

Commodified Generosity and Relational Abductions: The Multiples of
Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Mark Clintberg

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ABSTRACT

Commodified Generosity and Relational Abductions: The Multiples of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Mark Clintberg

The multiples of Felix Gonzalez-Torres have made a significant contribution to the legacy of Conceptual and Minimal art strategies. His artworks have often been framed as acts of generosity as viewers are entitled to remove singles copies of his multiples from exhibitions as gifts. This interpretation of his work has been further fueled by the writings of key theorists including Nicolas Bourriaud in his text *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), which suggests that since the 1990s artists increasingly develop projects with utopian objectives that generate and depend on collaboration and response from audiences. This thesis challenges Bourriaud's understanding of Gonzalez-Torres's practice, and other existent literature around his artworks. I argue that his multiples allow for dissenting responses as well as for the audience's alteration or regifting of the object as a form of reciprocity. The aesthetic lineage of these works, and the ideological similarities the multiples share with early Minimalism and Conceptual art practices also present alternative readings of Gonzalez-Torres' multiples. The artist's gift is simultaneously self-serving, benevolent, and antagonistic. These artworks present troubled allegories of democracy, framed by the history of collaborative and social art practices. Finally, the multiples are considered as troubled allegories of democracy. Gonzalez-Torres's practice offers its viewers a participatory experience that illustrates the limitations and possibilities of art as an active force in the operation of society, which struggles with the divide between individual rights and the greater good.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Alice Clintberg, who fostered my earliest introductions to art by drawing felt pen bathing suits over Art History's nudes, prompting my curiosity about what was hidden, and how best to uncover it.

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Introduction

Yes, everything I say can be used against me. This interview could be used against me. But I like to take stands and say what I believe. It might not be the best idea, but I'm still proposing the radical idea of trying to make this a better place for everyone.¹

*~ Felix Gonzalez-Torres,
in Interview with Robert Nickas*

Notions of generosity are central to the design of Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres's (1957-1996) multiples.² This thesis will examine his infinitely supplied objects, which are free for gallery-goers to take with them as gifts. The two primary forms these multiples take are stacks of printed posters and piles of mass-produced candies. Alluding to the geometric forms of Minimalist art, Gonzalez-Torres's multiples are presented as blocks, stacks, piles, and squares of hundreds or even thousands of individual posters or candies. These works are not mounted, framed, or otherwise enclosed, and are instead presented on the floor in geometric shapes recalling carpets and mounded in gallery corners.³ The cellophane and foil wrappers of the candies

¹ Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the time in the world." *Flash Art* vol. 24, no. 161. (November/December 1991): 88-89.

² Note that in Spanish contexts, his name is spelled Félix González Torres.

³ There are two exceptions to these conditions of display that I could locate in my research. The first example of the gift works, *Untitled* (1988), was presented on a wooden plinth for the exhibition *Real World: Jon Tower, Lorna Simpson, Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, White Columns, New York, 1988. This work is closely examined in Chapter 3. The second exception is *Untitled (Throat)* (1991), made of blue and white cellophane-wrapped cough drops piled on a handkerchief, a work rarely reproduced photographically in publications. The work is atypically small – 1 ½ x 16 x 16 inches – and was featured in the exhibition *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*:

reflect light, causing the piles to glitter. Gonzalez-Torres often selected specific varieties of candy according to their color or flavour: black rod licorice candies in clear cellophane for *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991) (see Illustration 1 and 2); “Bazooka” bubble gum wrapped in white, blue, and red colored paper for *Untitled (Welcome Back Heroes)* (1991). Candy-works are exhibited as an “endless supply;” posters are exhibited as an edition of “endless copies.” The posters are printed using silkscreen and offset print methods on stock that is approximately 80lb weight, coated or uncoated to produce matte or gloss surfaces. Stock sizes are generally between 8 ½ x 11 inches (21.59 cm x 27.94 cm) and 33 x 45 inches (83.82 cm x 114.30 cm). What is printed on the posters varies, but their imagery generally falls into three categories, with few exceptions: delicately typeset fonts (usually serif and italic) printed in either black or white on contrasting backgrounds; spare photographic compositions that resemble snapshots, sometimes of ocean vistas or partially clouded skies; colored geometric forms on contrasting backgrounds recalling hard edged abstract painting. His *Untitled* (1989-1990) is typical of the poster works: it features two stacks of offset printed posters printed with italic serif text. One poster reads “Somewhere better than this place,” the other, “Nowhere better than this place.” The artist’s text-based posters often include poetic or aphoristic statements of this variety that refer to loss and desire. In this way his practice combines romantic and emotional content within the perimeters of Conceptual and Minimal aesthetics.

The artist’s project invites each viewer to take a single object from the stack or pile. Larger accumulations of these individual fragments are available for sale through his

Traveling at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1994. See Ault, 84, for a photograph of the artist installing the work.

commercial dealer or on the secondary market. As viewers consume the multiples over time, the collection that owns a piece from this body of work is obliged by contractual agreement to replace them in perpetuity, thus fulfilling the artist's objective of an endless supply of gifts. The *catalogue raisonné* for the artist, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*,⁴ provides extensive information about the certificates and contracts the artist designed to regulate the flow and operation of the gift works. The editor of this publication, Dietmar Elger, writes that the certificates' requirements changed gradually as the body of work evolved. The documents certifying the poster stacks, which are also contracts, list the original dimensions of the work, the method of reproduction, and the image to be reproduced on the poster. There are allowances: if the original paper is not available, another of similar quality may be used, for example. Contracts also explicitly state that "third parties may take individual sheets of paper from the stack," but go on to say that these gifted sheets are not "a unique work of art nor can they be considered the piece."⁵ The certificate also permits the owner to fabricate an ongoing supply of the posters whenever scarcity dictates. It additionally assures the collector that, "The physical manifestation of this work in more than one place at a time does not threaten this work's uniqueness since its uniqueness is defined by ownership."⁶

But with these responsibilities, the artist also gives the owner an unusual privilege, one that can be seen as a second component of generosity: the owner or curator of the work is entitled to alter the work's dimensions according to necessity or desire. The candy spill *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991) for example, has been installed in a

⁴ Dietmar Elger, ed. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1997).

⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁶ Ibid, 14.

corner as a mounded pyramid and also as a rectilinear form sprawling across an entire room.⁷

Gonzalez-Torres's gift works involve the viewer's participation. If his posters sat untouched in a gallery, he admits, they would be a conceptual failure and not fully realized as artworks. The artist says, "I need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without the public these works are nothing ... I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in."⁸ Do these works *require* participation, then, in order to be fully realized as art works? The responsibility that Gonzalez-Torres mentions could go beyond the mere act of taking the poster. The assistance that Gonzalez-Torres calls for could extend into the viewer's participation in the pedagogical project these works suggest. Many of the text-based posters, for example, list two or three word phrases next to pivotal historical dates, making allusions to contentious histories that can be researched further by the inquisitive, engaged viewer. As citations that orbit Gonzalez-Torres's subjective interests, these text-histories invite forms of participation that extend beyond the experience of engaging with the materiality of the artwork.⁹ Additionally, by accepting this gift, the viewer accepts its conditions. Gonzalez-Torres's gifts are regulated by forces of authority, and placed under the stewardship of their owners.

⁷ Exhibitions where these dimensions were realized are: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1990; *Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Joseph Kosuth* at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 2005 respectively.

⁸ Nancy Spector and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995): 57.

⁹ This opportunity for research is presented by all artworks to a certain degree. Here I simply wish to explore the framework of assumptions about participation that has been mounted around the artist's work by several authors and curators.

The emotional response that a viewer might feel when confronted by the gift works is directly tied to the pleasurable prospect of receipt, and allows for the possibility that the artist's sub-textual subject matter might be surreptitiously included in the exchange. After he has accepted one of the artist's objects, curator and Chair of University of California, Los Angeles' Department of Art Russell Ferguson describes his emotional state, writing, "the pleasant surprise of receiving one of these objects is like feeling a ripple from the other side of the lake."¹⁰ This sense of inter-human connection and communication is at the core of Gonzalez-Torres's concerns, acting as a veil for the work's content. The images he prints usually appear benign, but often have political and queer subtexts. Since they represent subjective beliefs, can we consider them as gifts that form bonds and alliances?¹¹ Are they also forms of coercion? Do they instigate dispute?

One frame of interpretation that has frequently fueled a particular understanding of Gonzalez-Torres's work is "generosity," meaning that his artworks are regarded as benevolent, harmonious gestures, as elastic and suggestible as the parameters of their installation.¹² My thesis will interrogate this cheerful conclusion, illustrating that in fact the artist's work presents a vigorous questioning of aesthetics as politics, the nature of the gift, and the operation of art practices that hope to be democratic. In particular this thesis will explore Gonzalez-Torres's multiples with primary attention paid to the poster stacks. Chapter 1 will provide a review of the literature on this artist. In Chapter 2 I will discuss

¹⁰ Russell Ferguson, "Authority Figure," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin, 2006): 83.

¹¹ For an analysis of this possibility in artworks see Ted Purves, ed. *What We Want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art* (Albany: New York Press, 2005).

¹² This view has been encouraged strongly by the popularity of the following titles: Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Dijon, France: Les Presse Du Reel, 2002). First edition published 1998; Gianfranco Maraniello, et al eds, *Il Dono. Offerta, ospitalita, insidia/The Gift. Generous Offerings, Threatening Hospitality*, (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2001).

the aesthetic lineage of these works, and the ideological similarities the multiples share with early Minimalism and Conceptual art practices, according to observations made by critics and historians. Chapter 3 will discuss the strategy of the gift used by Gonzalez-Torres, an understanding of which will be assembled from social and anthropological theory written about the social operation of generosity. Chapter 4 will analyze the multiples' potential to be considered as allegories of democracy. My concluding chapter will draw these three subjects together in order to elaborate on my stance that Gonzalez-Torres's practice offers its viewers a participatory experience that illustrates the limitations and possibilities of art as an active force in the operation of society, which struggles with the divide between individual rights and the greater good.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Gonzalez-Torres was born in Güaimaro, Cuba in 1957. In 1971 his parents sent him to Spain, after which he immigrated to Puerto Rico to live with his extended family. He moved to New York City in 1979. *Contaminación ambient/mental* (1980) is the earliest example of his artwork that I could locate in my research; it was reproduced as a mass-printed artist's page in the publication *El Nuevo Dia*.¹³ His first recorded exhibition was 1981's *Una imagen extendida (Memorias del Mariel)* at San Juan's Galería Zoom, and in this same year he participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program in New York.¹⁴ In 1993 he completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Pratt Institute, New York, which was followed by his Master of Fine Arts from the International Center of Photography, New York, in 1987. This same year he became an adjunct instructor at New York University, New York, where he taught a course titled "Social Landscape." In 1988 he made the first poster stack, *Untitled* (see footnote 3). The first candy work, *Untitled (Fortune Cookie Corner)*, was made in 1990, the same year of his first exhibition with New York gallerist, Andrea Rosen. One year later his four-part exhibition *Every Week There is Something Different* opened at this same gallery. Gonzalez-Torres made his last stacked multiple piece in 1993: *Untitled (Passport # II)*. In 1994 the artist's major exhibition *Traveling* was hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, launched Gonzalez-Torres's retrospective

¹³ *El Nuevo Dia*, August 24, 1980.

¹⁴ He attended this same program at the Whitney again in 1993.

exhibition in 1995. One year later, on January 9, 1996, the artist died of AIDS-related causes in Miami, Florida.¹⁵ His career is compressed and brief – from first exhibition to major museum retrospective in but fourteen years.

The sources I have consulted to construct my argument are diverse. Published texts focusing on the artist's work are numerous, and though the majority of these articles are found in scholarly journals, catalogues and magazines that focus on art, lifestyle magazines such as *House & Garden*, *Vogue Hommes International*, and *Gay City*, to name a few, have also published articles on the artist's work.¹⁶ This thesis will take major monographic studies as its primary focus, as the publications on this artist that my research uncovered number over six hundred. I will also refer to topical news sources periodically in order to address his work as it relates to Gonzalez-Torres's residence in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The purpose of this literature review will be to establish a framework of study concerning the multiples of Felix Gonzalez-Torres alongside theoretical and historical writings on collaborative and community art practices. A significant portion of the latter component will be an evaluation of scholarly writing that responds to the category of relational aesthetics.

The legacy of Gonzalez-Torres has recently been affirmed in many respects. He represented the United States at the 2007 Venice Biennale with an exhibition titled *Felix*

¹⁵ These biographical details are culled from Julie Ault's detailed and illustrated "Chronology" ed. Julie Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl, 2006): 361-376.

¹⁶ Robert Rosenblum, "Ground for Reflection: The Landscape Surrounding Howard and Cindy Rachofsky's Dallas Home Gives a Series of Artworks Its Ideal Setting," *House & Garden*, (January 2006): 104-111; Connelly, John, "Bringing psychedelia up to date..." *Vogue Hommes International*, (Spring/Summer 2005): 114-117; Spiher, David, "Realm of the Senses," *Gay City*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, (January 6-12, 2005).

Gonzalez-Torres: America.¹⁷ Phaidon Press's *Cream 3* (2003) named him as one of ten "source artists" for the third edition of their review of young contemporary artists.¹⁸ During his lifetime he was featured in thirty-four solo or two-person exhibitions and one hundred and ninety-four group exhibitions.¹⁹ Since the year of his death his work has been included in at least twenty-two solo or two person exhibitions and three hundred and twenty group exhibitions. Why does this artist's work continue to attract such attention? Though the possible answers to this question are undoubtedly too great in number to address here, in the following pages I will explore Gonzalez-Torres's contribution to the history of politically responsive art practices, taking seriously his contribution to, and questioning of, the legacy of Conceptual and Minimal art.

Art practices that offer goods or services to communities are often framed as acts of generosity. The act of giving has become the subject of lively discussion in the art history of the past several decades. Outreach through art, social intervention, community collaboration, dialogic practices, antagonistic practices, new genre public art, relational aesthetics: these terms have all been variously employed in an effort to define a broad swath of artworks in this vein spanning at least twenty years.²⁰

¹⁷ The original 1995 proposal for the artist to exhibit at the United States pavilion in Venice, presented by Amanda Cruz, Susanne Ghez, and Ann Goldstein, was short listed but ultimately rejected. For a reflective summary of their proposal and commentary on their experiences with its development, see "Reflections on a Proposal for 1995" in Nancy Spector's *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America*, (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2007): 47-59.

¹⁸ These include *Cream* (1998), *Fresh Cream* (2000), and *Ice Cream* (2007).

¹⁹ Andrea Rosen Gallery, "Felix Gonzales Torres - Biography," www.andreareosengallery.com/artists/felix-gonzalez-torres/. Date accessed: March 21, 2008.

²⁰ A few publications that describe and define these practices in detail include: Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* no. 110 (2004): 51-79; Jan Avgikos, "Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art," *But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism*. Nina Felshin, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995): 85-116; Suzi Gablik, ed, *The Re-enchantment of Art*, (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1991); Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. (Seattle: Bay Press. 1995).

Nomenclature not being arbitrary, these terms display subtle differences, but two central values are pushed to the forefront in all: use and participation. These artworks often ask for an audience to interact beyond viewing, whether at the moment of conceptualization (a collaborative genesis) or at the moment of public viewing (a collaborative unveiling). An activity outside of viewing is often involved in the relational field, but the method of operation required and its difference from the act of viewing is a complex matter difficult to agree upon. Does little distinguish these practices then, at first investigation, from historical antecedents? Possible precedents include Fluxus performance (which through performance interrupted the viewer's engagement), Dada (which made absurd ruptures in the everyday), and Happenings (which also depended on the response and involvement of the viewer in performance). The aesthetics of relational work sometimes bear resemblance to the look and spirit of all three of these historical precedents, often being hastily assembled, using impoverished materials, and lacking what is traditionally seen as craftsmanship.²¹

Is it possible to arrange a retroactive mapping that spans much further back than the twentieth century, and trace the qualities that inspired the contemporary category of relational or collaborative artworks? Can a viewer “use” a Neo-Classical painting? Might one “participate” in a Baroque sculpture? Tackling these queries in detail is not possible here due to limitations of space, but a cursory disassembly of verbs will be of assistance

²¹ Claire Bishop notes the similarity between these aesthetics and that of the Palais de Tokyo's architecture and installation design. The Palais went through a rough and provisional renovation before opening as a museum. The ceiling is open, exposing ductwork and cracked stucco, wall studs protrude, cords hang precariously from support beams, and lighting is basic. Nicolas Bourriaud, primary promoter of the relational model, was codirector and curator of the Palais. Bishop, 2004, 51-79.

in determining a framework for art objects that are seen as collaborative. “To use” is an act of consumption, but it is not always consumption resulting in the immediate disappearance of the object used. One can use a battery and deplete it, for example. One can use a sidewalk and only slightly erode it through footfalls. But in either case, “use” is here considered the production of eventual entropy. “To participate” finds itself in striking opposition with “to use,” since the former is the production of presence, an additive process rather than a reductive one. However, is there not a way “to use” with the goal of building, constructing, and contributing? Or a way “to participate” while consuming? Gonzalez-Torres’s work is a prime case study within which to ask these questions.

There is also the question of outcomes for participants. By participating, a result is achieved, one that is satisfactory for some constituents and unsatisfactory for others. An allowance should also be given that some audiences will respond to the work with indifference. Use can end in this same situation of unhappy or disinterested constituents. If the relational category of art invites participation, then its constituent body includes its audience, who are also its citizens. This question of citizenship is one that I will return to in Chapter Four of this thesis.

With use and participation at the apex of his considerations, French curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (1996) makes a bid to delineate contemporary art’s recent inflections. Practices that correspond to Bourriaud’s curatorial thesis lie at a nexus between installation, community outreach, and collaboration. The author ascribes these practices to the ongoing “fight for modernity,”²² with all of its

²² Bourriaud, 1998, 13.

implications of “spontaneity and liberation”²³ via the viewer’s use of or participation in an artwork. His text has stoked an understanding of a genre of art based on contingency and viewer participation that rose to prominence in the mid- and late-nineties in Europe and the United States. Bourriaud’s landmark publication has added to a debate about relational art work – then yet to be named as such – that existed before its release, which I will address momentarily. Counter-treatises have since been written, letters to the editor composed, and exhibitions assembled in response to *Relational Aesthetics*. What is the hallmark in his writing that excites and frustrates such a large readership, and how does this connect with the present case study of Gonzalez-Torres’s multiples?

The book includes a major chapter titled “Joint Presence and Availability: the Theoretical Legacy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” which makes up fifteen of the text’s total one hundred and five pages.²⁴ This is the only chapter of the book devoted entirely to a monographic case study of a single artist’s *oeuvre*. The artist is used as one of the author’s key prototypes in his description of the relational aesthetics category. Bourriaud’s goal in this writing, as he describes it, is to give, “a critical appraisal in order to reinstate [Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work] in the present-day context, to which it has

²³ Bourriaud, 1998, 12

²⁴ This page count is based on the text’s second edition (2002) and does not include glossary or index. The original French title of the chapter is “Copr  sence et disponibilit  : l’heritage th  orique de Felix Gonzalez-Torres.” Note that a significantly different translation of this chapter is also printed in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. To my understanding another was published in *The Gift/Il Dono*, (2001) translated first into Italian in 2000 by Elio Grazioli, and then translated into English by an uncredited individual. This 2001 version, two removes of translation from the original, would have been English-speaking audiences’ first exposure to Bourriaud’s text to my knowledge. A comparative reading of English translations alongside the original French is an illuminating procedure. The variations on title alone capture very different meanings: “Copr  sence et disponibilit  ” translates to “Joint Presence and Availability” in one case, and “Coexistence and Availability” in the other. The latter translation seems more in keeping with Bourriaud’s hopes for harmony, while the former could imply an antagonistic reading not so distant from Bishop’s critique of the relational. These discrepancies are deserving of further research.

made a conspicuous contribution.”²⁵ Bourriaud’s text was published just two years after the artist’s death. The multiples and Gonzalez-Torres’s other works have inspired the production of a new generation of artists, Bourriaud suggests, just as historical sources influenced Gonzalez-Torres himself.

