his experiences and thoughts to a public. These memories relate more to his immediate past and present rather than his distant past. In 1991, Gonzalez-Torres and Andrea Rosen started to sell empty wooden boxes (figure 15). These boxes were standard desk organizers that were meant to hold a person's correspondence. Periodically, the artist would send a letter or package to the owners of these boxes that they would subsequently have to open and place in the box. According to Gonzalez-Torres, these pieces were meant stay in the owner's residence and to be never shown publically.⁸⁷ The items that the artist would send at first glance look like a random assortment of trinkets and letters having no connection to each other, no grand narrative.⁸⁸ He sends odd knick-knacks

⁸⁶ "Chronology," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault. pp. 361-376.

⁸⁷ Tim Rollins, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Interview," p. 74.

⁸⁸ There was a similar project done in the 1960s and '70s called the New York Correspondence School, spearheaded by the artist Ray Johnson. The idea of NYCS was to set up a network of friends, strangers, artists, poets, etc. through the mail correspondence. Johnson would send letters, collages ("Moticos"), magazine clippings and other objects to friends with the request that they send something back (Johnson mentions once getting the ear of a small mouse). More people were introduced into this network and NYCS soon spread across the country and even internationally until its end in 1973. Johnson was interested in alternative forms of conversation with multiple people and he explained why this kind of communication interested him: "There are incredible degrees of subtlety of the possibility of interpretation... You look at the object, and, depending on your degree of interest, it very directly gets across to you, what is there, be it regular, verbal, written, visual or object." The first show that publically debuted NYCS was in 1970 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Ray Johnson: New York Correspondence School*. The idea that Gonzalez-Torres might have looked at Johnson's extensive decade-long project is apt considering his predilection towards conceptual artists of that decade. The act of mailing objects that relate to the thoughts and memories expressed in Gonzalez-Torres' mailbox pieces

like photo albums of his cats, promotional headshots from the popular '80s TV show *The Golden Girls*, magazine cutouts and a copy of *The Paris Review* from 1991 that featured *Untitled* (Perfect Lovers) on the cover.⁸⁹ He also includes more personal objects like photographs, letters and postcards. Many of objects were copies of images used in photographic puzzles and billboard. If we look back to *Untitled* (Welcome), which was mentioned in Chapter Three, Gonzalez-Torres' works often incorporate objects like these to invite the viewer to explore his abstract thoughts and memories. As mentioned in the Introduction, one of the last requests made by the artist's partner was to mail his ashes in a hundred yellow envelopes; a nod to their love of travel and exploration. The transportation of the trinkets in *Untitled* allow for an intimate conversation with the owner of the box. These owners were supposedly receiving things from the artist as late as 1995.⁹⁰

While communication is occurring in Gonzalez-Torres' wooden-box pieces, his later works began to explore the idea of travel as a spiritual journey toward the acceptance of death. Gonzalez-Torres created a series of works from 1991 to 1993 titled *Untitled* (Passport) and *Untitled* (Passport #II). The first realization from 1991 (figure 16) consisted of a stack of 23 5/8 in. by 23 5/8 in. blank white paper. The stack stays low to the ground, its ideal height being only four inches, and like many of his pieces, they are free for the visitor. The concept of this stack comes from the idea that

allow for the travel and crystallization of these ephemeral gestures. Edward M. Plunkett of the Max Ernst Fan Club coined the term NYCS; Johnson also called it the New York Correspondance School for its performative aspect. Found in "Send Letters, Postcards, Drawings, and Objects..." *Art Journal* 36, no. 3 (Spring, 1977), 233-241.

⁸⁹ The issue I mention is No. 120, from Fall 1991. *The Paris Review*. "Back Issues," *The Paris Review*, accessed January 19, 2011. <http://www.theparisreview.org/back-issues>.