Bourriaud puts forward the term “homo-sensual aesthetics,”²⁶ to address Gonzalez-Torres’s work, suggesting that the artist’s gayness “for him, represented not so much a discursive theme” but rather “an emotional dimension, a form of life creating forms of art” that could be seen as “a life model that could be shared by all, and identified with by everyone.”²⁷ Beyond this passage’s problematic essentialization of sexuality, its language raises other major questions concerning universalism and art practices. The relational aesthetics category, as pictured by Bourriaud through Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s practice, is largely concerned with providing space for a diverse range of viewers and participants who will somehow have their own values communicated in the emotional dimension represented by works like the multiples. Bourriaud carries on to say, “the idea of *including the other* is not just a theme. It turns out to be as essential to the formal understanding of the work [of Felix Gonzalez-Torres].”²⁸ Gonzalez-Torres is profiled in these two phrases as a minority whose subjectivity will apparently prove of significant interest to audiences. Bourriaud’s language suggests that Gonzalez-Torres’s work is formed – in its essence – by direct transmission between the artist’s personal life and his artistic representations in public.

²⁵ Bourriaud, 1998, 49. This chapter of *Relational Aesthetics* blends eulogy and critical analysis since the artist had recently died.

²⁶ Bourriaud’s original French phrase is “esthétique homosensuelle.” See Bourriaud, 1998, 52.

²⁷ Ibid, 50.

²⁸ Ibid, 52. (sic) Italics original.

The multiples are gifts to a public, but at their most fundamental level, Gonzalez-Torres says that he created them first and foremost for an audience of two – himself, and his partner Ross Laycock – and secondly for the viewer and all others.²⁹ Bourriaud acknowledges that Gonzalez-Torres's is "an autobiographical project"³⁰ but is quick to preface this admission by stressing its references to the "heart of human experience."³¹ By foregrounding the universality of Gonzalez-Torres's endeavor with stress placed on the emotional as distinguished from the rational, Bourriaud evades the possibility that the multiples might represent a subjective politics. And with significant cause: in order to retain his position that art should realize harmonious exchanges, he must frame Gonzalez-Torres's work as an ambassador of peace rather than conflict.

The features of Gonzalez-Torres's practice that are so enticing to Bourriaud are clear in his above statements: the multiples offers a space of universalism through use, which Bourriaud equates with a realized temporary utopia; this universalism is illustrated from the artist's subjective position of difference given his gayness; the artist's generosity encourages participation from its viewer, as well as promoting values of inclusion and agency.

Bourriaud writes that the viewer's agency within the relational aesthetics project determines the artwork's very nature, since artists increasingly invite viewers to join in the process of realizing the work.³² Bourriaud's use of Marxist thought in his later text, *Postproduction* (2002), reveals his position on cultural production and viewer

²⁹ Robert Storr, "When This You See Remember Me," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Julie Ault, ed. (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin, 2006). 10-11.

³⁰ Bourriaud, 1998, 51.

³¹ Ibid, 50.

³² Ibid, 81.

participation: that consumption can also be considered as a form of production.³³ This inversion of consumer as producer is the genesis of the relational aesthetics methodology. Bourriaud's selected title, *Relational Aesthetics*, reveals his proposed link between the formal elements of a work and the audience's participation in it. In Gonzalez-Torres's work the author finds his paramount example of this meld of the aesthetic and the social, which Bourriaud suggests is the outcome of the project of modernity, and the logical progression for art of the late twentieth century.

Given that the public audience for Felix Gonzalez-Torres's gift works comes across the piece in progress – which is to say, in flux between depletion and replenishment – the work's interlocutors must continually collaborate with the artist by consuming in order to ensure the project's success. Privileging infinite irresolution is only part of what distinguishes Bourriaud's theory from those of precedent twentieth century theorists dealing with collaborative practices, as I will discuss next. A second crucial distinguishing component is a subject I will return to momentarily.

The hybrid space of art-making Bourriaud describes, where the viewer's perception of space and the object's relationship with institutional structures is questioned, is the subject of many writings published before his. Rosalind Krauss, for example, succinctly expresses the possibilities of interstitial practices in her seminal text, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1972). Her Klein diagrams and historical examples illustrate the location of artworks that skate between landscape and non-landscape, sculpture and non-sculpture.³⁴ The interstitial quality profiled in *Relational Aesthetics* is

³³ Bourriaud, 2002, 23.

³⁴ "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, D. Preziosi, ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. First published 1972): 281-298. Her resulting categories are: axiomatic structures, marked sites, site-constructions, and sculpture.

also evident in the Robert Morris's series of "Notes on Sculpture" found in his *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1993), first published in *Artforum* in 1966 and 1967. Particularly useful are Morris' discussions of process in art-making as a force directed toward the alteration of perception,³⁵ and the fluid categories existent between object and monument.³⁶ Opponents to Bourriaud could counter that his theory only restates the now well-known atlases laid out by Krauss, Morris, and others, but there are other precedents that deal with audience participation to consider as well.

One year before Bourriaud's text, Suzanne Lacy's edited collection of essays *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* was published. In this volume, Mary Jane Jacob proposes that audiences be taken into consideration "as the goal at the centre of art production, at the point of conception"³⁷ which she sees as an art for social change.³⁸ Participation is pushed to the fore of Jacob's text, which returns repeatedly to hopes for the inclusion and transformation of individuals and communities through artworks. Patricia C. Phillips' essay in the same book holds that public art, when collaborative in nature, "can be a form of radical education that challenges the structures and conditions of cultural and political institutions."³⁹ Phillips argues that many contemporary artists are approaching their practices as part of the process of building a public sphere, looking at

³⁵ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1"; "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2"; "Notes on Sculpture, Part 3: Notes and Non Sequiturs"; "Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects," *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, (Cambridge; London: MIT Press; New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995. First MIT edition, 1993. First published 1966, 1967): 1-10; 11-22; 23-40; 51-70.

³⁶ Morris, 11-21.

³⁷ Mary Jane Jacob, "An Unfashionable Audience," *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Lacy, Suzanne, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995): 50.

³⁸ Jacob, 53.

³⁹ Patricia C. Phillips, "Public Constructions," *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Lacy, Suzanne, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995): 61. How effective these strategies can be when the very same institutions that are being critiqued are major funders of the project in question is a matter to which I will return in Chapter Four.

their art practice – a form that she acknowledges is unstable – as a variety of social responsibility.⁴⁰

But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism (1995), edited by Nina Felshin, examines practices one could now call relational. Of particular interest is an essay by Jan Avgikos that outlines the challenges faced by Group Material – an artist’s collective to which Felix Gonzalez-Torres belonged – as they managed a gallery and community space in New York City with the objective to “lead art back into life, thus bringing new life to art.”⁴¹ Avgikos casts a less celebratory image of Group Material’s ambitions, as the Group’s transformative aims were willfully resisted by their hosting neighborhood.⁴² This author presents an early critique of the collaborative practices’ risks: what will the artist do in the face of a disinterested or hostile constituency?

Published yet earlier than this, Suzi Gablik’s reflections on contemporary art prove further historical links for Bourriaud’s writing and Gonzalez-Torres’s practice. The postmodern condition as analyzed by Gablik in *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991) is an opportunity to question how art objects might be “used” in the world.⁴³ She predicts a wave of art involving the social, that is “purposeful” in its construction and that provides a sense of hope for its audiences and makers in contrast to the existential view that life is inherently meaningless.⁴⁴ Rather than an art that focuses on the production of objects, she observes practices that are concerned with relationships, the makers of which are both

⁴⁰ Phillips, 67.

⁴¹ Avgikos, 89.

⁴² The author describes the Group’s storefront space as a social experiment unfulfilled. “Members of the neighborhood were not assimilated within Group Material’s ranks, nor did [they] initiate an independent action group; the gallery did not become a community hotbed of political protest.” Avgikos, 98.

⁴³ Gablik, 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 4-5.

socially and morally aware of their practices.⁴⁵ Her quotation of William James, “I will act as if what I do makes a difference,”⁴⁶ in conjunction with her stress of post-Cartesian “interconnectedness”⁴⁷ situates Gablik’s text as one concerned with subjective social agency toward change. The author diagnoses contemporary culture as “toxic” and from this promotes art practice that is responsive to its community.⁴⁸

The opportunities for engagement in collaborative and relational practices are effectively laid out by these seminal texts. All of the above writings highlight an active viewership whose needs or desires are somehow either implicated in, or more often met by, the art and the artist. Taken into consideration with texts that stress art’s interstitial qualities (Bourriaud, Morris, Krauss) a pointed question becomes clear for community or collaboratively-based projects in general, and Gonzalez-Torres’s multiples in particular: how can these art works aim to meet the needs of their constituents, particularly if their manifestation remains *in medias res*? The challenge for the artist at work in the relational arena is to balance the particular needs and ethics - as well as the overall requirements and values – of every participant / collaborator / viewer. An artist in this scenario might have to consider the broad values of constituencies in lieu of their own ethics. As governments struggle to meet the demands of those they govern, so artists who collaborate often wrestle with the needs and values of their audiences. It follows that the ideal stance from which to achieve such an objective would be in conditions of unrest and constant change, since a static position would not permit the artist the sort of malleability necessary to gain the consent of their constituencies.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 22.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 24.

Expectations for artists to be responsible, ethical, and aware of their works' effects are present or implicit in many of the texts summarized above. It comes as little surprise then that efforts have been made by several authors, whose ideas will be discussed in the following chapters, to position Gonzalez-Torres as a social healer. The line of reasoning that justifies this thread is apparent, though specious: gifting leads to healing, gifting strengthens relationships. This equation gives little room for the contingency of giving or the possibility that artists who involve communities in their work are not obliged to be kind or inclusive in their practices. What of a gift given out of spite? A gift meant to injure? A gift that is a trap? Felix Gonzalez-Torres's works are not benign, and this thesis argues they do not lead to balance and resolution but rather instability.

Gifts, Bourriaud would hope, turn viewers from being passive into temporarily active and engaged citizens. But the actual results suggested by Bourriaud's thesis are unclear. What does the utopia fashioned from the relational model look like, in Bourriaud's view? The purpose of the relational aesthetics project is clouded with uncertainty in this respect.

A review of the recent monographic publications focusing on the artist will suggest that observations made by Bourriaud about Gonzalez-Torres's work still carry currency. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (2006) is edited by an intimate friend of the artist, Julie Ault.⁴⁹ Many of the texts included in this book were previously published in art journals, and some are theoretical sources that were cited as reference material by the artist during his lifetime. Though there are many chapters in this publication, I will restrict my

⁴⁹ In her preface, Ault makes clear that the structure of this collection of essays, letters, and documentation of works is deeply influenced by her relationship to the artist.

summary for the moment to three sections, expanding further on other texts from this volume later in this thesis.

Robert Storr's text in this monograph examines the institutional operation of the artist's work, with a unique focus on the role of museum staff such as security guards in the animation of the gift works.⁵⁰ The social interstice is the location for the work's enactment, as in Bourriaud's thesis. Storr also dwells on the sexually suggestive qualities of the artist's materials, since his candy-based works can be orally ingested, saying "these performative requirements and sensations," including sucking, "recall oral sex."⁵¹ His text proposes that Gonzalez-Torres's three primary theoretical sources were Karl Marx's theory of commodity-fetishism, Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*.⁵² The strengths of Storr's text are concise mapping of Gonzalez-Torres's theoretical antecedents, its account of the work's materiality as encountered by the viewer, and its reflection on the artist's incorporation of the institution's structure in his practice. But little is said to problematize these associations or their affiliations with political models.

In the same volume, Amanda Cruz's "The Means of Pleasure" suggests that Gonzalez-Torres's hope was that his work would hold currency outside of the art world, having effects in the realm of the everyday and "empowering the audience." The author points to Brecht as a significant influence on the artist's practice.⁵³ This metastasis of art

⁵⁰ Storr, 5. See the specific anecdote the author uses to introduce his text, a device examined further in Chapter 4.

⁵¹ Storr, 8.

⁵² Storr, 14. Brecht's "The Modern Theater is the Epic Theater" is published in Ault's monograph. There are no texts by Debord or Marx included in this volume.

⁵³ Amanda Cruz, "The Means of Pleasure," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Julie Ault, ed. (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin, 2006): 52.

into the realm of the everyday is not unlike *Relational Aesthetics*' provisions for art to engage in possible transformative aims through social interstices.

"Authority Figure" by Russell Ferguson carries a comparable tone, emphasizing that "personal, tactile, intimacy – and ownership – is counterpoised by the custodial authority of the institution."⁵⁴ The artist, according to this author, was "a constant gift-giver" in his personal life,⁵⁵ and this detail is used to leverage a meld between art and life. This mirroring of benevolence in public and personal aspects of the artist's life is repeated by several authors, as I will discuss later. The pattern of Ferguson's argument also recalls Bourriaud's notion of homo-sensual aesthetics. The symbolic qualities of the artist's practice are emphasized, suggesting "a hypothetical regime of abundance, of enough for all, in which each individual takes only what he or she will use."⁵⁶ Ferguson considers the multiple as a synecdoche for larger economic circumstances. In his analysis the author does not describe Gonzalez-Torres as an antagonist to Minimalism, but instead as a figure who hoped to adopt this aesthetic's authoritarian tone as well as its approach to materiality without sacrificing the possibility of narrativity or emotionalism.⁵⁷ These brief observations on Ault's publication suggest that the undertow activated by *Relational Aesthetics* continues to be felt in popular analyses of Gonzalez-Torres's work.

Several authors have directly responded to *Relational Aesthetics* since its publication. Below I will summarize the views of two authors that will build my argument concerning Gonzalez-Torres's multiples, namely Claire Bishop and Grant

⁵⁴ Ferguson, 82.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 83.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 84.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 93, 94.

Kester. I will intersperse these short summaries with primary observations on Gonzalez-Torres's practice, which will be analyzed in further detail in the coming chapters.

The discord between Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and the foundations of democratic models are brought to light by Claire Bishop's incisive texts, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," and "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents." In the first of these articles, published in *October*, the author indicates one of the limitations of Bourriaud's argument, by which,

all relations that permit "dialogue" are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does "democracy" really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?⁵⁸

Simply giving room for discussion is an inadequate objective for art to pursue, according to Bishop, just as relational universalism's room for negotiation falls short: both mandates can be summed up by the simplistic spirit of getting along. Bishop questions the motivations of artists who invite collaborators to assist in the realization of artworks and the equivalence of collaborative practices with models of good governance.

Another vital contribution Bishop adds to the dialogue concerning relational practices is her profiling of antagonism in socially based artworks. Her response to Bourriaud disagrees with his understanding that collaborative practices can result in temporary utopic spaces. She introduces her reservations by highlighting how Bourriaud's model expects relational art will be subjected to the limitless contingencies its viewers and its settings will present. As such, these scenarios are often described as

⁵⁸ Bishop, 2004, 37.

open systems. Because of this, she argues, they are difficult to maintain or control. Moving forward from this observation, writings by Chantal Mouffe and Ernest Laclau provide the framework for Bishop's contestation of Bourriaud's model. In her text *On the Political* (2005), Mouffe discusses the role of antagonism in contemporary political practice, which she sees as fueled by conflict between opposing factions, creating the force that should drive contemporary democracy rather than paralyze it.⁵⁹ Antagonism is a process to be fully explored and taken to its conclusions of tension rather than avoided, a position that Bishop heartily agrees with. Bishop argues that the rhetoric of democracy is more complex than the relational aesthetics model admits. Mouffe and Laclau's concept of antagonism in democratic practice suggests a setting where "new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate – in other words, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased."⁶⁰ This encouragement of tension and disagreement is what retains the democratic stake in social interactions. Bishop's concern with many artworks dubbed relational is that they involve an elite audience with common interests: gallerists, artists, auctioneers, critics, art historians, gallery-goers. Such practices give a false sense of freedom and inclusivity. Instead Bishop advocates art practices that she says sustain conflict, such as those by artists Thomas Hirschhorn or Santiago Sierra, who both welcome argument from participants and seem to celebrate their respective projects' potential failure.

Another of Bishop's key criticisms of the relational aesthetics model is its lack of defined qualities to identify its objects of study.⁶¹ If the relational project is continually in

⁵⁹ Mouffe, 2005, 10.

⁶⁰ Bishop, 2004, 65-66.

⁶¹ This problem is not unique and no reason to disqualify the relational model's validity. But it does reveal that relational aesthetics is not so much a category of artwork as it is a methodology.

process, how will the critic know when to begin their inquiry, or the historian know at what moment to instigate or conclude their account? This source of incertitude, Bishop observes, is thus often misled into an analysis of the artist's ethics, which have become confused with aesthetics.⁶² Consequences arising from this development are of considerable gravity. Bishop's reference for this concern, Mouffe, sees the post-political state asking its citizens to consider matters of concern not in terms of political factions – left and right – but instead in terms of moral absolutes – right and wrong.⁶³ Any transgressive artwork that is judged by these same criteria, or any artwork that disagrees with relational universalist values, risks collapse. However, though Mouffe is cautious about this incorporation of the moral into the political, she is not willing to see the two utterly divorced, and this point is where Bishop and Mouffe diverge.

Bishop, who is using political theory to analyze artworks, wants to avoid the infringement of ethical analysis onto the aesthetic field.⁶⁴ Mouffe admits that the split between morality and politics has resulted in significant advances in freedom, she is deeply concerned that the total avoidance of the ethical within the political sphere with the result of a decreased sense of civic responsibility and “lack of social cohesion.”⁶⁵

While my thesis largely agrees with Bishop's observations, I wish to build on her refashioning of the relational methodology through my case study of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's multiples. This role of civic responsibility and social cohesion is subtly present in Gonzalez-Torres's practice by virtue of its mode of distribution and its content. This

The relational aesthetics methodology aspires to draw up new boundaries for art, but only because it hopes to understand clearly the art objects being made.

⁶² Bishop, 2006, 180.

⁶³ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2005): 5.

⁶⁴ Bishop, 2006, 180.

⁶⁵ Mouffe, 1993, 65.

artist's work is a compelling demonstration of the way that, as Mouffe argues, there is a morality of politics involving a degree of respect for opposing factions and the opportunity for voicing dissent. Bishop's model does not adequately address the outcomes of relational artworks in terms of reciprocity or response from viewers; in the coming pages I will outline possible strategies for approaching these outcomes from an analytical standpoint.

Though Bishop does discuss Gonzalez-Torres's work in *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005), she does not analyze the results of his practice in detail, nor does she address the possibilities borne from this work's subversive circulation. My discussion of antagonism and democratic practices in Chapter 4 will play out Bishop's line of thought as it might be applied to an understanding of the multiples that includes the viewer's ability to reciprocate via refashioning or regifting the artwork.

Grant Kester, who squarely positions himself as a critic of Bishop's views,⁶⁶ has also put a bid on defining practices that involve participation. In his book *Conversation Pieces* (2004) he defines the consultative aspect of relational projects as the seed of their genesis, and so he chooses to refer to them as dialogic practices. Kester values conversational and communicative varieties of art practice. The dialogic is a practice for mobilization of aesthetic knowledge. With bravado, Kester expects from this that, "emancipatory insights [are possible] *through* dialogue."⁶⁷ In Kester's view, mapping social terrain is a primary objective for dialogic art practices. In tracing his category's goals back to the expectations of early modernity, Kester could be closely linked with Bourriaud, but the difference is that relational aesthetics considers modernity's teleology

⁶⁶ See his letter to the editor, *Artforum*, Issue 44, No. 9 (May 2006): 22.

⁶⁷ Kester, 2004, 69. Italics original.

and idealism as dead.⁶⁸ Bourriaud is eager to discard the teleology that “announce[s] a future world,” and instead advocates art that is “modeling possible universes.”⁶⁹ For Kester, this hope for transformation *en masse* is very much alive, and not simply theoretically possible as within Bourriaud’s ideal universes, but something art finds itself in the midst of today. The dialogic’s success rests on a structure that is egalitarian, and based on consultancy.

Kester distinguishes his theory from the restrictions of relational aesthetics since he is wary of practices that “position viewers as always/already guilty, treating them as hapless victims of cognitive incompetence who must be guided and ‘catalyzed’ by the insight-laden artist.”⁷⁰ Referring here to the work of Adrian Piper, his argument could be seen just as much as a blow to *Relational Aesthetics*. Kester is irritated by practices that assume a top-down approach to collaboration. The community that Kester describes can operate in creative harmony without the constant guidance of an authorial artist. The artist who operates harmoniously in Kester’s model can be identified as a good practitioner who behaves properly and with strict adherence to the outcomes hoped for by the unitary community.

Through this introduction and review of literature I have presented initial observations about Gonzalez-Torres’s gift works made in seminal writings, and instigated a reconsideration of the multiples in view of recent responses to Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*. A survey of key texts focusing on collaborative and interstitial practices has been assembled to locate the multiples in a history of earlier art practices. The material presented so far will serve as an anchor for the approaching analysis of the artist’s formal

⁶⁸ Bourriaud, 1998. 13.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁷⁰ Kester, 2004, 80.

allusions and ideological associations, the operation of the gift, and his work's complex relationship to democratic political models as reflected in artistic representation.

It is in the context of these issues and through an extended dialogue with this body of literature in the following three chapters that I aim to advance my interpretation of Gonzalez-Torres's multiples as both materially and conceptually based artworks that are most richly experienced by the viewer through participation defined by physical contact, possession, circulation, and even alteration of the object.

Chapter 2

Dark Matter: Bent Ideology and Formalism in the Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Untitled (Death by Gun) (1990) (see Illustration 3 and 4) is a poster stack by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, its printed image from a distance resembling an irregular grid of black dots and squares on a white background. The poster's grainy four hundred and sixty images portray victims of gun-related violence over the course of one week in the United States. Beneath each portrait is a caption describing the victim's death.⁷¹ The caption of Justin Price – aged 12, of Morrison, Oklahoma – reads, "He and another twelve-year-old were playing in a garage with a revolver. In the hands of the playmate, it discharged accidentally into Justin's face." Similar brief but personal and graphic descriptions of each death are included with every hazy photograph. Though usually represented in reproduction as printed on white stock, the poster's ground is actually the color of newsprint. Unlike many of Gonzalez-Torres's other offset posters, *Untitled (Death by Gun)* has irregular line and tonal print quality, causing it to greatly resemble an oversized 33 x 40 inch (83.82 x 101.6 cm) newspaper's obituary page.

⁷¹ If the victim's photograph was unavailable, Gonzalez-Torres represented the individual with a generic silhouette.

Is this work a memorial? An indictment against those apparently responsible for these deaths? Possibly both? In this chapter I suggest that *Untitled (Death by Gun)* and his other poster stacks can be considered beyond these categories by investigating the sources of the artist's aesthetic.

This emotionally charged work extends Gonzalez-Torres's interest in social issues, but is uncharacteristic for the artist in at least two ways: it features photographic portraits and significantly more text than any of his other poster-based works. The overall effect of this aesthetic is a dense and complex visual pattern. Because of these qualities, *Untitled (Death by Gun)* is a pivot for questioning the writing on this artist that places his formal strategies in relation to mid-twentieth century North American Minimalist artists such as Robert Morris (1931-), Donald Judd (1928-1994), and Carl Andre (1935-), but does not examine the ideological overlaps between these practices. The qualities that provoke these comparisons are apparent in Gonzalez-Torres's other works: spare, rectilinear works like *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991) and *Untitled* (1991) for example mimic Judd's, Morris's, and Andre's calculated, formal angles and pared-down aesthetics. Andre's modular compositions such as *Forty-third Copper Cardinal* (1975),⁷² (see Illustration 5) a floor-based sculpture made of forty-three copper plates, seem progenitors of the multiples' modular geometries. Nancy Spector refers to comparisons between Gonzalez-Torres's work and the Minimalists' as "morphological" in nature.⁷³ But the similarities do not end with mathematics, composition, and geometries. Accounts of the formal qualities of Gonzalez-Torres's work infrequently discuss in detail what ideological similarities or inheritances the multiples have with these antecedents. *Untitled*

⁷² *Forty-third Copper Cardinal* (1975). Copper, 43 units. Each unit: 3/16 x 19 5/8 x 19 5/8 in. Total composition: 3/16 x 19 5/8 x 843 7/8 in.

⁷³ Spector. 1995. 16.

(*Death by Gun*), for example, though not Minimalist in its image's appearance still has much in common ideologically with Minimalism. In my discussion of this subject I will bring into play a selection of texts, including Hal Foster's *Return of the Real* (1996) and Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (1967). These voices will be used in conversation with several writings that deal with Gonzalez-Torres's work to express the possible ways for his practice to be considered, after relational aesthetics, as not only arguing against but in many ways continuing with the ideals of Minimalism. In order to add substance to this discussion, I will stage a cursory comparison of the formal vocabularies of Gonzalez-Torres and Carl Andre, drawing primarily from Nicholas Serota's catalogue essay in *Carl Andre: Sculpture 1959-78* (1978).⁷⁴

Bourriaud discusses Gonzalez-Torres's formalism in "Coexistence and Availability: the Theoretical Legacy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres" (1998). According to the author, this artist's work has been highly influential to a subsequent generation of artists including Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Jorge Pardo. The common qualities that Bourriaud identifies are: "transforming the most personal and most complex memories into clear, unadorned forms" and the "minimal, evanescent, subtle aspect of his formal repertoire ... the geometric treatment of functional objects ... [and] color at the center of their concerns," which Bourriaud compares with the "'style' of Gonzalez-Torres in his

⁷⁴ Several other historical precedents exist for Gonzalez-Torres's aesthetic and concept, particularly other gift-based works. Roelof Louw's *Pyramid (Soul City)* (1967) is a pile of nearly six thousand oranges, free for gallery-goers to take with them and eat outside. Sandy Nairne compares Louw's and Gonzalez-Torres's work in "The Institutionalization of Dissent." *Thinking About Exhibitions*. Reesa Greenberg et al, Eds. London; New York: Routledge. 2002. First published 1996. Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974) is a stack of roseate paper featuring text, which asks the viewer to hold a sheet of paper against their body. The visitor is then allowed to take the paper with them. Artist Guilio Paolini exhibited a blank paper stack at the Hayward Gallery in 1993. These last two examples are cited in relation to Gonzalez-Torres's practice by Storr, 13.

chromatic gentleness.”⁷⁵ “Coexistence and Availability” presents lucid reenactments of Minimalist aesthetics in Gonzalez-Torres’s work mirrored in Pardo’s and Gonzalez-Foerster’s practices with the objective of clarifying the author’s category of relational aesthetics. The removal of adornment noted by Bourriaud very strongly evokes the minimal doctrine represented by modernist authors such as Adolf Loos in “Ornament and Crime” (1908).⁷⁶ Loos associates decoration with erotic, primitive impulses, writing, “*The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use.*”⁷⁷ Loos rationalizes this mandate by arguing that linear and evolutionary progression drives the development of forms that are unadorned: the removal of decorative forms is part of Loos’s social program for the betterment of society. Though there are several authors active throughout the twentieth century who argue for the removal of ornament, Loos presents an especially troubled view of design’s evolution tied to a racist mandate. As his argument is so problematic, he provides a unique counterpoint to arguments that the Minimal, unadorned form is without politics or ideology. For Loos, the removal of ornament is a question of social order and sustainability, where design is an integral contributor to the maintenance of governance and the ejection of the primitive.

Gonzalez-Torres borrows the appearance of the reductive, unembellished Loosian turn, and the monochromatic compositions of the Minimalists, and bends them toward his own hopes for the improvement of the social order. If the removal of ornament has associations with Loos and similarly minded theoreticians concerning linear histories and

⁷⁵ Bourriaud, 2001, 331.

⁷⁶ Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” *Crime and Ornament: The arts and popular culture in the shadow of Adolf Loos*, (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2002, Originally published 1908): 29-36.

⁷⁷ Loos, 30. Italics original.

primitivism, an idea at odds with Gonzalez-Torres's general objectives presented thus far, what is the impetus for the artist's use of these aesthetics? Storr claims that Gonzalez-Torres "understood that the time had come to make the jump from [Conceptualism]'s 'pure' forms of the 1970s to impure varieties that could, in their realm, match in rigor those earlier models."⁷⁸ The same could be said of the artist's use of minimalism. The paper stacks are, Storr writes,

as strikingly different and as aesthetically self-sufficient as the various brass, steel, plexi-glass, or common plywood boxes of Donald Judd ... In short, Gonzalez-Torres's stacks conflate the contingent and contrarian qualities of Dada with the absolute presence of high formalist painting and sculpture.⁷⁹

Storr argues that Gonzalez-Torres's form is somehow mutated or cross-pollinated with earlier twentieth-century formal solutions. Absolute presence in Gonzalez-Torres's work is constructed using the high formalist style of artists like Judd, according to Storr. How, then, does the removal of adornment result in a cultivated niche for Gonzalez-Torres's politics to be expressed as the kind of totality – "absolute presence" – identified by Storr? Might this absolute presence be equally demonstrated through Gonzalez-Torres's use of the anti-visual strategies of Conceptual art? Densely compressed at the centre of these questions is whether the Minimalist aesthetic is inherently osmotic and permeable to the insertion and promotion of ideologies. Though a conclusive answer cannot be provided in this thesis, this puzzle fuels my inquiry.

Nancy Spector, a longtime supporter of Gonzalez-Torres's career, explains that the objective for this artist and his contemporaries such as Robert Gober and Keith

⁷⁸ Storr, 13.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 21.

Haring was “not to establish a counterimagery that would somehow be more ‘truthful’ about the social, psychic, and sexual realities of gay life but, rather, to repudiate any unitary notion of (representational) truth.”⁸⁰ These artists felt that any attempt to do so was blatantly insincere. Instead, the artists named by Spector adopted aesthetics historically associated with heterosexual males to subvert the established norms of the art world.⁸¹ Gonzalez-Torres and his contemporaries hoped to inhabit the icons of art histories. This “queering” of form sets up an inquiry about the traditional gender associations of certain aesthetics. Note how distant this aim appears to be from the unitary and absolute goals presented in the Loosian mandate.

Writing that focuses on the Minimalist aesthetic often carries a similar tone to that of Loos and Storr. Anne Rorimer’s catalogue essay on Carl Andre explains,

By eliminating elements or appendages from his work, Andre succeeds in creating sculpture that is immediately grasped as a complete idea. Nothing interferes with a direct experience of his work as it occupies a particular area or place⁸²

The terms that Rorimer uses – the complete idea that is immediately grasped from which extraneous elements have been eliminated – follow Storr’s description of Gonzalez-Torres’s work and also Loos’ plan for the evolution of aesthetics.

Spector maintains that Gonzalez-Torres adopted the Minimal aesthetic in order to “subversively re-present formal paradigms by disrupting their claims to autonomy and objectivity,” and for its “aesthetic appeal.” The autonomy Spector positions Gonzalez-Torres in opposition to is the same variety of autonomy Rorimer applauds Andre for

⁸⁰ Spector, 1995, 14-15.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Anne Rorimer, “The Sculpture of Carl Andre,” *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago*, Vol 72. No. 6. (November 1978): 9.

expressing. Spector is intent on keeping the Minimal program's ideological objectives, beyond simple use of 'unadorned forms,' outside the cloister of Gonzalez-Torres's concerns.

Nicholas Baume's text, which describes Gonzalez-Torres's Minimal forms as being "infused" with politics, fails to communicate the urgency and hostility of the artist's action against historic forms.⁸³ Baume writes that, "While Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work may at first appear primarily conceptual, it is imbued with emotionally charged personal and political meaning."⁸⁴ Baume's language suggests that the conceptual and the emotional are mutually exclusive, as if displays of emotion automatically replace conceptual integrity.

Surprisingly little separates Baume's response from that of Claire Bishop, who profiles the artist's use of Minimalism's formal qualities. She observes that he "invested their anonymous aesthetic with a subtle political and emotional charge."⁸⁵ Her critique suggests that historical forms of minimalism are void of politics or emotion. The proposed political and emotional *results* of Gonzalez-Torres's formalism, and their ideological associations, are curiously absent from Bishop's analysis, particularly in light of the concerns raised in her writing, as discussed in my literature review.

Linked with these readings, Spector presents a somewhat more dynamic response in *Cream 3*, praising Gonzalez-Torres for "infusing" forms with "political and autobiographical content, and not distinguishing between the two."⁸⁶ She goes on to

⁸³ Nicholas Baume. *Getting Emotional*. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2005): 27.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 132.

⁸⁵ Bishop, 2005, 113.

⁸⁶ Phaidon Publishers, *Cream 3*, 427.

express that this work is both “infiltration and subversion.”⁸⁷ This attempt to separate the emotional from the conceptual in Gonzalez-Torres’s practice shadows another attempt to hold this artist’s practice as somehow closer to the concerns of the everyday and political commentary than the work of minimalists. Spector positions Gonzalez-Torres’s as a “lyrical yet rigorously conceptual art,”⁸⁸ and in a later essay she writes that Gonzalez-Torres’s work “exists in a dialogic relation with the art of the immediately preceding decades.”⁸⁹ She stresses a conversational tone between the artist and his references, her tenor suggesting something nearer homage than dialectics.⁹⁰ It is not enough to describe the multiples as only inhabiting dominant forms; they subvert and hijack these forms for other causes, as Spector writes and Bishop implies. I use the verb “hijack” with specific intentions: in order to suggest that this form was originally directed toward a politic, rather than being neutral or anonymous as Bishop’s writing intimates.

Gonzalez-Torres’s practice also responds to the strategies of Conceptual art - its anti-visual tendencies, and use of language. As summarized by Benjamin Buchloh, for example, “the proposal inherent in Conceptual Art was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone ... it thus constituted the most consequential assault on the status of that object, that is to say, its visibility, its commodity status, its form of distribution.”⁹¹ This attitude is evident in the multiples’ primary existence as textual descriptions via contracts, their status as free gifts, and their tracing of social relations.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 427.

⁸⁸ Spector, 2007, 33.

⁸⁹ Spector, 1995, 15.

⁹⁰ I will return to this conversational quality in Chapter 4’s discussion of Grant Kester’s writing.

⁹¹ Buchloh, 1990, 107.

Gonzalez-Torres's contracts behave as textual descriptions of the art object and have an approach to objecthood similar to many key Conceptual artists. For the sake of brevity, I will link his work to the practices of historic Conceptual artists: Joseph Kosuth and Helio Oiticica.

Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) features three representations of a chair: a photograph of a chair, a chair, and a dictionary definition of a chair. A key proposition of these practices is that an artwork's essence is not necessarily contained within an object. Language also transmits and contains artworks. The precise nature of representation is contested by Conceptual strategies such as this. This work proposes that representation is more than visual illustration, and that language is a fundamental tool in artworks. Displaying similar tools and objectives, Gonzalez-Torres's posters are often text-based and include lists of dates and historic events. The genesis of the gift works was *Untitled* (1988), (Illustration 6) a pedestal constructed from wood holding endless copies of photocopies printed on 8 ½ by 11-inch sheets of paper. These white sheets of paper feature black text: "Helms Amendment 1987 Anita Bryant 1977 High-Tech 1980 Cardinal O'Connor 1988 Bavaria 1986 White Night Riots 1979 F.D.A. 1985."⁹² This information is presented with no elaboration in a fashion that recalls the tone of text works by Kosuth, where the viewer's engagement with language is the work's point of encounter with the art object.

Continuing with many of the queries raised by early Conceptual practices, Gonzalez-Torres's work calls into question the physicality of the art object and also its distribution: by making his work available for free within the context of the commercial art system, Gonzalez-Torres's works rupture traditional understandings of ownership and

⁹² The piece's text alludes to historical events, which I will discuss in detail later in this thesis.

collection as it relates to language. Another important link between this artist's practice and Conceptual art is the viewer's physical involvement with the artwork. Historically this has frequently involved the establishment of social relations between viewers – an early hint of the relational aesthetics category. Artist Hélio Oiticica, for example, developed artworks that were social games and performances where the viewer could use the art object as a prop in a larger social experiment. Oiticica's capes are costume-artworks worn alone or in groups to perform dances. While Kosuth and artists like him questioned the location of artworks through text and image, Oiticica challenged the understanding that art is immobile. In a similar way Gonzalez-Torres's stacks and piles become transportable, socially engaged objects while contesting the nature of representation. My discussion of these links must remain brief in this thesis, but a detailed analysis of Gonzalez-Torres's subversion of Conceptual politics in the spirit of my analysis of his associations with Minimal aesthetics would be a fruitful enterprise.

The artist's subversion of aesthetics is tied to his queer politics, but analysis must consider Gonzalez-Torres's investments in subjects other than sexuality and gender. *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, as discussed above, raises awareness of the deadly effects of weaponry in communities, having nothing to do with sexuality specifically. Since his concerns reach far beyond the gay ghetto, why does criticism so frequently consign him to it? Gonzalez-Torres himself provides the fuel for the defense of this position. "In our case," Gonzalez-Torres says in regard to queer appropriation,

we should not be afraid of using such formal references, since they represent authority and history. Why not take them? When we insert our own discourse into these forms, we soil them. We make them dark. We

make them our own and that is our final revenge. We become part of the language of authority, part of history.⁹³

The artist characterizes queerness as “dark” and viral in this passage. Dark matter,⁹⁴ content representing subjectivity, creeps into the minimal form through Gonzalez-Torres’s political position. This appropriative act is calculating and even militant, but it also stands to limit the potential readings of his work outside of queer politics.

As introduced above, the registration of the multiple’s associations is not confined to the formal. It extends to the ideological. What does this relationship, a network of counterpoised and ransomed forms, look like? Bourriaud refers to this process as a “‘recharging’ of already historicized forms,” such as minimal, process, antiform and conceptual art.⁹⁵ This phrase suggests that the antecedent forms Gonzalez-Torres uses no longer carry the energy – and perhaps the politics – they once did. The author hints at what surprisingly sounds like Bishop’s antagonistic aesthetics. Bourriaud says, “the approach of [Gonzalez-Torres] is actually one of the couple, of cohabitation.”⁹⁶ Immediately after this statement, however, Bourriaud underlines that “[w]hat remains essential in this perspective of fusion indicated by Gonzalez-Torres, [is] this *need for harmony and coexistence* that even extends to his relationship with art history.”⁹⁷ Artworks, according to Bourriaud’s model, should be kin to an idealistic vision for romantic interhuman relationships, existing in satisfied conjugal bliss across the

⁹³ Ibid, 15.

⁹⁴ Though this phrase is also used by Gregory Scholette, I include it here as a reference to Gonzalez-Torres’s comments about his own work. For an example of Scholette’s use of the term, see his “Heart of Darkness: A Journey into the Dark Matter of the Art World,” *Visual Worlds*, John R. Hall, Blake Stimson and Lisa T. Becker eds. (New York, London: Routledge, 2005): 116-138.

⁹⁵ Bourriaud, 2001, 331.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid. Italics original.

centuries. As far as Bourriaud's conclusions go, so much more is the pity that what is highly unlikely in matters of the heart – eternal peaceful cohabitation – is both historically inaccurate and unproductive in the analysis of artworks. But a moment's reflection illustrates that developments and changes in aesthetics through history have occurred by dialectics, not through conditions of agreement. Andre, key antecedent for Gonzalez-Torres's work, held that art came from dialectic encounters, in "a convergence of forces."⁹⁸ *Untitled (Death by Gun)*'s politics, which appear to argue against the dangers of publicly available weaponry, do not express or result in harmony, but rather point to the conflicting desires of citizens.

As Brecht famously said, "Real innovations attack the roots,"⁹⁹ and this spirit is represented in Gonzalez-Torres's practice. Returning to the roots, then, is likely to be a useful method for prizing apart the artist's aesthetic virus. Perception and its affect are matters investigated in detail by many Minimalists, introducing vital metamorphoses in art production. For Foster,

As an analysis of perception, minimalism prepared a further analysis of the conditions of perception. This led to a critique of the spaces of art (as in the work of Michael Asher), of its exhibition conventions (as in Daniel Buren), of its commodity status (as in Hans Haacke) – in short, to a critique of the institution of art.¹⁰⁰

This historical cord from perception to institutional critique is taken in hand, then, by Gonzalez-Torres's work.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Quoted in Ballou, Michael and George Morgenstern, "An Interview with Carl Andre," Minneapolis College of Art and Design newspaper, (1976): 1, 4, 8.

⁹⁹ Brecht, 66.

¹⁰⁰ Foster, 59.