⁹⁰ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 123.

everyone is on the journey of life. Similar to an official passport; its pages start off empty until stamps document the places and times you travel. The artist describes the individual blank sheets as

...an untouched feeling, an undiscovered experience. A passport to another place, to another life, to a new beginning, to chance...to inscribe it with the best, the most painful, the most banal, the most sublime, and yet to inscribe it with life, love memories, fears, voids, and unexpected reasons of being.⁹¹

Gonzalez-Torres is equating the beginning of a new phase in life with a blank sheet of paper, which stands in as an optimistic outlook to the future. The artist developed this idea after his partner's death as a way to work through grief and begin a new part of his life without Laycock. Here, the idea of travel and memory is hopeful; he gives the audience the gift of possibility. Aside from the general associations that come with the word "passport," the intentional use of austere white paper needs to be taken into consideration. The use of any other color on the surface of the paper would compromise the contemplative exercise that Gonzalez-Torres is encouraging. Muñoz describes this projection as "looking at a mirror" whose travels of the mind are akin to Lewis Carroll's "looking glass."⁹² Essentially, the blank paper works as a screen onto which spectators can project their own lives, specifically their own voyages.

The second "passport" takes on a different meaning; rather than look optimistically at the future, it reflects on imminent death, or at the very least solitude. In 1993, Gonzalez-Torres began incorporating images of birds in midflight over cloudy skies. *Untitled (Passport #II)* (figure 17) consisted of multiple stacks of bound booklets. These

⁹¹ Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, Letter to Andrea Rosen, February 14, 1992. In "Selected Correspondences" chosen by Julie Ault in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. p. 160.

⁹² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 143.

12-page booklets were 6x4 inches each and featured the bird photographs on every page. Instead of having the piece open up a possible place for recollection or projection, the severe mood of the images becomes a vehicle for meditation free of the past or present. Spector writes that there is no room for memories in these booklets, just an invitation to dream. In the 1994 catalogue, she mentions a quote found with the booklets from Langston Hughes: "There is a certain amount of traveling in a dream deferred."⁹³ In order to achieve one's dream involves first personal expansion and growth.

The idea of meditation is also implied in the images themselves: birds in midflight suspended in time also appear suspended in space. Spatiotemporal elements are done away with. When the image includes multiple birds, they do not engage with one another, as maintaining flight is a priority. All the images are taken on a cloudy day, which not only adds a terrific chiaroscuro to the black and white photographs but also gives the viewer a sense of the impending storm off to the side. An impending decline in health was also on the horizon for the artist in 1993, less than three years before his death, so the birds in flight could represent the difficulty he would soon face in the coming years. Once visitors take the booklet, they become less about the artist and more about the visitors' own mortality. What is now given to the spectator is only a temporary suspension of time and place, which is soon replaced with thoughts of the future. This follows the tradition of the *memento mori*, which not only presents the artist coming to grips with his own death but also invites the viewer to do so as well. This was not the only time that Gonzalez-Torres used bird images or ideas of travel. Traveling

⁹³ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 56.

exhibitions and installations were replete with these themes, which took his interest in travel and death even further.

The same year that Gonzalez-Torres created *Untitled* (Passport #II); the artist had two shows in Paris, *Travel # 1* and *Travel # 2*. This show was featured simultaneously in two galleries in different parts of the city. In order for people to experience the show fully, they had to travel through the city to reach the other gallery. The artist wanted the audience to encounter the sights and sounds of Parisian streets, which became part of the experience.⁹⁴ This idea of experiencing Paris was important to Gonzalez-Torres; when speaking about his first trip to Paris, he said, “I had already been there thousands of times....I dreamt about going there with Ross....When I finally was [there], it was just my physical entity...a completion of what I have dreamt before....That is real traveling.”⁹⁵ Here the artist is talking about how immobile traveling can be just as important as its physical counterpart. In the *Travel* exhibition, the audience was getting both notions, inside and outside the gallery. This quote shows the artist’s resurrection of his partner in dreams. For Gonzalez-Torres, dreams and memories function the same way in the mind.