¹⁰¹ Robert Nickas observes as much when he compares a Gonzalez-Torres exhibition to Robert Morris' *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1969), pointing out that Morris' project was in continual flux, its resolution always out of reach. Gonzalez-Torres's *Every Week There is*

Rich ground for discussion of this artist's Minimal gift series can be found in the pivotal writing of Michael Fried, an early detractor of Minimalism. Fried argues in "Art and Objecthood" that Minimalist forms are "theatrical," and that they are contingent on the viewer's action in front of the piece.¹⁰² Fried would prefer a singular ecstatic encounter with an artwork that is above the everyday, above mere things. The object's reliance on the compliance, presence, and action of a viewer presents a conflict for Fried. It is in his concluding remarks that his indictment against the Minimal form proves most useful for the purposes of this thesis. The author brands the work of minimalist Tony Smith as "always of further interest," but Fried does not intend this to be complimentary, since,

one never feels that one has come to the end of it; it is inexhaustible. It is inexhaustible, however, not because of any fullness – *that* is the inexhaustibility of art – but because there is nothing there to exhaust. It is endless in the way a road might be, if it were circular, for example.¹⁰³

Fried's endlessness of the Minimal form foreshadows later concerns in art history for participatory art works, which can never be defined as complete since they always lie in wait for the next viewer's engagement.¹⁰⁴ The work, he fears, is never fully manifest.¹⁰⁵

Something Different (1991) has similar characteristics, but, as the title suggests, this exhibition's objects are not only altered but removed. Nickas, 89. See Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge; London: MIT Press; New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. 1995, First MIT edition, 1993).

¹⁰² Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, First published 1967): 148-172.

¹⁰³ Fried, 166.

¹⁰⁴ This is linked not only to the form of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's poster stacks, and to the piece-by-piece nature of his artworks' individual segments, but also the mandate that these works must continue *ad infinitum*. For a contemporary discussion of this infinitude and incompleteness in relational practices, see Bishop, 2004, 51-79.

¹⁰⁵ Fried, 163, 164.

The conflict that Fried identifies in his text comes out of his defense of art as a discrete category, outside of the everyday and the banal.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's multiples can be considered in two ways from Fried's anti-Minimalist position: either the artist replicates the everyday act of giving and places it within the cloistered commercial art world, thus shattering the boundary Fried sees protecting art from "mere things;" or the artist replicates the syntax of the Minimal artwork and uses it to invade the everyday. It could also be argued that this work returns the category of art-as-everyday to the everyday. Which faction is invading which territory? The latter is, for my concerns, a much more fruitful approach in light of the present enthusiasm for the relational.¹⁰⁶ Gonzalez-Torres's work does not only invade the everyday experience of the viewer with his practice – in keeping with his ambitions to improve situations for all people, quoted in the Introduction to this thesis – but also maintains a continual dialogue between his practice, his personal life, art history, and current events, as evident in a topical work like *Untitled (Death by Gun)*.

A reflection upon Bourriaud's relational critique of Gonzalez-Torres's practice balanced against Fried's statements quoted above will prove useful presently. Bourriaud writes, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres used historicized forms to reveal their ideological foundations and to construct a new alphabet to struggle against sexual norms."¹⁰⁷ The revelation of ideological foundations results in a new alphabet, which can be nothing less than a new ideology. Bourriaud's text implies that art's objectives are inherently above political ideology, in a restricted category outside of the everyday, yet he wishes to see art's realization overlap as closely as possible with the quotidian and be as expansive as

¹⁰⁶ The former possibility, that Gonzalez-Torres troubles the art market with his minimal gift works, will be examined in Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁷ Bourriaud, 2002, 62.

possible. Bourriaud's statement that "the artwork is presented as a *social interstice* within which these experiments and these new 'life possibilities' appear to be possible,"¹⁰⁸ eludes the chance that the practice of art-making itself, outside of its material results, can carry ideological associations. Just as the Minimal forms of Judd and Andre and the Conceptual strategies of Oiticica and Kosuth were imbued with ideological associations, so are Gonzalez-Torres's, even if their strategy of rerouting form toward gifting seems neutral and without ideology.

In Spector's observation that, "by inviting his viewers to share in the work – literally allowing them to take a part of it and figuratively inducing them to project their own experiences into its *quiet, blank expanses*"¹⁰⁹ we can see how the work's aesthetic lineage becomes integral to its enacted effects as stressed by Fried. Spector's emphasis on the quietness of the work obscures its overtly political strategy, but her intention is to profile the way that the multiples invite the subjective views and experiences of its audiences. Expanse is here not only related to bounty and plentitude, nor to Minimalism's reflections of the void; it also suggests the infinite territory that Gonzalez-Torres's work might occupy, beyond the institution and into the everyday. The artist's manipulation of historical Conceptual strategies that profile the anti-visual is a good portion of what enables this possibility. As Fried fears, "it is inexhaustible." It is viral. The rigid angles of modernism, the reader might be led to think, are hence softened by Gonzalez-Torres's generous offer, which welcomes the viewer into the evaluation of history from a standpoint of subjectivity that is capable of overtaking any context. Spector also writes that, "Gonzalez-Torres opens up a communal space in which the various meanings of the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 45.

¹⁰⁹ Spector, 1995, 18, Emphasis mine.

work begin to coalesce”¹¹⁰ but her phrasings point to a further concern. If “various meanings” are permitted, heterogeneous opinions and subjectivities can be represented – a seemingly noble outcome – but how can a method simultaneously encompass discrete stances without collapsing into universalism?

If Gonzalez-Torres’s work is created from a subjective political position – a position representing one standpoint, one way – the risks of its ability to spread virally, inexhaustibly, should raise alarm. bell hooks’s analysis of the artist’s work describes the situation as follows: “what is captured here [in Gonzalez-Torres’s work] is a moment of utter oneness where the experience of union, of perfect love, transcends the realm of the senses. No boundaries exist. There are no limits.”¹¹¹ This seems to describe a hegemony of love and agreement, signaling one possible and dangerous outcome of utopian aims.¹¹²

Having raised these concerns, I will now turn to Foster’s *Return of the Real* in order to investigate one contemporary critical position of Minimalism’s aesthetics near the time of Gonzalez-Torres’s production. Written in the year of Gonzalez-Torres’s death, Foster’s assessment of artists’ reception and revisitation of Minimalism in the 1990s might have been written about Gonzalez-Torres’s gift works themselves. Foster writes,

This return [of minimal aesthetics] is a mixed event: often rather than a working through of the problems left by minimalism, it appears strategic and/or reactive. Thus there are strategic revisions of minimalism that

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 18.

¹¹¹ bell hooks, “subversive beauty: new modes of contestation,” *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Julie Ault, ed, (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin, 2006): 178.

¹¹² The political results of this stance are discussed in Chapter 4.

refashion it in iconographic, expressive, and/or spectacular terms – as if to attack it with the very terms that it opposed.¹¹³

This passage may not initially reveal how Foster aims to distinguish between practices that work through problems, which seem in his estimation to be superior works, and those that simply react with strategies. His closing clause in this quotation sheds light on the matter, however. Foster's pejorative category turns itself against Minimalism with strategies gathered from the camps of its historical antagonists: Pop art, for example. Foster also cautions against the refiguration of Minimalism within "expressive" terms, and I suggest that the emotionalism, personal biography, and sentiment present in Gonzalez-Torres's work does exactly this within the formal vocabulary of the Minimalists. This investment suggests the Minimalist form, stripped down, also could have its own cloaked sentiments, again challenging Bishop's classification of Minimalism's anonymous aesthetic.

Foster proposes a "counter-memory" of Minimalism as a preface to the post-modern critique so in vogue at the time of his writing.¹¹⁴ Rather than discard the efforts of key Minimalist artists, Foster suggests an assessment of the movement as a "return of the readymade,"¹¹⁵ cautioning that history has been too quick to declare Minimalism as "reductive" and "idealist."¹¹⁶ The kernel of Foster's discussion is that,

to avoid the relational and the illusionist, as minimalist sought to do through its insistence on nonhierarchical orderings and literal readings, is in principle to avoid the aesthetic correlates of this ideological idealism as well.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Foster, 1996, 59-60.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 36.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 38.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 40.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 42.

These objectives might not sound so different from Gonzalez-Torres's aspirations for the blend of emotional / subjective content and pure form in the process suggested by Bourriaud and Spector. But Foster argues later in his text that, "minimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power."¹¹⁸ This viewpoint may seem one that utterly divides Gonzalez-Torres's practice from Minimal ideologies. The situation is not quite this simple, however, since although Gonzalez-Torres's work promotes the particularism that finds itself outside of the *a priori* position of the minimalists as described by Foster – before or outside history, and so on – his work simultaneously has been utilized by institutions and curators to promote histories and discourses of power, as indicated in Chapter 5's discussion of the Serpentine Gallery's use of Gonzalez-Torres's work as gestures of thanks and social negotiation. The ambivalence of the artist's concept combined with apparent neutrality of many of his images finds itself poised for ideological abduction. It is this possibility that motivates my earlier question about the permeability of the Loosian aesthetic. The question at hand, then, is how artworks will or can be used.

With this framework of Fried's essay, Foster's response, and critical writings on Gonzalez-Torres's formalism in place, discussion can now lead into an account of similarity and difference between the gift works and work by arch-Minimalist Carl Andre. To introduce these subjects, consider first Foster's account of his friend's daughter playfully interacting with a group of Minimal sculptures. The book's illustration on the facing page suggests the work in question to be Robert Morris' *Untitled* (1977), a network of geometric spans of beam. The child uses *Untitled*'s long planks as balancing beams:

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 43.

her playing of the piece conveyed not only specific concerns of minimalist work – the tensions among the spaces we feel, the images we see, and the forms we know – but also general shifts in art over the last three decades – new interventions into space, different constructions of viewing, and expanded definitions of art.¹¹⁹

Foster suggests that this child is putting theory into practice, engaging with Minimal form through play by performing on it, linking perception with the critique of institutional protection of objects. Foster only begins to acknowledge the possibilities of this action in this introductory text. Keeping this performance and Foster's delighted observation of it in mind, it is important not to discard the possibility that the broad expanse of the Minimal form has resulted in inclusivity evident in the work of Minimalist artists. Specifically Andre's work, which calls for haptic or ontological encounters, seems in retrospect a radically generous gesture. This example expresses the link between the alteration of perception and institutional critique in art practices.

Andre's copper, steel, lead, and magnesium plate works can be seen to represent passages and paths, in keeping with his well-known observation that contemporary sculpture is concerned with "sculpture as place."¹²⁰ But these works, which are composed of metal cubic plates resting on the gallery floor, can also be "used" by viewers, touched by viewers, walked on by viewers. Initiates may recognize an Andre immediately, and the especially bold will make a point of marching triumphantly over the work. The serial form of Andre's works and their embrace of mass reproduced materials are facets of Minimalist practice discussed extensively by Foster.¹²¹ The resemblance of his work to

¹¹⁹ Ibid, ix.

¹²⁰ Nicholas Serota, *Carl Andre: Sculpture 1959-78*, (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery. 1978): Unpaginated, 10.

¹²¹ Foster, 62.

“mere things” such as industrial flooring panels, or arrangements of bricks in construction sites, is what raises Fried’s concern, and the attentive viewer will notice that these qualities are equally present in Gonzalez-Torres’s work. Andre’s works, which deteriorate and erode with time, have a great deal in common with the vanishing and transitory works of Gonzalez-Torres. Additionally, Andre’s work and its invitation for participation and alteration of the work must be seriously considered as a key precedent for the Conceptual attitude Bourriaud uses in the development his relational aesthetics methodology. Andre’s viewers are participants who contribute to the work’s development and damage over time. I would also argue that the scenario presented by Andre’s 1960s and 1970s sculptures, as architectural fragments that can be walked on and inhabited by viewers, bear great similarity to the kinds of temporary community spaces that Bourriaud argues distinguish the art of the 1990s in Europe and North America.¹²²

Nicholas Serota’s catalogue essay for Andre’s 1978 exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery examines the work’s entropic quality. He explains that Andre, “accepts the changes that occur over time,” and quotes the artist as saying, “the work becomes its own record of everything that’s happened to it.”¹²³ Entropy is admitted into Andre’s work, and this conceptual feature – as well as the formalism that drives mid-century artists like Andre – is what lures Gonzalez-Torres.

To add flesh to this discussion, it will be necessary to return to questions raised by “Art and Objecthood,” and possible responses in light of the multiples. Fried’s ambitions for art’s integrity initially seems at odds with Suzanne Perling Hudson’s discussion of Gonzalez-Torres’s practice. Her argument is that Gonzalez-Torres’s gift, by allowing the

¹²² The kind of conversation meant to be provoked by a Rirkrit Tiravanija or Liam Gillick work seems just as likely to happen in the architectural construct of an Andre, for example.

¹²³ Serota, 21.

work to gradually vanish and replenish, crumbles the singularity and wholeness of the artwork. She writes, “the integrity of a stable and unitary work is thereby renounced,” by Gonzalez-Torres’s work.¹²⁴ If this is the case, his practice is in direct opposition to the totality of form and singularity of expression proposed by critics of Andre like Rorimer. Perling Hudson writes, “the structure of the work quite literally (formally) enacts the absence upon which its wounded beauty is premised, encouraging the viewer to meditate on the participatory space the work engenders.”¹²⁵ Stability is challenged, as Perling Hudson says, by the audience’s removal of the gift and insertion of the work into an everyday context.

Minimalist or “literalist” works are endless by Fried’s estimation, giving the audience an eternal replication of the everyday, something that Fried hopes that artwork can offer escape from by providing a singular experience grasped instantaneously.¹²⁶ For Perling Hudson, this simulation or literalism - which questions the stability of the artwork and its boundaries and refuses to offer an instantaneous experience - is what imbues the work with a “wounded beauty” that causes the viewer to see and participate in a situation of loss, the gift resulting in continual re-disappearance. Perling Hudson’s analysis of Gonzalez-Torres’s work is apt, but while considering its relevance to the subject of appropriated form, the reader must not overlook the haptic facet of works by Minimalists such as Andre. Perling Hudson’s quotation above could be used convincingly to defend Andre’s work rather than Gonzalez-Torres’s against the critiques of his era: Andre’s modular and reconfigurable metal plates “renounce” stability through the scuffing of

¹²⁴ Suzanne Perling Hudson, “Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism,” *October*, No 104, (Spring 2003): 127.

¹²⁵ Perling Hudson, 127.

¹²⁶ Fried, 166, 167.

viewer's shoes, traces of fingerprints, and scratches, are not "stable" but in fact demonstrate a "wounded beauty" through the markings left by their audience, thus welcoming visitors to reflect on their contribution to the realization of this work's long-term existence. Though Perling Hudson's argument is carefully constructed, it is surprising to see that her position can also be used to prove how much Gonzalez-Torres has in common with his Minimalist forebears.

Gonzalez-Torres's project suggests the erosion of these Minimalist forms, but also their replenishment. Rejuvenation or repair of form was not a part of Andre's program, and in this sense one might consider Gonzalez-Torres's as even more problematized by *hubris*, legacy, and infinitude than a work like *Forty-third Copper Cardinal*. Gonzalez-Torres stresses that his works are impossible to destroy since they exist first as a concept: they "are indestructible because they can be endlessly duplicated. They will always exist because they don't really exist or because they don't have to exist all the time."¹²⁷ Tallman similarly observes that the multiples are "perfect, unalterable objects, imposing meanings that brook no argument."¹²⁸ Could not similar language be used to describe and potentially attack the supposedly narrow messages associated with the removal of ornament, such as Loos'? Gonzalez-Torres retains the unadorned form, echoes entropic flexibility, and uses the Minimal aesthetic for the promotion of his own subjectivity, which is then molded into a participatory experience not unlike that proposed by Andre.

In conclusion, and by way of introduction to the following chapter, I ask, "What are the allowances that promote or permit such engagement with the Minimal form?"

¹²⁷ Rollins, 22.

¹²⁸ Tallman, 126.

Perling Hudson offers that, “Minimalism therefore provided [Gonzalez-Torres] a set of formal and visual strategies that allowed a transgressive critique precisely because of the seeming neutrality and seriality of its forms.”¹²⁹ Note Perling Hudson’s use of “allowed” in this passage. This word suggests that it was no great struggle for Gonzalez-Torres to counterpose within the Minimal framework, that the historical movement *invited* him to do so.

Dialectics are at the core of the gift works’ inception. The Minimalist and Conceptual theses seem to find its antithesis in the emotionalism of Gonzalez-Torres’s practice, but as argued above, the multiples in some ways continue with the traditions established by Minimalists and Conceptualists, and discussed by Fried, Rorimer, and Foster. When critic Tony Godfrey writes of Andre’s 1996 Oxford exhibition, “In this latter work the elements are left around like words awaiting syntax – the room providing a temporary but satisfying sentence,”¹³⁰ there is a sense of anticipation. Are there glimmers here of possibilities for the further hijacking of form? Minimal art provides a gateway by offering a temporary grammar that is open to disruption and restructuring. The dialectic process cannot and will not end with Gonzalez-Torres’s multiples and their gifting as the conclusion of an historical aesthetic argument, and Gonzalez-Torres’s form finds itself radically available for re-use and response, as the remainder of this thesis will argue. The broad possibilities for extemporized responses to Minimalist form – for artists today and in the future – are varied and legion indeed.

¹²⁹ Perling Hudson, 127.

¹³⁰ Tony Godfrey, “Carl Andre. Oxford,” *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 138, No. 1120, (July 1996): 474.

Chapter 3

The Bountiful and Dissenting Gift: Art, Activism and Generosity

[Life is w]hen it goes on 'doing something', moving, exchanging material with its environment, and so forth, and ... for a much longer period than we would expect an inanimate piece of matter to 'keep going' under similar circumstances.¹³¹

~ Erwin Schroedinger

RN "With the stack pieces, you can take a rolled up sheet from the gallery and 'get the piece', but there's no way you can remove it entirely. It's portable, yet unmovable."

FGT "Even if you take it all away, more can be printed. Even the "unique" stack sometimes gets reprinted and shown in two places at the same time."

RN "They're comprised of 'endless copies'. In terms of the subject of time, the pieces being made of a vulnerable material, and the fact that they can easily disappear, being endless means it can also reappear..."¹³²

~ Interview between Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Robert Nickas

Schroedinger's definition of living systems written from a biological perspective could be mistaken for a diagnosis of the circulation of art objects, which move through systems economic, social, and political – even across epochs – with or without the consent of their creators. The art works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, however, are specifically engineered to track through these same systems as part of their conceptual mandate, their movement being born from an act of giving. A stack or pile of his

¹³¹ Quoted in Evelyn Fox Keller, *Refiguring Life: Metaphors of Twentieth-Century Biology*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995): 66-67.

¹³² Robert Nikas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the time in the world," *Flash Art*, Vol. 24, No. 161, (November/December, 1991): 86-89.

multiples, owned, regulated, and reproduced by a museum, collection, or gallerist, serves as the point of distribution for the project's operation. His multiples are gifts to their viewers, and exist as an infinite edition, meaning that their materiality and content can be transmitted widely. Gonzalez-Torres's aesthetics and also his politics are propagated by this project.

What are the terms and conditions of Gonzalez-Torres's gifts? Are these gifts owned rather than merely possessed by its recipient? This chapter will address what effect these distinctions have upon the work's status as commodity, and will attempt to characterize Gonzalez-Torres's gifts as contingent, dissenting, and promoting disagreement in their audiences. Gonzalez-Torres's work has been framed as a point of dispensation whereby the museum can forge strong alliances with its constituents through the gift, and therefore adopt a tone of self-reflexive institutional critique by allowing viewers to transgress long observed but historically critiqued rules about physical contact with works, and also the ownership of art objects. This chapter will demonstrate an understanding of Gonzalez-Torres's objects that refigures them as attempts to present particular political views while allowing its audience disparate political positions. Concurrently, his multiples remain commodified gifts, by which I mean that generosity as a conceptual feature of his work is what determines the use-value of his project, and therefore its value on the art market. By presenting these small gifts, Gonzalez-Torres *profits*, and I will argue that it is this acquiescence to the nature of the capitalist market and its flagship institutions that has insured a tolerance for the radical political positions his work presents.¹³³ From this observation I will demonstrate that the artist's multiples

¹³³ Gonzalez-Torres responds to this situation by saying, "For me it makes a lot of sense to be part of the market. It would be very expected, very logical and normal and 'natural' for me to be in

are antagonistic gifts grounded in materiality. These subjects will prepare the passage for the next chapter's discussion of democracy in relation to the artist's work.