One of the artist’s final “real travel” projects came the following year. Gonzalez-Torres combined both physical travel and psychological travel into an eight-month exhibition that journeyed across the United States. In 1994, Gonzalez-Torres had one of the last traveling shows in his lifetime, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Traveling*. Organized in Los Angeles at the Museum of Contemporary Art, it went on to the Hirshhorn

⁹⁴ Galerie Ghislaie Hussenot , *Travel #1* (Oct. 30 – Dec. 1) and Galerie Jennifer Flay, *Travel #2* (Oct. 30 – Dec. 4). *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, pp. 381-392.

⁹⁵ *ibid.* 81.

Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and then to the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.⁹⁶ Each venue varied slightly. In Los Angeles, the artist installed twenty-two billboards across the city depicting images of birds in flight. Washington had two of those billboards installed inside the gallery along two walls, and Chicago had the stack of booklets, *Untitled* (Passport #II), mentioned above.⁹⁷ Aside from these works, which directly reference traveling, the rest of the show was a retrospective of the artist's work from the past couple of years that in some way references travel, whether mental, spiritual or physical. One example, the 1992 photograph *Untitled* (Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein's Grave, Paris) (figure 18) depicts the grave plaque obstructed with colorful flowers. The image makes reference to the couple's journey together in death—a relationship between two women, lovers, and partners that is forever recorded in the history of modern art. Another one, *Untitled* (North) (figure 19), from 1993, consists of twelve strings of light hanging from the gallery's ceiling. The "North" references Ross Laycock's residence in Toronto throughout the majority of his relationship with Gonzalez-Torres as well as the artist's need to make frequent trips from New York to Toronto, which he considered to be his true home.⁹⁸ A critic once described the heat that emanates from the light as comforting,

⁹⁶Organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. (Apr. 24- June 19,1994). Co-organized by Amanda Cruz, Ann Goldstein and Suzanne Ghez. Also traveled to The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (June 16 – Sept. 11, 1994) and The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, IL. (Oct. 2– Nov. 6, 1994) Andrea Rosen Website, accessed January 19, 2011. <http://www.andrearosengallery.com/artists/felix-gonzalez-torres/>.

⁹⁷ Claudia Mesch, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Traveling," *Chicago Reader* October 21, 1994, sec 1.

⁹⁸ "1986 blue kitchen, blue flowers in Toronto – a real home for the first time in so long, so long, Ross is here" from "Chronology." *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, p. 265.

akin to the lights glowing from one's windows as he or she arrives home.⁹⁹ When a bulb goes out, the idea is that it remains out. Like most things in life, the installation changes organically and you are left with something different: the lights give out and the room dims. Even though this show was not the last retrospective before his death, it allowed the artist to take a look back and put his career into perspective and, in a way, make peace with it.

Finally, Gonzalez-Torres' last show of new work at the Andrea Rosen Gallery did away with many of his old exhibition practices and presented a very traditional show. Keeping with the theme of travel, he debuted *Untitled (Vultures)* (figure 20), fourteen framed standard-sized black-and-white photographs of birds in flight.¹⁰⁰ Each photograph contains a grayish sky with small specks of black thought to be vultures as the title suggests. The press release has no description besides the names and dates for the show; in it, he does include written works by poets Arthur Rimbaud and Pier Pablo Pasolini as well as singer Barbra Streisand. All three, in one way or another, talk about the existence of God and the practices of organized religion.¹⁰¹ The show lasted about five weeks and ended in October, three months before his death. It became the artist's swan song. The show became a metaphorical proclamation of how certain institutions would look at his death. Like the vultures depicted, religious and conservative groups could swoop down and use his life as another casualty of the homosexual lifestyle. With no trace of religious iconography, the show had a spirituality

⁹⁹ Jo Ann Lewis Post, "'Traveling' Light Installation Artist Felix Gonzalez - Torres Shines at the Hirshhorn," *The Washington Post*, July 10, 1994.

¹⁰⁰ *"Untitled" (Vultures)*. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York (Sept. 8 - Oct. 14, 1995). Andrea Rosen Website, accessed January 19, 2011. <http://www.andrearosengallery.com/artists/felix-gonzalez-torres/>.

¹⁰¹ "Press Release," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, p. 30.

that transcended religion. A show containing fourteen austere photographs on white walls, modestly lit, was Gonzalez-Torres' travel project come to a close.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Around the time this thesis was written, late 2010 and early 2011, a retrospective of Felix Gonzalez-Torres was traveling across Europe. *Specific Objects without Specific Form* started off at the WEILS in Brussels, followed by the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, and finally the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt. This retrospective was unique in terms of the curatorial process. The curator, Elena Filipovic, initially decided the placement of his work in each location. Halfway through the exhibition in each location, an artist who had been influenced by Gonzalez-Torres would rearrange the exhibition for the remainder of the show. The artists were Danh Vo at WEILS, Carol Bove at Beyeler and Tino Sehgal at the MMK.¹⁰² The concept was inspired by Gonzalez-Torres' own curatorial practices, since he also encouraged multiple interpretations of his work. Almost fifteen years after his death, much has been written about Gonzalez-Torres' brief yet extraordinary career. This raises the question of why his work remains culturally relevant. This paper has shown how certain themes that Gonzalez-Torres explored in his day have endured.

Gonzalez-Torres' work adheres to a cool Minimalist aesthetic, but unlike the Minimalists, his work was always personal. Taking the parenthetical subtitles into consideration, every work references an event, person or place that the artist experienced. But he never gave away the whole story. Whether it is a childhood memory of his departure from Cuba and his family, the place where he met his partner or a journey somewhere, he demonstrates how memory is both constructed and

¹⁰² Danh Vo, "1000 Words: Danh Vo Talks about 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects Without Specific Forms,'" *Artforum* (February 2010), p. 161.

reconstructed through aesthetic cues. Not only relying on visual signs for his pieces, he also incorporates oral, aural, tactile and to a lesser extent olfactory signals as well. This trend is shown in almost all of his works—the candy piles, rubber mats, paper stacks, dancing platforms and others.

Another fascinating, yet equally frustrating, aspect of his work is its indirect nature. The artist stresses time and time again that each person will experience and interpret his work differently and that these interpretations are all equally important to the work. This egalitarian approach has led to a lively, ever-expanding literature on Gonzalez-Torres that includes many perspectives. In 2003, the art critic Germán Rubiano Caballero discusses the unfixed meanings behind the artist's work especially with his use of language, "In Gonzalez-Torres, words do not have a single, unitary meaning. They work on the viewer's memory, and they have been deployed carefully in order to provoke associations and metaphors."¹⁰³ An example would be the parenthetical subtitles that Gonzalez-Torres assigns to almost every "Untitled" piece. The artist states in 1994, "Things are suggested or alluded to discreetly....because 'meaning' is always shifting in time and place. Also, this isn't my language, but the language I learned."¹⁰⁴ The artist believes that as an immigrant of the United States, he feels no need to impose a meaning on anyone that they must come to one themselves.

What I wanted to do with this paper is to view Gonzalez-Torres' work as an ever-evolving project that taps into what it means to feel, to experience, to remember and to exist. At the end of his interview with Gonzalez-Torres in 1994, Bleckner asked the

¹⁰³ Germán Rubiano Caballero, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Writing as Metaphor in his Work," *ArtNexus* (April-June 2003), p. 83.

¹⁰⁴ Nancy Spector, *Felix-Gonzalez-Torres*, 17.

artist how long he thought he would live. Gonzalez-Torres answered simply, "It's not about time. It's about how life is lived. I have had a very good life....How many years, I don't know. I want to experience a few other things....I want to go back to Paris...."¹⁰⁵

This view on life permeated his work, an oeuvre of crystallized memories and experiences translated into physical objects. They are souvenirs that mimic the ethereality of memory.