Since Gonzalez-Torres's project invites contingency by allowing owners and curators to determine the dimensions of the work, the gift works carry the suggestion that they might extend infinitely into any setting, and this adaptability may in part account for his works' popularity for inclusion in group thematic exhibitions and biennales. Gonzalez-Torres's practice celebrates endless supply, abundance, and freedom: the images that the artist uses – limitless oceans, vast skies – are frequently interpreted in the writing on his work as metaphors for the bounty of the gift.¹³⁴ While a great deal of writing on the artist's work praises these two qualities, I aim to problematize them. To aid in my approach, I will draw on Arjun Appadurai's "Commodities and the Politics of Value," (1986) which explains how objects – even gifts – can move in and out of commodity status. Other sources that will assist my inquiry include Marcel Mauss's influential text *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1950), Mark Osteen's *The Question of the Gift: Essays across disciplines* (2002), and Jean Starobinski's *Largesse* (1997), sources which examine the gift as polyvalent, riddled, and in some cases a potentially dangerous tool. As a counterpoint, I will also examine the literature about Gonzalez-Torres that dwells on the philanthropic qualities of the artist's gifting.

Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* has served as an anthropological landmark on the subject of generosity's social operation. A brief outline of this author's thesis will set up a

alternative spaces, but it's more threatening that people like me are operating as part of the market – selling the work, especially when you consider that, yes, this is just a stack of paper that I didn't even touch." Nickas, 20.

¹³⁴ For one example, see Charles Merewether, "The Spirit of the Gift," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 1994, 61.

rich discussion of the gift's effects and implications in Gonzalez-Torres's work. The often-quoted centrepiece of Mauss' argument is that gifts, which he groups under the terms "potlatch" and "total services," are "in theory ... voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily."¹³⁵ He cites Germanic, Roman, Polynesian, and Maori examples of gifting, among others, based on a primitivist perspective and suggesting that gifted objects have their own agency. His research question is in part summarized as follows,

*What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?*¹³⁶

Mauss hopes to prove that these same strains of gifting economies, which he locates in the past, still exist in his mid-twentieth century contemporary society. The question raised by this text in relationship to the artist's work is whether art history should consider the multiples themselves as operative forms somehow capable of provoking social relations in a way different from antecedent traditional forms of art making simply because they adopt the form of a gift. Art history must also address the nature of the gift Gonzalez-Torres offers, since much critical writing about the artist's practice assumes that his gifts are given without expectations for reciprocity. I will argue that his practice is distinguished from many antecedents by its potential and actual social effects, because

¹³⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. W.D. Halls, (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1990. First published "Essai sur le Don." *Sociologie et Anthropologie*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1950): 3.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 3. Italics in original.

these art objects remain itinerant, and also because they invite reconfiguration in the viewer's opportunity for reciprocity.

Gonzalez-Torres's offer appears an act of magnanimity. Viewers, it seems, are fortunate to have the opportunity to own a segment of a larger artwork worth a significant sum because of the artist's openness of spirit. Spector frames his work as "singularly generous."¹³⁷ But if one places stock in Mauss' argument, it is important to consider that Gonzalez-Torres's gifts have consequences for their receivers, who become somehow responsible by virtue of their acceptance of the gift. Viewer, collector, and curator become engaged in Gonzalez-Torres's plan upon receipt of the gift. When Gonzalez-Torres's multiples are purchased by a collector, responsibilities shift: if this artist's work appears at auction, a group of bidders compete for the right and responsibility to give this work away for free, as well as the financial burden associated with its ongoing production. What they obtain as its stewards is more than possession; it is also an assumption of duty. All gifts have terms, and the multiples are no exception. But what force sets up their administration?

Mauss examines the Maori *hau*, a spiritual power that resides in the object given, that obliges the receiver to give in return; this *hau* is carried by or follows anyone who

¹³⁷ Phaidon Publishers, *Cream 3*, 427. Note that Thomas Krens in his preface for *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (1995) uses exactly the same phrase, "singularly generous," to introduce this artist's work. Notably, much of Krens essay, written nearly a decade before the publication of *Cream 3*, closely resembles Spector's later text. While Krens says, "Gonzalez-Torres invites his viewers to interpret the work as they will, in recognition that meaning is always dependent on cultural context," (viii) Spector writes, "Gonzalez-Torres offered his viewers to interpret the work as they wish, in recognition that meaning is always contingent on the context in which it is encountered." (427) In my research for this thesis I found many examples of texts which echoed sentiments of earlier texts, but I cite this particular case in order to demonstrate not only how entrenched this particular reading of the artist's work has become, but also the specificity of the analytical vocabulary employed. See Thomas Krens, "Preface and Acknowledgements," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1995): viii-x.

takes the gift subsequently.¹³⁸ Mauss connects this giving to a linkage of the giver's and receiver's souls. By accepting the gift, the receiver also accepts a portion of the giver's very being. This spiritual outcome associated with *hau* is, of course, impossible to demonstrate empirically with an artist's work, but rather than cast aside this concept, analysis will benefit from reconsidering this abstract form as an authority defined by the artist, but also as a gate that allows the receiver entry into the artwork and the freedom to do with it as they choose. The gifted multiple and the viewer's liberty to display, discard, or otherwise use the work suggests a form of power is passed on to the viewer. But in this exchange power is also passed to the giver, Gonzalez-Torres. Returning to a nomenclature of the gift, Mauss describes that gifting results in *mana* for the benefactor, building prestige and power – “the talisman and source of wealth that is authority itself.”¹³⁹ This model corresponds readily with Gonzalez-Torres's situation, since his notoriety increases in direct relation to the quantity of posters distributed.¹⁴⁰

Gifts are contingent because they require that the giver cede possession to another. Dispensations conventionally referred to as gifts, however, rarely involve an anonymous receiver as Gonzalez-Torres's case does. Another peculiarity of this gifting practice is that it continues posthumously and still is distributed as a gift from the artist. These aspects only serve to add uncertainty to a gifting method that is already contingent. How might a receiver reciprocate to a giver who is no longer alive, and is someone that they do not know?

¹³⁸ Mauss, 12.

¹³⁹ Mauss, 8.

¹⁴⁰ It would be tempting to suggest that the market value of the multiples also inflates according the rising distribution of his work. This relationship is specious, however, since it is conceivable that at some point the work, if made available on the secondary market (which in the present climate seems unlikely since he produced so few objects) may drop in value.

As Gonzalez-Torres describes them, the multiples are, “always extremely unstable ... I enjoy that danger, that instability, that in-betweenness,”¹⁴¹ which he ties to cultural expectations for his social role as a gay man who must function in both normative and transgressive roles. He next suggests that these objects are a threat to the art market since they do not have an original, and “you cannot destroy something that does not exist.”¹⁴² Gonzalez-Torres implies that his work is indestructible since it first exists as a concept rather than an object, and this quality may have motivated Hal Foster’s description of the multiples as a “precarious gift.”¹⁴³ Ostensibly, one also cannot *sell* something that does not exist, yet his work has been purchased and sold extensively. Gonzalez-Torres’s statement ignores that at some point, his work requires physical presence in order to become manifest. Furthermore, Gonzalez-Torres’s suggests that the artwork itself exists only conceptually, but this assumption overlooks the fact that the work’s materiality is the viewer’s primary point of encounter with the multiples. On the subject of materiality, Joshua Mack writes, “The work remains incomplete until it is shared,” since, “the act of sharing both diminishing its mass (although it can be replenished) and completing it, a metaphor, on one level, for the act of loving.”¹⁴⁴ If the artist requires the viewer to participate in order for the work to exist and function, then this requirement also demands that the work have materiality in order for the work to be used. Mack continues,

¹⁴¹ Hans Ulrich Obrist and Thomas Boutoux, eds, “Gonzalez-Torres, Felix,” *Interviews, Volume I*, (Florence; Milan: Fondazione Pitti Immagine Discovery; Charta): 311.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 311-312.

¹⁴³ Foster, “Chat Rooms,” 190.

¹⁴⁴ Joshua Mack, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Roni Horn: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 31 March – 30 April,” *Modern Painters*, (July-August 2005): 100.

the candy achieves its full aesthetic potency when the viewer plucks it from the pile and places it in his mouth. The value of the work, then, is not in its expensive, discrete self, but in its physical and sensory transfer to the viewer, a shift of value which is deeply political.¹⁴⁵

This shift of value is only culminated by the material removal of goods from the museum by the viewer. Possibly this figures into the threat perceived by gallerist Andrea Rosen, who asserts that the individual candies and posters are not artworks, because to include them in the artist's *oeuvre* as separate pieces would undermine the rarity of the artist's objects and therefore compromise their market price.¹⁴⁶ Rosen's interest in defending the singularity of the stacks and piles by virtue of their authenticity and unique nature is obvious. Her interests are in opposition to the sentiment behind Gonzalez-Torres' statements; while Rosen does her best to evade it, he relishes in the threat.

As the multiples are made available to all, it is unavoidable that some viewers will accept the offer and later reject it, possibly by discarding or destroying the work in question. The work's constant availability does not discourage this outcome, since even if discarded, the bounty of the work ensures replacements will always exist. It is not unusual as a result to see abandoned posters in dustbins or cast on the ground near sites of Gonzalez-Torres's exhibitions as discussed in Chapter 4.¹⁴⁷ Unless reclaimed by curious passersby, these discards can be effectively classified as lost and destroyed. As to be explained later in this thesis, Gonzalez-Torres saw this kind of response to his work as malicious. Though Mauss does not directly address the discarded, appropriated, or reconfigured gift and the implications for the *hau*, he does write that the destroyed gift is

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 101.

¹⁴⁶ This is a gloss of the subject, since the complexities and unpredictability of market forces are too great a matter to discuss in detail here.

¹⁴⁷ I observed this to be the case during exhibitions I viewed at Miami's Art Basel Miami Beach 2006, and at the Venice Biennale 2007. This phenomenon will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

not necessarily an insult or assault against the giver, and so this does not indicate a rejection of the artist's politics.

In some forms of potlatch, Mauss writes, gifts are destroyed deliberately as sumptuary proof of dominance and bounty.¹⁴⁸ Houses, blankets, and other valuables are ignited, "the most valuable copper objects are broken and thrown into the water, in order to put down and to 'flatten' one's rival."¹⁴⁹ By offering the bountiful gift, an individual makes a bid at surpassing his opponents and effectively proving that his moral code, values, or leadership, are superior. "It is a competition," Mauss concludes, "to see who is the richest and the most madly extravagant. Everything is based upon the principles of antagonism and rivalry."¹⁵⁰ Jean Starobinski counters, suggesting that with the gift,

the ties to one's possessiveness come undone in every possible manner: either the object becomes tainted or breaks (some objects are as fragile as soap bubbles), or the possessors move beyond frivolity and, seized by melancholy, touched by conversion, or vanquished by absurdity, let go of them.¹⁵¹

According to Starobinski, then, not every case of generosity that leads to discard proves prestige. The motives for Starobinski's discarded gift are closely observed here; fragility, melancholy, and absurdity all play roles in the offering made refuse. Mauss' discarded gift – which is a gift given through its sacrifice – is profiled as noble and impregnated with authority, while Starobinski describes the gift as tainted or broken, turned refuse by the receiver. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's multiples can be analyzed according to both models, not only as gifts meant to secure social relations, but gifts that promote the

¹⁴⁸ Mauss, 1990, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 37.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 37.

¹⁵¹ Jean Starobinski, *Largesse*, Trans. Jane Marie Todd, (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997): 53.

artist's own politics as aligned with the positive values of generosity and bounty. Good citizenship, which is often associated with the gift as a humanitarian endeavor, as I will argue below, is a screen this artist uses to infiltrate communities with his own politics.

As explained in Bertolt Brecht's "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," which Gonzalez-Torres acknowledges as one of his major inspirations, "society absorbs via the apparatus whatever it needs in order to reproduce itself"¹⁵²; the multiples are no exception to this rule. Though branded with political content, their apparently philanthropic qualities, rather than their operation as tools of political dissent, have been emphasized by sponsoring museums, curators, and collectors. The interests that drive such a position seem obvious: to usher in a popular understanding of the creative act as one founded on giving, supporting, and providing for audiences and society at large. The artist by this model is placed in a role of a "good citizen," which secures rather than questions the stability of institutions.

This quality of endless provision suggests that the art work's values, if followed, will lead to ongoing prosperity for its audience, thus in keeping with Mauss's suggestion that the excessive gift is a tool to evince superiority. Starobinski's link between the gift and fragility has clear links to Gonzalez-Torres's easily dented, torn, crushed and trampled gift. Initially, their frailty might seem of little consequence: Gonzalez-Torres's gift is infinitely-editioned, so the damaged copy can always be replaced. There is nothing that distinguishes each copy at the moment of gifting. But the movement and possible alteration of the object after the moment of gifting ensures that each one does become a unique object. The further the object wanders from its point of origin or time of dispersal,

¹⁵² Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre." *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Julie Ault, ed. (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl, 2006): 61.

the greater it is differentiated. As Susan Tallman explains, “with each removal it moves out from that concise block into the broad, dilute space of the edition, spread over a hundred walls, drawers, refrigerators ... and there assumes a life both linked to the original sculpture and independent of it.”¹⁵³ Tallman’s question about the fate of Gonzalez-Torres’s work might be addressed by an extensive investigation of a single multiple after its receipt and passage into an owner’s life, as a piece of evidence about this owner’s proclivities and haunts. This is a methodology of material forensics. Was the poster pinned to a wall or framed? Was it pasted on a bathroom stall in Prague? Gently folded and inserted into a book in San Francisco? Fragile objects are prone to marking and scuffing from contact with their carriers, making them unique, and also indicating how they have been handled, the places they have been stored and displayed. Each of these decisions by the viewer who accepts the gift are forms of reciprocity that set their copy apart from all others in the infinite edition.¹⁵⁴ All the multiples are subject to material loss and weathering, and these marks cause each one to become a unique and singular object, problematizing Rosen’s stance that their infinite nature excludes them from the category of art objects.

Having described this position on fragility and singularity, my discussion can return to the subject of prestige and excessive giving. Mauss writes, “competition, rivalry, ostentatiousness, the seeking after the grandiose, and the stimulation of interest – there are the various motives that underlie all these actions”¹⁵⁵ of gifting. Even with humble gifts there is the pursuit of interest. Gonzalez-Torres’s giving is grandiose because of the

¹⁵³ Susan Tallman, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Social Works,” *Parkett*, No. 39. (1991): 124.

¹⁵⁴ Gonzalez-Torres says in interview that he once found *Untitled (Death by Gun)* pinned up in an employee’s toilet at a museum in Germany. See Rollins, 24.

¹⁵⁵ Mauss, 28.

infinite scale of his project, which is secured by the relatively small cost of replicating the gift *ad infinitum*. Manufactured simply, from accessible materials, the multiples can be cheaply reproduced by hosting institutions, making gifting viable. If the giftworks were built from expensive or rare materials, it would render the project impossible. Since these materials are so readily accessible a gate is left open for third parties – relational “abductors” – to truly interlocate and intervene in the operation of the artist’s work. As observed by Fuchs,

Insight into the fundamental interlink between private and public matters [in Gonzalez-Torres’s work] determines a kind of authorship as the mediation of what is only seemingly disparate whereby the renunciation of the self and allowing the work to be destroyed are also forms of self-preservation, self-control, and the preservation of the work.¹⁵⁶

By this token, the abundant and inexpensively reproduced gift, with its potential to be destroyed, secures the multiple’s position as a constant form of authority and distribution of politics. At the same time, the received and then discarded gift also serves to further support the advancement of Gonzalez-Torres’s work, since it equally promotes the circulation of the project’s *modus operandi* by its continual replenishment. In this case, the poster turned rubbish is just as beneficial to the multiple’s concept as the poster cherished and preserved.

A surplus of gifts also encourages recipients to take more than they might need themselves, opening up other opportunities for the multiples to be re-routed through re-gifting. The initial recipient of the gift has the option to channel the work toward other viewers who might not encounter the work otherwise. This expanded distribution

¹⁵⁶ Rainer Fuchs, “The Authorized Viewer,” *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Julie Ault, ed. (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin, 2006): 115.

network challenges the understanding of Gonzalez-Torres's exhibited poster stacks as the point of dispensation that somehow controls the work's distribution.

In a complex example of regifting, curator and educator Sue Spaid of Otis College of Art in Los Angeles redistributed one of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's multiples *Untitled (The End)* (1990) to her students. This group was asked to decide how they might use this object, a process that Spaid compares to the "democratic distribution of finite resources."¹⁵⁷ The decision was to photocopy and then burn the poster. The students then collected the ashes into a box, then placed the ashes into the interior of a helium filled balloon, which they released. Of the photocopies they had made of the piece one was ground up and baked into cookies. One student distributed copies of the poster via a chain letter, which asked the recipient to recopy and redistribute the gift in a "worldwide effort to spread Gonzalez-Torres's work around."¹⁵⁸ Spaid's re-gift exposed a new group of individuals to Gonzalez-Torres' work, which inspired several reworkings of his practice. It is especially interesting that these responses use strategies that reinforced the disappearance and reappearance of the object, underlining the multiples' strong ties to the antivisuality of Conceptual art practices from the past several decades. This dynamic response to the gift demonstrates that analysis of this artist's work must take into account its final material results in the hands of audiences.

The bountiful gift can also turn awful and wasteful. "As in ancient Gaul or Germany," relates Mauss, "or at our own banquets for students, soldiers, and peasants, one is committed to gulping down large quantities of food, in order to "do honour" in a

¹⁵⁷ Spaid, 1999, 85.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

somewhat grotesque way, to one's host."¹⁵⁹ Audience members faced with Gonzalez-Torres's gift may accept and consume the gift only out of this sense of obligation, or, provoked by the sumptuous display, over-consume the gift.

Art has increasingly been made against use, which, according to Jean Baudrillard, is a key development in contemporary art since the nineteenth century. This displeases him. Art objects, Baudrillard says, all reflect the history of the readymade, which the author clearly situates as the pivotal gesture of the last odd hundred years. Art now produces waste. The outcome is that the world at large has become "a fable...something which is neither true nor real."¹⁶⁰ He therefore aligns the arrival of modernism with that of the object in art making. Baudrillard, not an art historian, says that contemporary art now only exists in order to duplicate reality – a quality he admits, but does not care for. He goes on to say that art cannot return to being a "pure event," or an object *qua* object, for reasons that are not significantly argued in his text.¹⁶¹ What option does Baudrillard leave for art but that it dissolve itself, give up attempts to reflect reality, and instead act as an integral part of life? Use is meant to be the logical next location of art's purpose. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work produces waste, however, a characteristic that disqualifies it from Baudrillard's neat assertions.

Gianfranco Maraniello's poetic assessment of the disappearance of gifted artworks partially explains the viewer's beholden sense. "Thus the work of art that seeks to bring evidence of it knows that it *must dissolve* in order to be a true gift" he writes, going on to say, "the gift is in fact surprise and detour; it interrupts the economy with a

¹⁵⁹ Mauss, 41.

¹⁶⁰ Jean Baudrillard, "Notes on the Impossible Exchange," *Il Dono. Offerta, ospitalita, insidia/The Gift. Generous Offerings, Threatening Hospitality*, (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2001): 83.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 89.

useless expenditure, without finality, not to be compensated. It seems to be generous, gratuitous.”¹⁶² A gift with remnants unaccepted, Maraniello implies, is not a true gift. Infinite offerings confuse this requirement of disappearance based on indemnity from the effects of over-consumption, but they also encourage the recipient to take more than they need or even want. Situations of bounty only heighten the subject’s presentiments for future conditions of scarcity. Bounty therefore does not materialize without consequence. “Behind largesse,” warns Starobinski, “there lay raids, pillaging, and fiscal abuse.”¹⁶³ Gonzalez-Torres’s bounty is fueled by the institutions that own the work, and their fundraising, trustees, and donors. Largesse has a source, even if it seems with Gonzalez-Torres’s candies and posters to emerge from a vapor, directly from the artist’s hands to the viewers’.

Mauss also describes gifts as “comforting,” and says, “mere contact with them passes on their virtues.”¹⁶⁴ Osmotic outcomes of the same variety are inherent in Bourriaud’s relational program, which outlines projects that are meant to address constituent’s needs and desires through the insertion of the artist’s values and moral code. According to Storr, Gonzalez-Torres was able to detect, “a craving for things that exceed any definable need or wish,”¹⁶⁵ and this conception positions the artist as the ultimate provider of comfort, who can anticipate desires audiences might not even be aware of themselves. The language surrounding this aspect of the artist’s practice often positions him as an enlightened provider, such as Spector’s claims that, “Gonzalez-Torres’s own stance as an artist was multivalent – simultaneously romantic, optimistic, critical, and

¹⁶² Maraniello, 57.

¹⁶³ Starobinski, 34.

¹⁶⁴ Mauss, 24.

¹⁶⁵ Storr, 2006, 14.

political – his work could mean many things to many people.”¹⁶⁶ So the strategy of dispensation is a strategy of altruism but also of omniscience. This model of the artist frames him as a social agent who identifies need, and then provides. “Giving is a blind act of dispensation that always remains inadequate or disproportionate,” says Starobinski, “never in keeping with popular expectations and greed.”¹⁶⁷ Gonzalez-Torres’s work is no exception; no benefactor can adequately foretell the total needs of their constituents through an act of largesse.

If the artist in this arena represents the good citizen, what are the potential outcomes for fellow citizens who reject his offer? What of the pressure to accept the gift? There may in fact be an obligation to receive the gift, since to refuse it, warns Mauss, is often “tantamount to declaring war.”¹⁶⁸ In a case like Gonzalez-Torres’s, this evaluation of risk seems dramatic. However, the potentially hostile conversation around the gift might be itself a form of warfare – but one without risk of human life.

As Mark Osteen writes, “the exchange of gifts supplants the exchange of blows because the former creates tangible and enforceable but non-violent modes of coercion.”¹⁶⁹ Through the gifting of his politics Gonzalez-Torres hopes to set up a dialogue with his audience through which discussion rather than violent action can take place. If his work is analyzed from Bourriaud’s perspective, this conversation is eternally incomplete, since the viewer is never given the opportunity to reciprocate the gift or challenge its offering. The analysis I’ve introduced above shows the possibilities for eluding this closed circuit. In Bourriaud’s vision, by giving and receiving gifts former

¹⁶⁶ Spector, 2007, 35.

¹⁶⁷ Starobinski, 39.

¹⁶⁸ Mauss, 1990, 13.

¹⁶⁹ Mark Osteen, “Introduction: questions of the gift,” *The Question of the Gift: Essays across disciplines*, Mark Osteen, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002): 4.

opponents become satisfied collaborators, whereas my considerations of Gonzalez-Torres's publics place them as engaged and potentially dissenting. This point, which I will return to in Chapter 4, is crucial since one objective of the gifting process is to negotiate otherness, and allow reciprocity through a remodeling of the multiple itself, or through passing along the gift to another recipient.

Gonzalez-Torres's multiples must take into account potential encounters with enemies or opponents. Helmuth Berking explains that through gifting practices, "strangers who might be happily mistreated with impunity are turned into representatives of the ideal values of one's group, to be handled with respect, restraint, and ritual distance."¹⁷⁰ Offering care to an enemy or a political opponent seems an unsavory prospect. The tone of faint mistrust in this passage suggests that even in gifting the category of enemy is crucial to maintain, yet these enemies can be treated with a degree of care, even if their politics are in disagreement with the host's. Gonzalez-Torres's objects do provide an open and respectful – though wary – arena for the opponent to explore their own position, their own politics.

The content of Gonzalez-Torres's work often presents a shorthand history of political struggles for equal rights and freedom from discrimination, as discussed in Chapter 2. The posters' distribution as an activist strategy rouses awareness of the cause and acts as a tool to *coerce* understanding. In a public lecture, Gonzalez-Torres once quoted George Bernard Shaw: "Next to torture, art is the greatest persuader."¹⁷¹ Shaw's grim assessment – though framed ironically - must be taken seriously by art historians

¹⁷⁰ Helmuth Berking, *Sociology of Giving*, Trans. Patrick Camiller, (London: Sage, 1999): 92.

¹⁷¹ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Practices: The Problem of Divisions of Cultural Labor," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl, 2006): 132. Delivered as a public lecture at "Sites of Criticism: A Symposium." at the Drawing Center, New York. First published in *Acme Journal*, 1, No. 2, (1992): 44-49.

who approach Gonzalez-Torres's work. Art is capable of acting as a persuasive element in communities to the benefit of any political position that wishes to develop a constituency, and this polyvalent aspect of aesthetic production, where art can be routed towards political ends, was one Gonzalez-Torres was keenly aware of. Discussing an invitation to apply for the State Embassy exhibition program, where artworks by Americans are put on view in American Embassies worldwide,¹⁷² Gonzalez-Torres says of works by their featured artists Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, "obviously, this type of art is being used for a very active purpose, which can be translated as "activist art" for a conservative right-wing Republican agenda."¹⁷³ This phrase expresses the his understanding of activism not as a force unique to the left, and that art's role is potentially poised to be shunted or directed by institutions in the promotion of politics the artist intended to operate against. Enveloping his politics in what appears a benevolent and neutral gift, Gonzalez-Torres attempts to infiltrate institutions that might otherwise be resistant to his beliefs and values. The framework of the gift could disarm its receiver or host, who may not suspect that these gifts are intended for argument.

The artist's gift acts as a political critique, as is clear from the earliest examples of the multiples. *Untitled* (1988), discussed earlier in this thesis, is a prime example and the first gift work Gonzalez-Torres made. It reads, "Helms Amendment 1987 Anita Bryant 1977 High-Tech 1980 Cardinal O'Connor 1988 Bavaria 1986 White Night Riots 1979 F.D.A. 1985." The series of historical events that this artist's poster is meant to refer to is

¹⁷² Evidently, Gonzalez-Torres accepted this invitation, since photographs document an installation of *Untitled (Portrait of Dad)* (1991) in the exhibition *Art in Embassies Program: Around the World in 40 Years*, Department Reception Rooms of the United States Department of State, Washington, DC, 2004. This work, composed of 175 lbs of white candy, is documented installed at the base of a paned glass window on inlaid wood flooring. See Ault, 84.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 132.

at times debatable. His brief citations make possible connections to several important historical moments, movements, and developments. The “Helms Amendment” refers to the political actions of North Carolina Republican Senator Jesse Helms, who in 1989 incited debate in the United States Senate surrounded the work of American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe because of its gay and erotic content. This event was part of Helms larger efforts to deny public funding to art practices deemed “obscene.”¹⁷⁴ “Anita Bryant” refers to the popular singer, who in 1977 successfully launched a campaign against an ordinance in Miami which was intended to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination. “High-Tech 1980” is a more ambiguous reference, which my research indicates may be a reference to the profusion of gay communities in cities known for technological development.¹⁷⁵ It is possible, however, that it refers to United States President Ronald Reagan’s engagement in a technologically advanced weapons program developed during the Cold War colloquially referred to as “Star Wars,” officially named the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). It may also be a reference to the Human Rights Campaign’s defense of rights for transgender, bisexual, lesbian, and gay individuals in their workplaces and communities. Since 1980 this Washington-based organization has offered consultation services and policy development models for employers. Cardinal John Joseph O’Connor is the subject of “Cardinal O’Connor 1988,” a man known for his public voice against homosexuality. Notably, O’Connor was a member of Reagan’s

¹⁷⁴ Though extensively documented by the press, see William H. Honan, “Senate Debating Helms Amendment,” *New York Times*, (September 29, 1989).

¹⁷⁵ For a recent gloss of this phenomenon see Richard Florida, “Technology, Talent, and Tolerance.” *Information Week*, <http://www.informationweek.com/812/12uwrf.htm>. Accessed March 31, 2008. Accessed March 31, 2008. Florida explains, “his close relationship between tolerance and high-tech isn’t because gay people attract technology companies. Rather, a place that’s a comfortable home to the gay community is likely to be open to all. The key to growth in the New Economy is to be open and have low entry barriers for human capital.”

AIDS commission, lending an evident link to suggest that the previous “High-Tech” notation refers to Reagan’s actions.¹⁷⁶ “Bavaria 1986” is another vague reference in this work, until considered in connection to “High-Tech.” The second cabinet of German conservative leader Helmut Josef Michael Kohl, was responsible for agreeing to the installment of NATO missiles in Bavaria as part of the Cold War arms race. This cabinet existed between 1983 and 1987. In my research I have been unable to determine an exact link to the year 1986, and so this entry requires further investigation. Another possible connection for this entry is Pope Joseph Ratzinger, born in Bavaria. In 1986, Ratzinger denounced homosexuality and gay marriage in a letter to Catholic Bishops worldwide. The 1979 sentencing of Dan White for the assassination of San Francisco mayor George Moscone and gay City Supervisor Harvey Milk – seen by some as a hate crime against gays and lesbians – led to events referred to in the phrase “White Night Riots 1979.” White was found guilty of manslaughter rather than murder, and on May 21, 1979, this verdict sparked violent demonstrations by the city’s gay community and other concerned citizens. “F.D.A. 1985” appears to be a reference to the first widely known treatment for AIDS, azidothymidine, commonly known as AZT. The antiretroviral treatment was approved by the FDA in 1987, but work began to develop AZT in 1985. As mentioned above, the possible references for the entries are variable and open to interpretation. In sum each entry refers to a pivotal moment in history as determined by the artist. Though not chronological, the order of events begins with acts of discrimination and violence,

¹⁷⁶ See Ari L. Goldman, “300 Fault O'Connor Role On AIDS Commission,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1987.
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0DE2D6133EF934A15754C0A961948260&scp=1&sq=300%20Fault%20O'Connor%20Role%20On%20AIDS%20Commission&st=cse>. Date accessed, August 4, 2008.

leading into acts of dissent, and concluding with the hope that AZT provided those suffering with AIDS.

Eventually this format became a mainstay in Gonzalez-Torres's career and served as the schema followed in his commissioned portraits: a list of dates and associations is selected by the portrait's subject, and presented as a text frieze along the top segment of an exhibition space. The textual-history stacks introduce a biographical tactic where narrative is alluded to, though its unfolding is most richly understood and experienced by a reader already at least partially knowledgeable on the topic. The indirect references encourage research and promote inquiry, and in this way, a politically charged narrative is overlaid with the viewer's own memories and experiences. There is the possibility for this work to act as a pedagogical tool. Once released from the artist's hold the gift's message and effects are at the mercy – or desire – of the audience, and its hosting institution.

How this process might proceed is discussed by Ferguson, who writes, “most evident in the early text pieces, Gonzalez-Torres's withdrawal of the image is actually an invitation to the viewer to *provide* images drawn from his or her own memories and experiences.”¹⁷⁷ Tallman reaches similar conclusions, saying that Gonzalez-Torres “allows the viewer a space in which to personalize the work, so that the black-bordered sheets of “*Untitled*” (*The End*) for example, becomes an all-purpose elegy, memorializing anyone the viewer has loved and lost.”¹⁷⁸ Amanda Cruz echoes the words of these two other writers in a somewhat more simple and prosaic formulation, explaining

¹⁷⁷ Ferguson, 99.

¹⁷⁸ Tallman, 124.

that the work offers “blanks” for the viewer to “fill in” with their own experiences.¹⁷⁹ In these statements, Ferguson and Tallman overlook the fact that visual art in general invites these same polyvalent responses, but profile the work’s links to Conceptual artist’s use of language. Viewers construct associations and even visions or compositions of their own, in the minds-eye, in response to any sensory stimulus. This open invitation to remember and memorialize is present in the work, but a more direct form of reciprocity is available to the viewer in the form of the work’s reconfiguration or alteration, where the viewer becomes an author.

Umberto Eco’s “Poetics of the Open Work” (1962) expresses how an audience’s subjectivity can challenge traditional understandings of authorship. Eco ruminates on the role of the reader in the determination of a text’s meaning, writing,

according to how he feels at one particular moment, the reader might choose a possible interpretive key which strikes him as exemplary of this spiritual state. He will *use* the work according to the desired meaning.¹⁸⁰

Artworks, Eco argues, can generally be redirected by an audience toward subjective meanings – but this open interpretation has limits, the borders of which are provided by the work in question. Gonzalez-Torres’s text-based histories, for example, can spark associations as various as viewers’ backgrounds, but the initial stimulus of these associations is the work itself. Eco expands on this point later in his essay, when he

¹⁷⁹ Spector, 2007, 56. “Reflections on a Proposal for 1995,” In conversation with Amanda Cruz, Ann Goldstein, Suzanne Ghez at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, January 9, 2007, the 11th Anniversary of Gonzalez-Torres’s death. Not every edition of posters created by Gonzalez-Torres, however, is quite as open as the text-based portraits. *Untitled (Join)* (1990), for example, features a pulp photograph of a semi-disrobed young sailor, combining patriotic and erotic sentiments. Though the reception of this work is certain to vary significantly from viewer to viewer, it clearly is not as “open” as *Untitled* (1988).

¹⁸⁰ Umberto Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work,” *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Claire Bishop, ed. (London; Cambridge: Whitechapel; The MIT Press, 2006): 25.

writes, “‘openness’ is converted into an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics.”¹⁸¹ Inviting the reader to participate in and complete the work is therefore part of a program of dissent and democratic feedback. The danger in Eco’s model and its potential applications to Gonzalez-Torres’s work is that it only begins to address how ideology is still embedded in aesthetic programs, even when they can be abducted by viewers or readers. Eco places great faith in the work’s pedagogical value, but he does not flesh out the counter-point to this aspect; in other words, the work is a training tool that still carries with it an ideology. This bind is apparently inescapable, even if Eco places the reader in the role of engineer of the work’s meaning.

Ideology is a concern raised by Gonzalez-Torres’s work. The multiple’s questioning gesture survives in part because Gonzalez-Torres was strategic enough to braid the authority of the art market, and thus the rules of capitalism, into his practice. It would be difficult to imagine that his practice would have risen to such prominence had he refused to sell his work, for example. Engineering into his objects a tension between commodity and non-commodity, Gonzalez-Torres camouflages the content of his work, and manages to cling to the apparently positive qualities of open-hearted giving while still receiving financial reward for his gifts and the recognition of the art world.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres retains an ideological stake in the object after it is given regardless of whether it is art object or not. Related to this point, Maurice Godelier argues against Mauss’ description of the gift, arguing that he neglects to distinguish between possession and ownership. An owner can retain rights to property even if it is regifted and garnered by a second individual. Moreover, Godelier writes, the longer the object’s

¹⁸¹ Eco, 30.

provenance the more powerful it becomes for its proper original owner.¹⁸² Extrapolating from this, it is clear that the authority of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's stacks and piles is in part determined by how broadly they are distributed as individual fragments, and also how many times they are exchanged or relocated by their owners. If these multiples are considered as a distributed message or passage of information that aims to enact democracy, then the more widely distributed it is across the populace, the broader its constituency will be. Summarizing Godelier's argument, Osteen writes, "gifts retain the personhood of their primary owner; thus it is not the object but the owner's identity that drives the object to be returned. Such objects speak in one voice only."¹⁸³ The more constituents that have a share in the practice, the stronger the multiples' symbolic capital becomes. By this process, Gonzalez-Torres's aesthetic gains value on a symbolic level. But it is also the feature that drives the sale value of the total accumulations.

Now that I have established that Gonzalez-Torres's gift is partially self-interested, I will now address the agonistic qualities of his offering. Exploring the malicious gift, Starobinski advances his discussion using Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884), a tale of a hermetic aesthete named des Essientes. This character lives an isolated and miserable life, his days spent in search of sensual satisfaction. At one point in the narrative, he observes an ebullient child outdoors, surrounded by other youths, who has just eaten a meal of bread and cheese, still caked around its mouth. Upon seeing this, the hungry and until recently nauseated des Essientes races home with stimulated appetite to have a similar meal prepared, hoping perhaps to obtain the child's joyous spirit, only to find the prepared delicacy revolting. He then commands his servant to distribute the meal to the

¹⁸² Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, Trans. Nora Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁸³ Osteen, 9.

group of children – which at first seems a true act of generosity – but he offers this platter with the malicious intention of causing the group to fight over the meal. Starobinski observes, “He has the snack given *so that* the battle will increase in intensity.”¹⁸⁴ A cloaked gift can infiltrate an otherwise closed social order in order to rouse dispute and discussion. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, though surely not with the same malicious intentions, offers his gift in order to increase the argument amongst his constituency. His mode of attack and provocation, though, is subtle. Through acquiescence to institutional structures, this artist wished to act as a “virus,” that “will replicate together with these institutions.”¹⁸⁵ Viral presences negotiate their difference by feeding off host-bodies, and escape notice until they have reached critical mass.¹⁸⁶ Like a virus that causes the immune system to respond, Gonzalez-Torres’s gifts enter communities: sympathetic parties are quickly rallied and opponents are made apparent.

As I have discussed above, the possible routes that the gift can take after it is released into the hands of the viewer are just as infinite as the edition itself. Is there a way that the viewer, a collaborator, can deal, trade, or reconfigure the multiples in order to propel them in and out of commodity status? Jacques Rancière suggests that,

Any commodity or useful object can, by becoming obsolete and unfit for consumption, become available to art in different ways, separate or linked: as an object of disinterested pleasure, a body encoded with a story, or as witness to a strangeness impossible to assimilate.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Starobinski, 137. Italics original.

¹⁸⁵ Obrist, 315.

¹⁸⁶ The artist’s inspiration for this model is likely human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). At the time of this interview Gonzalez-Torres may have known he was a carrier of this virus, which eventually led to his death.

¹⁸⁷ Jacques Rancière, “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art,” *Participation*, Claire Bishop, ed., trans. with assistance of Pablo Lafuente, (London: Whitechapel Ventures Limited;

And so could not the opposite transference be possible – so that art objects could once again go back to the role of forgotten and “lowly” commodities, perhaps either through becoming obsolete or distanced from their original function?

To elaborate on this point, I will draw from Arjun Appadurai’s essay “Commodities and the Politics of Value.” Appadurai builds his argument around the statement that “commodities, like persons, have social lives.”¹⁸⁸ The circulation of commodities reveals the operation of social groups, he writes, and he begins by examining all things as possible commodities.¹⁸⁹ Likewise, Gonzalez-Torres’s multiples have social lives that are linked to and trace out the social relations of their recipients. The “commodity *candidacy* of things,” Appadurai argues, “is less a temporal than a conceptual feature,”¹⁹⁰ since

in modern capitalist societies, it can safely be said that more things are likely to experience a *commodity phase* in their own careers, more contexts to become legitimate commodity contexts, and the standards of commodity candidacy to embrace a large part of the world of things than in noncapitalist societies.¹⁹¹

The possibility of a commodity phase suggests that things can shift rapidly or slowly between commodity and non-commodity status, since these features are determined according to a conceptual nature.

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006. First published in *Malaise dans l'esthétique*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 2004. 65-84): 86.

¹⁸⁸ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 3.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 4, 13.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 13.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 15. Emphasis added.

I would like to foreground that the material qualities of Gonzalez-Torres's project ensure that his multiples can simultaneously exist both in and out of commodity phase. The stacks and piles, which seem to be objects in totality when exhibited in museums and collections, are in fact forever incomplete, so they cannot be seen as inherently superior – on a conceptual level – to the fragmentary single copy counterparts taken by gallery visitors except by virtue of quantity. What separates the two, fragment and accumulation, is obvious: one is for sale and one is free. But Gonzalez-Torres himself is intentionally ambiguous about whether both stack and single copy are both artwork. In one interview he claims he “never define[s] which one is which.”¹⁹² In conversation with Tim Rollins, the artist mused on this subject, saying, “yes, an individual piece of paper from one of the stacks does not constitute the ‘piece’ itself, but in fact it is a piece.”¹⁹³ This cyclical phrase is only further confused by gallerist Andrea Rosen's dispute of both of these statements, when she claims “he did not consider each sheet from a stack to be an art work.”¹⁹⁴ Gonzalez-Torres goes on to say that “At the same time, the sum of many pieces of the identical paper is the ‘piece,’ but not really because there is no piece only an ideal height and endless copies.”¹⁹⁵ A final piece of evidence comes from the caption published for *Untitled* (1991), featured in the artist's interview with Robert Nickas, which reads, “147 Signed silkscreened sheets.” The possibility that these posters were signed lends strength to the argument that the multiples in general could be considered individual artworks.¹⁹⁶ If both fragment and stack are artworks, does this enlist both as

¹⁹² Gonzalez-Torres, 2006, 313.