¹⁰⁵ Ross Bleckner, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 47.

APPENDIX A
LIST OF FIGURES

- 1 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991, printed billboards, dimensions vary with installation. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995, pages 26-27)
- 2 Robert Morris, *Columns*, 1961-73, painted aluminum, each column 96 x 24 x 24 in. (in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* edited by Rosalind Krauss. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981, page 202)
- 3 Robert Morris, *Untitled* (Sectional Fiberglass Pieces), 1967, fiberglass, 47 x 48 x 47 ½ in. for four pieces; 47 ½ x 85 x 47 in for four pieces. (in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* edited by Rosalind Krauss. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981, pages 268-269)
- 4 Robert Morris, *Untitled* (Scatter Piece), 1968-69, felt, steel, lead, zinc, copper, aluminum, brass, dimensions variable. (in artnet website accessed in February 27, 2011. <http://www.artnet.com/artwork/426041149/140983/robert-morris-untitled-scatter-piece.html>)
- 5 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Go-Go Dancing Platform), 1991, wood, lightbulbs, acrylic paint, and Go-Go dancer in silver lame bathing suit, sneakers and Walkman (when installed publically); 21 ½ x 72 x 72. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 104)
- 6 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991, variously colored-cellophane-wrapped candies, endless supply, ideal weight 175 lbs; dimensions vary with installation. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 151)
- 7 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Throat), 1991, cough drops individually wrapped in blue-and-white cellophane, endless supply, and handkerchief; dimensions vary with installation (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Julie Ault. Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2006, page 84)
- 8 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Welcome), 1991, rubber mats, photographs, metal soap, ad paper; 11 x 29 ½ x 71 in. Installation view of *Every Week There Is Something Different* (week four) at Andrea Rosen Gallery, 1991 (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Julie Ault. Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2006, page 39)

- 9 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Florence), 1985-1992, framed C-print; 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 31 1.4 in. Image size: 12 x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Julie Ault. Göttingen: Steidl/dangin Publishers, 2006, page 111)
- 10 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1989, C-print jigsaw puzzle in bag; edition of 3, 1 A.P.; 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 116)
- 11 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Loverboy), 1989, blue sheer and metal rod, dimensions vary with installation. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 78)
- 12 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Lover Boys), 1991, cellophane-wrapped blue-and-white candies, endless supply, ideal weight 355 lbs; dimensions vary with installation. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 154-155)
- 13 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Loverboy), 1991, blue paper, endless copies; 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ in (ideal height) x 29 x 23 in. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 19)
- 14 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Madrid 1971), 1988, C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag, edition of 3, 1 A.P.; 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 48)
- 15 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991, wooden box, paper, photographs, magazines, postcards, and other objects added by the artist over time; box 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 126-127)
- 16 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Passport), 1991, white paper, endless copies, 4 in. (ideal height) x 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 54)
- 17 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Passport #II), 1993, offset print on paper, bound in booklets, endless copies; 8 in. (ideal height) x 30 x 24 in. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 55)

- 18 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Alice B, Toklas' and Gertrude Stein's Grave, Paris), 1992, framed C-print, edition of 4, 1 A.P.; 26 ¼ x 36 ¼ in. (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 72)
- 19 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (North), 1993, 15-watt light bulbs, extension cords, and porcelain light sockets; dimensions vary with installation (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Nancy Spector, Félix González Torres and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York; Guggenheim Museum, 1995, page 79)
- 20 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Vultures), 1995, framed gelatin silver prints and paint on wall; overall dimensions vary with installation; fourteen parts: 25 5/8 x 32 7/8 in. each, image size: 14 7/8 x 22 7/8 in. each. Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (Vultures) 1995* at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1995 (in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* edited by Julie Ault. Göttingen: Steidl/daing Publishers, 2006, page 33)

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