¹⁹³ Rollins, 23.

¹⁹⁴ Rosen, 1997, 45.

¹⁹⁵ Rollins, 23.

¹⁹⁶ This text was later republished in Ault's monograph, but with different images. When *Untitled* (1991) appears elsewhere in her publication, its caption reads, “Silkscreen on paper,” omitting

commodities? Or, if only the stack is an artwork to the exclusion of the single poster or candy, as Rosen would have it, is the later incapable of being a commodity?

An identification of the key moves that the gift passes through will clarify this potential operation as commodity and preface an exploration of how Brechtian theory might be germane to this particular practice. In order to chart this movement, I would like to suggest that conceptual practices are often governed by mandates that could be considered grammatical. By conceptual grammar, I mean to suggest that an artistic practice can be composed of individual formative elements that may be redistributed or altered by their interpreters – who are often curators or viewers – as long as these new versions retain particular central clauses. In some artistic practices the syntactical arrangement is extremely tight, lacking malleability. Gonzalez-Torres's practice of conceptual grammar is determined according to the etiquette of the gift, and from this stance, Gonzalez-Torres utilizes a particular syntax that appears open and democratic.

The syntactical arrangement I propose for Gonzalez-Torres's multiples involves the following: the artist provides the authority and rules that govern the project, split between a manifest aesthetic and a general code of conduct. Born from the strategies of conceptual art these gift piles exist in part as text descriptions. These written details ensure that the project will not stray from the artist's original aesthetic intentions. The rules of display are equally important in protecting the integrity of this artist's concept. First, the artist configures and plans the object, and is also responsible for determining the object's regulation. Second, the object is manufactured or purchased rather than hand crafted by the artist. Third, the curator or collector determines the specifics of installation

both the edition listed by Nickas, and the presence of signatures. This discrepancy warrants further archival research.

and display, following the initial quantity and sometimes the dimensions required by Gonzalez-Torres. Fourth, the viewer is permitted to encounter the work, determine their own desire, and then either receive or reject the gift. Finally, viewers who have accepted the gift may do with the object as they please.

Sometimes it is only through a savvy recognition of the multiple's parameters that the viewer will be able to participate and receive their gift. Frequently the pieces are exhibited without signage indicating that viewers are free to touch and remove copies of the work. And the consequences for mistaking a gift for a non-gift are serious. *Untitled (Implosion)* (1991) is a stack of posters produced in collaboration with a print publisher, in a limited edition of 10 artist's proofs and 190 prints; this work is available only as one unit "bound together for life."¹⁹⁷ Viewers are not permitted to remove these prints. This stack is not to be considered a gift, since it is produced in a limited rather than infinite edition, but based on its appearance it seems likely that even art literati could misidentify it as one of Gonzalez-Torres's conventional gifting stacks. From this example it is clear that the artist's gift is also a form of test for the museum attendee: can they correctly classify a gift work, and differentiate its conceptual grammar as distinguished from that of conventional artworks?

A few basic experiments can prove just how slippery these categories are, and that the determining decision of whether these single copies remain or become artworks, remain or become commodities, may not rest with the artist or the gallerist despite their assertions. I will now explore this matter with a few brief examples. According to the authority of these objects and the rules implied by the artist, it is conceivable for a viewer to take all but one of the posters on display in an exhibition without technically stealing

¹⁹⁷ Tallman, 124.

the artwork. Bourriaud's analysis of the multiples claims that they "would purely and simply disappear if every visitor exercised this right" to remove a copy, and that "the artist has thus appealed to the visitor's sense of responsibility, and the visitor had to understand that his gesture was contributing to the break-up of the work."¹⁹⁸ This is a fine sentiment, but little actually prohibits the viewer from removing more than one copy. In practice an experiment of removing-all-but-one, suggested in the quotation that prefaces this chapter, would be difficult to execute because of obvious restrictions including museum security and transportation. But what would happen if a large consortium of individuals entered the museum, each removing several copies over the course of many hours or days, and then met to reassemble their individual Gonzalez-Torres fragments into a stack of their own making? After the objects have been removed from the gallery, could they be replaced and reabsorbed by the accumulation of the larger pile? And might a viewer not also be capable of selling a poster or candy independently, thus at least temporarily shifting the thing back into commodity status? These scenarios show that the appointment of commodity status is beyond control at a certain point. This condition of shifting commodity status is in part influenced by the conceptual grammar laid down by the artist's authority. These are examples of relational abduction, where the audience is capable of rerouting the artist's practice toward their own objectives. This term will be expanded further in Chapter 4.

After acknowledging the latitude offered by the gift in the above scenarios, it must also be said that certain contexts disrupt the operation of Gonzalez-Torres's multiples. Scale prevents the poster stacks from operating effectively at art fairs, for example, where door security staff are in place to prevent the theft of an artwork.

¹⁹⁸ Bourriaud, 2002, 39.

Gonzalez-Torres's posters have been on display for sale on secondary market in art fairs in the past. Since fairs are prime sites for artworks to be stolen, these staff members may prove resistant to explanation by visitors that a commercial gallery gave them the artist's poster.¹⁹⁹ I have observed Art Basel Miami Beach security staff interrogate visitors upon exit who are carrying Gonzalez-Torres's posters, suggesting again that the question of whether the individual multiples are artwork or not is not entirely dependant on the rule of the gallerist or artist. Andrea Rosen Gallery permits visitors to remove the work from their stall at fairs, but for security staff the status of the art object is very much in question.

One of the qualities that Bourriaud profiles in *Relational Aesthetics* is flexibility of practice where, as outlined above, grammatical rules are broad and easily negotiated, resulting in a viewership positioned at a social interstice where viewers are effective collaborators.²⁰⁰ He builds further on this theme in his later text *Postproduction*, in which he proposes a "new cultural configuration, whose emblematic figures are the programmer and the DJ. The remixer has become more important than the instrumentalist, the rave more exciting than the concert."²⁰¹ These personages and events take liberty of choice and a reworking of earlier models as their primary tenets. The DJ considers previously recorded music as a resource to be mined in order to present fresh and innovative phrasings of material produced across epochs. The instrumentalist, Bourriaud implies, only replicates a score for an audience that sits passively, while a DJ not only alters preexisting aesthetic fragments, but also allows the audience to respond – perhaps even

¹⁹⁹ I have personally evaded these restrictions at fairs in order to remove Gonzalez-Torres's work on more than one occasion by explaining to security that I was removing paper rather than artwork.

²⁰⁰ Bourriaud, 1998, 45.

²⁰¹ Bourriaud, 2002, 35.

make requests – in an environment that is ruled by a spirit of revelry and celebration. Parties where DJs perform also often enforce exclusivity by distributing paper flyers selectively to individuals. Bourriaud’s “rave,” a culturally specific expression rarely used since the late 1990s to describe an underground party that is usually promoted through private channels such as word of mouth, has the gleam of authenticity, generosity, and do-it-yourself activism that this curator finds so appealing. Raves and their promotional strategies set up Bourriaud’s observations about contemporary art as grounded in liberty of expression and the possibility for citizens to take ownership and authorship of their environment by the permission the gift grants. Gonzalez-Torres’s gift similarly appears informally available to the *literati*: there is no regimented process of distribution for the gift, and its form recalls the cheaply reproduced leaflet, the self-published political tract. This process of remixing and the rave’s promotion of agency are closely tied to the question of commodity status.

If the five grammatical units I defined previously are considered as commodity phases as well as grammatical phrases, the opportunities for audience authorship, or relational abduction, become clear. The fourth and fifth categories, where the viewer is invited to participate by removing and using the gift, offer a syntactical gate through which the viewer can add a phrase. The third category allows the curator or collector to rephrase. This utterance and its potential is a condition that Bourriaud is evidently aware of in his comparison with remixing and DJ culture, as quoted above, but he anticipates quite different results of Gonzalez-Torres’s offer than this thesis argues for.

The informal constituencies formed by Gonzalez-Torres’s gift are frequently framed as governed by natural states or inherent understandings. For *Untitled (Placebo)*’s

(1991) (see illustration 6) first incarnation in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gonzalez-Torres requested, “that no effort should be made to replenish the stock of the candies ... as the cycle of depletion ran its course.” Robert Storr warns that the act of replenishment would “interrupt and administer a spontaneous social transaction, a process of aesthetic repossession, a minor, incremental but perpetual transfer of wealth.”²⁰² Storr’s concluding sentence implies that by accepting the gift, the viewer is removing wealth from the gallery, depleting the museum’s financial solvency, and somehow also repossessing aesthetics, and therefore repossessing agency. Like its counterpoint, the capitalist economic market, this system of gifting is framed as self-governing. But as in economic systems, stakeholders are just as likely to rescind their abilities to make informed decisions about how their capital and their agency are negotiated.

The gift’s terms are frustrated by the curator who may be unwilling to take Gonzalez-Torres’s cue and makes subjective decisions about the installation specifications according to whim, desire, or thesis. Conversing with curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the artist relates that museum programming staff in past have contacted him to clarify the appropriate installation method for a specific work, not understanding that this decision rests entirely with them. Obrist wryly observes on the subject, “*They would rather refuse the liberty that you offer to them?*”²⁰³ This broken circuit presents another rupture for Bourriaud’s theory of relational practices. If an artwork’s aesthetic success or operation relies on the viewer’s and curator’s acceptance of “liberty,” and the audience

²⁰² Storr, 2006, 7.

²⁰³ Obrist, 313, Emphasis in the original.

rejects that offer, does the artwork simply cease to exist, or does it remain merely incomplete? This question presents problems for the relational aesthetics methodology.

There is also evidently the possibility that this generosity toward liberty might over-extend or supersede the wishes or consent of the artist. Nancy Spector's Venice Biennale exhibition resulted in great controversy since the curator commissioned the fabrication of a work of art based on a series of drawings executed by the artist before his death, *Untitled (Sagitario)* (1994-1995).²⁰⁴ (Illustration 8) This work was originally conceived for a 1992 public sculpture competition by Western Washington University.²⁰⁵ *Untitled (Sagitario)*'s form appeared again in drawings Gonzalez-Torres completed for a solo exhibition at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux. In a letter the artist asked the CAPC to have the catalogue essay for the exhibition written by an astronomer, and Spector links this correspondence and the title with a news clipping faxed by Gonzalez-Torres to Andrea Rosen about the Space Shuttle Endeavour's study of the Sagittarius constellation. Sagittarius is composed of a binary star system, an astral phenomenon where two stars are able to transmit gases back and forth since their mutual orbit is so tight, and as Spector suggests, this concept likely held great appeal for the artist as a metaphor for human relationships.²⁰⁶ Using these sketches as her guide for the work's fabrication, the curator selected white Italian Carrara marble "since the artist's sketch suggests that the sculptures could be rendered in 'stone' or 'poured blue

²⁰⁴ The date of production Spector has attributed to the object raises significant questions of its own. The work was fabricated much later than 1994-1995, and the first drawn iteration of this work was in fact in 1992. Spector found the title for this work written below a schematic drawing by Gonzalez-Torres of the piece.

²⁰⁵ Spector, 2007, 42.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 43.

cement.”²⁰⁷ In an interview Gonzalez-Torres describes his drawings in quite a different way than imagined by Spector for the realization of her exhibition’s centerpiece, *Untitled (Sagittario)*. He says, “I really don’t plan pieces using drawings...I do make drawings and photographs but they have their own specific function. They are not sketches of the sculptures, these are drawings that represent a parallel set of ideas.”²⁰⁸ This sense of liberty regarding installation specifications that is granted to the curator by the artist in is here re-routed to rationalize a liberty regarding fabrication, without the artist’s consent. If Gonzalez-Torres’s work exists as a concept as described through text, what are the consequences for the creation of a work like *Untitled (Sagittario)* – which might be considered a forgery were it not for the prestige of Spector’s position and Rosen’s presumed consent.

It can be said that the public distribution of Gonzalez-Torres’s work animates social situations and politics. Gonzalez-Torres’s giftworks involve investment on behalf of the collector or institution, but rather than giving a gift that only “improves” the recipient, or anticipates a need, the artist’s work offers constituents a gift that will polarize and clarify subjective politics. The gift acts as a marker of commitment, a stake in the ground that demonstrates allegiance to codes of conduct. Bourriaud’s model of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is effectively a tyranny. All citizens are equal, but they must bow to the authority of the “whole community,” the utopia, to whom they have gifted themselves.²⁰⁹ The notion of the whole, rather than the fragmented community, echoes Bourriaud’s strategies of relational aesthetics. According to his model audiences are a group in accord rather than a system composed of various factions. This idealized model

²⁰⁷ Spector, 2007, 43.

²⁰⁸ Rollins, 7.

²⁰⁹ This concept is borrowed from Starobinski, 66-67.

is not a realistic description of art's effects on the social front. Gonzalez-Torres's multiples capture the impossibility of a whole community, instead allowing both opponents and friends identities as recipients and reciprocators through a gift offered to promote argument and dialectical exchange.

Chapter 4

Multiply Divide: Faulty Democracy and Abducted Relational Practices

*Today's fight for modernity is being waged in the same terms as yesterday's ... Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modeling possible universes.*²¹⁰

~ Nicolas Bourriaud

*I recently saw Marlin Fitzwater on a televised press conference, and when he was asked about the huge anti-war demonstrations, he replied without skipping a beat, "It's all part of the process." That is just mind-boggling. It's all part of the process. The only people who learned anything in the 60s were on the right. Those people weren't crying at the Freedom Foundation. They were preparing. It's so clear that our strategy has to change.*²¹¹

~ Felix Gonzalez-Torres

The interests of relational aesthetics, with its predilection for collaboration and consensus, seem to run parallel to the strategies that drive democratic political practice. According to Bourriaud, relational art practices invite audience participation and the use of art objects with the aim of realizing temporary utopias; he employs Gonzalez-Torres's work as a pivotal case study in his argument. What quality of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's multiples invokes this specific political model? If communal harmony is Bourriaud's relational objective – as examined on formal and conceptual registers in the two previous chapters of this thesis – then what properties motivate the curator's use of this artist as a primary case study in his landmark text, *Relational Aesthetics*? The work of Gonzalez-Torres operates only with the collaboration of the viewer, who is given the opportunity to accept a gift in order to enter a discussion. The results of these individual encounters

²¹⁰ Bourriaud, 1998, 13.

²¹¹ Nickas, 87.

between viewer and artwork, viewer and viewer, and artist and viewer, trace political associations according to the work's conditions of display and distribution, but also according to its content. This chapter will explore what politics are implied by Gonzalez-Torres's work's format and mode of operation, contrasting frameworks mounted around his practice and relational aesthetics in general, including Bourriaud's writing, Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, and Claire Bishop's "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents." These texts of art criticism will be compared to resonant political writings: Chantal Mouffe's *The Return of the Political* (2005), Hannah Arendt's "What is Authority?" (1958) and Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000) in order to determine possible roots for the established discussion that has influenced a contemporary understanding of this artist's work.

From the artist's words, it is obvious that he saw himself and his work as politically salient and active, as part of a process that worked in contradistinction to or even retaliation against the actions of conservative groups, as his work *Untitled* (1988), discussed earlier in this thesis, suggests. The political possibilities behind sentiment and interpersonal relationships are elaborated when Gonzalez-Torres says,

A reading that has been overlooked is the radicality of certain forms of distribution...Someone's agenda has been enacted to define "public" and "private". We're really talking about private property because there is no private space anymore. Our intimate desires, fantasies, dreams are ruled and intercepted by the public sphere.²¹²

²¹² Nickas, 86.

Gonzalez-Torres's practice mingles in this public sphere, representing his own private desires, and giving potential space for the expression of the desires of citizens. His agenda is promoted by his work's content, but also by the radicality of its distribution: gifting. Based on this method of distribution, however, can theoretical analysis resolutely affirm the seemingly instinctual descriptor often pinned to this artist's practice: democratic. The subjective lines of political fraternity are so firmly established and unquestioningly linked with Gonzalez-Torres's work that this label is difficult to substantiate, as I will demonstrate below.

Theorists and art historians who hope to respond to the relational model must first define within their own methodology where politics can be located, and what constitutes democratic operation, in artworks. Since art is a form of production that can have both symbolic significance and lasting social effect, it is possible that politics can be present in form (see Chapter 2), content and concept (see Chapter 3). Which is to say that whether intentionally constructed by the artist or otherwise, politics are manifest in both the subject matter and the method used for the works' development and exhibition. Solely relying on Gonzalez-Torres's clarification of his alliances – "I prefer democracy, as faulty as it is"²¹³ – is inadequate. But this chapter will begin from the position that "faulty" democracy is a dynamic and illuminating lens through which to consider this artist's work. To render this concept, I will present a discussion of the democratic principles observed in Gonzalez-Torres's practice, guided by the writing of Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Hannah Arendt, taking into account the troubling aspects of Bourriaud's relational practice.

²¹³ Rollins, 14.

The introduction to this thesis cites Bourriaud's term "homosensual aesthetics," and his suggestion that Gonzalez-Torres's gayness, "represented not so much a discursive theme," but rather "an emotional dimension, a form of life creating forms of art," that could be seen as "a life model that could be shared by all, and identified with by everyone."²¹⁴ The stakes of a model promoting such inclusive and normalizing values, this chapter will argue, are extremely high. Groundwork laid in the previous chapter highlights some concerns: the lack of space for political opposites, and the flattening of values. This matter becomes further entangled in consultation with the artist's intentions when he explains the development of the work's content by saying, "sometimes I'm going to be democratic," meaning,

Sometimes I'm going to do a billboard that is just text about health care, and the next time I just want to do a billboard that is about something perhaps more obscure that I need to see in public. I do have a political and personal agenda with this work, and in a way they are very interrelated but I haven't been able to find a perfect union for both.²¹⁵

Gonzalez-Torres's struggle for a perfect union parallels civil society's contest between the rights of the individual and the greater good - a conflict that has historically proven irresolvable. This conflict leads to the question of whether artists who hope to follow democratic principles must consult with viewers in the development of the work's content, or if it is sufficient for the artist to rely on art's symbolic value to suggest and represent rather than enact a real democratic system. If an art practice wishes to follow democratic practice, is it required that an artist consistently represent the greater good or the issues of the community instead of the concerns of the individual? I will return to this

²¹⁴ Bourriaud, 1998, 50.

²¹⁵ Rollins, 25.

query throughout this chapter, drawing from texts by Grant Kester and Claire Bishop that react to Bourriaud's writing. A larger question – namely, who stands to benefit from art practices that mimic dominant systems of governance – will figure into the conclusion of this thesis.

Audiences seem to enter a democratic forum when viewing Gonzalez-Torres's multiples, being free to accept or reject Gonzalez-Torres's gift, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, this decision does not guarantee clear agreement or disagreement with the politics his art presents. The very value of inclusion that the artist promotes through the work's conceptual grammar,²¹⁶ a concept I examined in Chapter 2, also leaves it open to be hijacked or appropriated by its citizens, as I will further demonstrate in this chapter with a unique case study. My subject of analysis here will be the work *Untitled (Republican Years)* (1992), (see Illustration 9, 10, 11) on view during the 2007 Venice Biennale, which featured the work of Gonzalez-Torres in both the Italian and American pavilions. The exhibition in the United States pavilion, curated by Nancy Spector, included several gift works. These posters were widely collected by attendees during the press opening. Many were subsequently discarded by visitors, presumably because they were too cumbersome to carry while navigating the congested streets of Venice. This dispersal and littering appeared to be a natural progression of the sheer quantity represented by each poster stack.

In an unexpected response to this exhibition, environmental activists appropriated the artist's work in order to denounce his practice as ecologically destructive and wasteful. After collecting several copies of *Untitled (Republican Years)*, these individuals wrote a slogan by hand with ballpoint pen on each copy and posted them on the streets of

²¹⁶ Lippard, 124.

Venice, effectively abducting the work for their own purposes.²¹⁷ The text added by the anonymous interventionists reads: “gli alberi riposano in pace, RIP the rest off the trees with this paper.” (sic, see Illustration 10) The Italian portion translates to “The Trees Rest in Peace.” These activists’ identities remain unknown. It is clear that the interventionists have carefully considered their own project in relation to the content of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s posters. At least two other works on show would have been suitable for their purposes from a practical perspective: both *Untitled (Veterans Day Sale)* (1989) and *Untitled (Memorial Day Weekend)* (1989) offer white space that the interventionists could have used to scrawl their message. They have chosen *Untitled (Republican Years)*, a work with a black border that Gonzalez-Torres produced in reference to death and mourning, which resembles the form of black bordered stationery and envelopes traditionally used to announce a death.²¹⁸ This is a work that was produced at the height of the AIDS pandemic’s grip in North America, a time when Ronald Reagan’s administration in the United States remained largely inactive in response to the mounting death toll. Gonzalez-Torres’s interlocutors in Venice, whom we might truly consider his collaborators in the context of a democratic conversation, are grieving the negative ecological outcomes of Gonzalez-Torres’s work. They collected their supply of posters within the rules of operation for Gonzalez-Torres’s multiples. None of the grammatical rules of the artist’s work prohibit this action. Any viewer is allowed to remove posters from the stack, and though visitors are encouraged only to remove a single copy there is no specific limit or allowance placed on the audience’s use of the work after its removal. Participants may display or otherwise use the posters in whatever way they choose.

²¹⁷ No reportage or scholarly literature has focused on this case, to my knowledge.

²¹⁸ Spector, 2007, 39.

As previously mentioned, the artist expressed delight at discovering copies of his posters pasted in public settings, including a toilet in Germany:

For me it's very beautiful when the work changes by being placed in different contexts. A page or a stack in a gallery reads differently from one you see in an artist's studio or one you see in a home or museum.²¹⁹

The Venetian interventionists register the sentiment behind these words – though it is possible they never read them – and identify a syntactical gate in the multiples' conceptual operation. They have used this gate to promote their own politics. Their response to the multiples is mildly ironic, of course, since the activists themselves had to consume paper from the artist's project in order to denounce it. One cannot assume, however, that by acting against the artist's practice in this way the interventionists also reject the work's profiling of political issues or its conceptual mandate to provide a democratic space for conversation. But clearly *Untitled (Republican Years)* as a gift does not represent an *ethos* shared by all, as Bourriaud's model would hope.

The possibilities inherent because of this "gate" are hinted at but not fully explored by Susan Tallman, who says the multiples give viewers a chance to take ownership of the work's content, "so that the black-bordered sheets of "*Untitled*" (*The End*) for example, become an all-purpose elegy, memorializing anyone the viewer has loved and lost."²²⁰ The offer to personalize the work can be taken to its literal conclusion: the works can be physically altered. Gonzalez-Torres's work, it can be assumed, is just one cultural practice among many that the interventionists might disagree with on the

²¹⁹ Rollins, 24.

²²⁰ Tallman, 124.

basis of its destruction of resources, and yet they chose his work as the host-site for their action. Why?

Negotiating the framework of Gonzalez-Torres's gift, and exploring key political writings related to questions suggested by Bourriaud's relational category will reveal in the following pages that the artist's practice *invited* the dissenting voices of the interventionists. This intervention in Venice, I argue, is an important rupture that suggests Bourriaud's analysis is simplistic in its consideration of the artist / interlocutor relationship. Most importantly, it shows the way that this artist's practice, meant to champion particular political values, has since been absorbed into the system of capital and consumption that it hoped to critique, and has now been critiqued itself in ways perhaps not anticipated by the artist. As I will explain, this re-direction of Gonzalez-Torres's work toward *ad-hoc* activism is at the same time greatly in keeping with the aims of the artist, even if it is used for his denouncement.

Gonzalez-Torres was an advocate of democratic politics, but understood the provisional and contingent nature of systems of rule. "I don't want a revolution anymore," he says, "it's too much energy for too little. So I want to work within the system ... to work within the contradictions of the system."²²¹ Since this work has an infinite conceptual lifespan of consumption and replenishment, and as the political extremities of left and right are reconfigured continually in history, so will this work's relationship to contemporary politics shift endlessly. This situation indicates that the vision of democracy Gonzalez-Torres presents through his work is more subtle than a divide between those who agree and those who dissent, those who accept and those who refuse.

²²¹ Rollins, 27.

Gonzalez-Torres's multiples have been positioned by theorists, including Bourriaud, Spector, Maraniello, and Ferguson, as representing democracy's processes: all viewers are given the opportunity to contribute to the conceptual operation of the work, and its political or social content sets up a dividing line for participants who are meant to find themselves in agreement or disagreement with the artist's own convictions. An additional democratic flourish is provided by the conversational arena enacted around the work when it is exhibited. Robert Storr's essay "When This You See Remember Me," provides an example of this tendency, his essay built upon an introductory narrative describing a mother and two children who encounter Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991) in a museum. The result is a friendly conversation between a black security guard and a white mother about the work's links to "sex and death and public policy."²²² This prosaic device sets up Storr's account of the artist's practice being grounded in interpersonal relationships that are intimate and particular, but also points to the work's ability to spark and even facilitate discussion about diverse subjects across boundaries of race, age, class, and sexuality. The author stresses that Gonzalez-Torres "set a premium on making such contacts integral to his larger purpose,"²²³ inviting security guards, not usually included in the critical discussion of an artwork's meanings, to act as "front-line troops in the so-called culture wars."²²⁴ Values of inclusion and civility are apparently even imbedded into the work's administration and presentation to the public.

The dissatisfaction promoted by contemporary democratic practices was a condition that Gonzalez-Torres was aware of, and this inherent sense of frustration and

²²² Storr, 2006, 5.

²²³ Ibid, 6.

²²⁴ Ibid, 6.

conflict is intimated in anecdotal accounts of his responses to viewer's interactions with his work. In one interview, Gonzalez-Torres indicates he was at first elated that an artist at a New York gallery removed over twenty posters from his stack, since he assumed that she was about to use them as a work surface. Instead, as he was angered to see, she simply threw them in the garbage. "I thought she was taking them because she needed paper to work on," the artist explains, "So at first I was very, very pleased, but then she just acted maliciously."²²⁵ His distress could be motivated by a dislike of waste, or he may have felt threatened or insulted by her response. Andrea Rosen recounts how after copies of the artist's posters were distributed to the public by gallery employees at an opening, many were discarded by their recipients. She recounts that this was because the audience had not been given the chance to engage in the decision to take the work for themselves. Gonzalez-Torres discovered these rejected gifts and was "aghast to find them abandoned."²²⁶ However, Gonzalez-Torres also said on more than one occasion that the audience was free to use the work in any way they pleased, even as dustpans.²²⁷ These contradictions suggest the artist's relationship with his own practice and the participation of the viewer is variable according to the intentions of the participant and their adherence to the grammatical authority of the artwork.

Universitas and Societas: Governance and Relational Projects

²²⁵ Rollins, 13.

²²⁶ Andrea Rosen, "'Untitled' (The Neverending Portrait)," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Dietmar Elger, ed. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1997): 46.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 46.

Gonzalez-Torres's work anticipates that the guiding spirit Storr describes - where audience spontaneity can be relied upon to regulate the flow of the gift - could prove an inadequate protection of the multiples' method of distribution. Binding contracts were therefore drawn up by the artist for each work to ensure its conceptual integrity beyond his lifetime. The contract functions as an authority over the province of each spill or pile in the artist's stead. Collectors of the work are required to adhere to the regulations of these documents in perpetuity – though as outlined earlier in this thesis, the rules are surprisingly flexible.

These contracts' requirements for the incumbent owner are changed as he developed this body of work.²²⁸ Gonzalez-Torres's first contracts did not allow the work to exist in more than one place at the same time, while his later ones encouraged exhibitions of the same work to take place simultaneously.²²⁹ Andrea Rosen provides many important insights into the development of these contracts. The artist allowed for the owner of the work to use other dimensions of paper for the printing of posters were the original size not available. Rosen explains that if the artist was producing a piece in a country that used metric measurements, he would use a similar size or crop the sheets. She observes that, "the owner, who does not have this specific methodology available to them from the certificate, would have to come to their own decisions about how to

²²⁸ Elger, 1997, 14.

²²⁹ Rosen, 1997, 48. In 1995 the work *Untitled (Republican Years)* (1992) was shown simultaneously at the Sprengel Museum Hannover, which owns the work, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Public Information. Desire, Disaster, Document," as well as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's retrospective of Gonzalez-Torres's work. See Elger, 1997, 74.

reproduce the piece ... within the certificates Felix left no clues about just how variable the dimensions could be.”²³⁰

Most of the contracts require that candies be replenished to maintain an ideal weight. *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991) for example has variable dimensions but must retain an ideal weight of between 1,000 and 1,200 pounds. *Untitled* (1988) is a poster stack intended to be 6 inches high ideally. The text poster *Untitled* (1991), however, has no ideal height and is silkscreen rather than offset print on paper.²³¹ Others do not carry this condition and can be reconfigured according to the whim of the collector or curator.²³² These discrepancies are often contradicted by critical reviews of exhibitions and other analytical texts dealing with the gift works.²³³ Since the rules are inconsistent, claims such as those made by Maraniello and discussed in Chapter 2 – that a gift must vaporize in order to be a legitimate offering²³⁴ – are difficult to argue. What seems an act of generosity on behalf of the artist is in fact administered in his stead by curators, directors, and museum staff, who behave as stewards for the works in their physical iterations and also guard the works’ conceptual integrity. Institutions or individuals who own the work

²³⁰ Rosen, 1997, 49.

²³¹ This poster reads, “People with AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1891 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969.”

²³² Mark Coetzee, Director of the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, Florida, which owns some of Gonzalez-Torres’s multiples, indicated that in practice the institution is not allowed to leave a stack or pile unreplenished until it disappears. This fact contradicts popular understandings that the work commonly disappears. My correspondence in June and July of 2008 with Michelle Reyes of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation confirms that there have been restricted cases where candies and posters have been allowed to deplete. There is no written record on file at the Foundation that confirms this. As of July 2008 Reyes is researching exhibitions where this has taken place.

²³³ Suzanne Perling Hudson writes, for example, “Further, the owner or the institution exhibiting the work is not obligated to maintain an ideal height – the stacks can either be constantly replenished or the floor space can be left empty after the last sheet has been taken, which allows the owner or the curator a great deal of flexibility and interpretive freedom.” 2003, 126.

²³⁴ Maraniello, 55.

are responsible to provide the funds to replace candies or posters. In the case of the Venetian exhibition, for example, the steward of the work was the Guggenheim Museum, New York, meaning that this institution was responsible for the cost and administration associated with replenishing the supply of multiples. The artist's work lies under the incumbent's stewardship and power, but still under the authority of the documents drawn up by the artist. The location of authority, then, is central to insuring that Gonzalez-Torres's multiples will survive their audiences' desires.

Since democratic models have been used extensively in the analysis of relational artworks by several writers, my discussion of this artist's work will now focus on the qualities that intersect with some of Bishop's key observations about antagonism and collaborative practices.

As democratic authority is meant to rest with the people it must necessarily occupy a non-place, and not involve power or violence, according to Hannah Arendt.²³⁵ She says, "If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments," keeping in mind that authority is not power, and that "the most conspicuous characteristic of those in authority is that they do not have power."²³⁶ Following from these remarks by Arendt, could it be argued that Gonzalez-Torres's multiples have authority but not power? His multiples are presented as free gifts that do not undermine the power of the institution but instead work within it to establish relations with and between individuals. Gonzalez-Torres's gifts are given freely but the institution controls their flow to the audience. The museum decides when and how to show the work. The museum funds the replenishment of the piece. The museum

²³⁵ Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin, 2006, First edition published 1958 in *Nomos I: Authority*, Carl J. Friedrich, ed): 92.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, 93, 122.

determines the signage that accompanies the piece, which either directly indicates the piece may be touched and fragments taken, or does not. The multiples' contracts are a form of authority, but they do not rule through wielding actual power.

Arendt explains how a clear understanding of authority has eroded in contemporary society, and her ideas can be refigured to examine the effect of this transformation on cultural production, including Gonzalez-Torres's multiples. Arendt suggests that the constant swing of the pendulum between liberalism and conservatism in the last one hundred and fifty years has "resulted only in further undermining both, confusing the issues, blurring the distinctive lines between authority and freedom, and eventually destroying the political meaning of both."²³⁷ This erosion that Arendt describes seems simply a natural effect of democratic process in the western world, a consequence of the rule of the majority and the continual dissatisfaction of a populace. This possibility of a flattened political landscape is a primary cause for Bishop's support of antagonism of relational artworks.

Gonzalez-Torres's multiples and their method of distribution appear to have strong symbolic and conceptual similarities with this process of erosion. His piles of posters and spills of candies recede and erode according to the desire or disinterest of their participants. Supply in the museum seems to fluctuate between plenty and scarcity according to the popularity of the artist's project, and perhaps the relationship between the politics of the day and the politics of his project. But this is a misunderstanding of the roles of authority and power in his practice; though Gonzalez-Torres's contract holds

²³⁷ Ibid, 64.

authority over the work's grammar, it is the curator or administrator who determines when the supply should be increased, when the gift should return to a state of bounty.²³⁸

Can it be said, then, that the conceptual properties of Gonzalez-Torres's practice as authorities exist in a non-place? The artist's contracts have a form of authority that rules outside of reason or coercion, and exists independently from the institutional power that rules the legislation of the art object. The works' authority is established by a body distinguished, but not hermetically separate, from the authority of the institution which holds the work in stewardship. Although the content of his practice is markedly slanted towards the support of a subjective politics, relying on persuasion, the authority of the work's conceptual operation itself – which is also here referred to as conceptual grammar – remains independent of this content.

Arendt questions the assumption that history has continually progressed toward freedom,²³⁹ and a parallel interrogation should inform our analysis of this artist's work since matters of liberty are so often raised in texts dealing with Gonzalez-Torres's production. The goal of satisfaction or equality that Gonzalez-Torres speaks of in his interviews – when he says he hopes to improve the situation for everyone in the world –²⁴⁰ cannot succeed when his subjective ruling on political issues is so open to individual interpretation. Those who oppose his strategy of improvement will be left outside of his plans, left in the role of opponent. This personage is omitted from the association tabulated in Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* as expressed earlier in this thesis.

²³⁸ To an extent this is true even when piles or spills have an ideal weight since the steward evaluates the recession of the work based on his or her rough observations.

²³⁹ Arendt, 96.

²⁴⁰ See Introduction, footnote 1.

Related to this, Toni Ross observes in Bourriaud's theory an effort to frame "social bonds in terms of non-coercive co-existence, as an equal distribution of different roles, desires and interests."²⁴¹ Ross criticizes Bourriaud as seeing art practices as "seeking to ameliorate social or political dissent," with the view that "every sector of society along with their specific differences, can be incorporated and adjusted to the given political order."²⁴² Ross's observations reveal the potential jarring uses of a theory of relational aesthetics: political groups from any faction can easily ply and direct art objects toward their own activism. Outcomes from relational projects such as this beg the question: whose freedom is demonstrated or negotiated in relational artworks?

Democratic practices endeavor to achieve freedom for all citizens through governance. What variety of governance, then, does Gonzalez-Torres's project promote? Mouffe gives a summary of Michael Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct*, which introduces two types of political body, *societas* and *universitas*. A close analysis of these two terms will be used to drive the central issue of antagonism in interactive artworks beyond Bishop's initial observations. I will now outline a provisional comparison between these categories and relational models of art production toward a deeper analysis of Gonzalez-Torres's work.

Societas is a "formal relationship in terms of rules, not a substantive relation in terms of common action," driven by "a loyalty to one another."²⁴³ By contrast, the *universitas* is a relationship determined by action toward a shared goal or outcome.²⁴⁴ Mouffe's analysis suggests that the *societas* is best equipped to deal with the challenges

²⁴¹ Toni Ross, "Aesthetic Autonomy and Interdisciplinarity: A Response to Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics'." *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 5, 3 (2006): 171.

²⁴² Ibid, 171.

²⁴³ Mouffe, 1993, 66.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 66.

that antagonistic relations will raise because it will allow the successful support of a large group of strangers.²⁴⁵ The *societas* supports contingency since it does not attempt to promote a shared goal. The morality of the *societas*, it can be extrapolated, is one built on common respect for difference rather than an attempt to achieve stability. *Societas* fosters and celebrates instability as a generative element in the management of public affairs. How might these categories relate to relational art practices?

These categories of state bodies provide a question relevant to Gonzalez-Torres's artworks: how can a collaborative or interactive artwork best represent a system of *societas* or *universitas*? If Gonzalez-Torres's work is considered for its symbolic qualities as a simulation of a democratic ideal, it could be said that his practice results in effects that fall into both systems of governance. The terms of *universitas* are paralleled in his practice's goal of an improved situation for all and a shared goal for all. However, these same artworks have been interpreted as presenting content towards specific shared community goals as writ large in Bourriaud's neologism "homo-sensual aesthetics," since the objective of relational aesthetics is "*learning to inhabit the world in a better way.*"²⁴⁶ The terms of *societas* are echoed in the multiples' insistence on uncertain outcomes determined by loyalty to the authority laid out in the artist's contracts. Participation in Gonzalez-Torres's project does not require that viewers share a common goal or objective with the artist. Instead, the work only asks its participants to respect the conditions put forward by the piece.

Mouffe's argument for a system of governance founded on *societas* has great relevance for Bishop's line of thought, and for Gonzalez-Torres's practice: the *societas*

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 67.

²⁴⁶ Bourriaud, 1998, 13.

rejects the force of the common good and instead aspires to a common bond.²⁴⁷ Interactive art practices that follow this same principle can generate productive antagonism while allowing morality to play a role in their interactions, and allowing a “common political identity as radical democratic citizens.”²⁴⁸ The primary shared value promoted by Gonzalez-Torres’s is the work’s celebration of disagreement and allowance for conflict. Conflict implies the presence of an opponent, and a methodology that wishes to clearly analyze interactive practices must take the possibility of conflict into account.

Oakshoot, as Mouffe observes, has no space in his theory for an enemy or outsider, and interpretations of Gonzalez-Torres’s aspirations such as Bourriaud’s suffer the same oversight. Loyalty according to *societas* or shared goals according to *universitas* alone do not adequately explain the forces that drive democracy. I argue for a discussion of Gonzalez-Torres’s multiples as governed by an authority similar to *societas*. A reworked notion of loyalty in *societas*, in my view, can be considered as a scheme used to achieve subjective aspirations of each individual citizen in projects that invite collaboration with the viewer. Unlike the *universitas*, which governs with the hope of a common goal, the *societas* gives great latitude for individual desire and also for the viewer’s reciprocity, even if this includes actions against the physical or material product of the collaborative endeavor.

Analysis of interactive art practices must take into account that the viewer’s stake in the artwork is a response that can affect the work’s later reception. In cases where relational artworks permit the viewer to physically alter, redisplay, or rework the object in question, this aspect is especially apparent. If Gonzalez-Torres’s project invites the

²⁴⁷ Mouffe, 1993, 67.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 71.

viewer to collaborate through accepting the gift, analysis of this work must look closely at the materiality of the object and its circulation and alteration over time. The forces of antagonism reveal themselves most clearly in the actions of individual citizens, whether in the operation of civil society or in engagement with art objects. It is for this reason that my thesis has focused on specific case studies and individual ruptures that Gonzalez-Torres's multiples have provoked.

In interview, the artist defines himself as an insurgent or “spy,” since he does not, want to be the opposition because the opposition always serves a purpose: ‘Improve your arms against me.’ But if you’re the spy – always ‘straight acting,’ always within the system – you are the person that they fear the most because you’re one of them and you become impossible to define.²⁴⁹

Because Gonzalez-Torres's project seems loyal to the greater good, or appears “straight acting,” it has stronger potency and wider effect in its conceptual insurgency, setting up a situation of possible abduction that the Venetian interventionists environmental protest detected and reconfigured. Under the guise of normalcy insurgent *societas* is subtly camouflaged to cause a cloaking or concealing of the artist's practice as being harmonious and governed by shared goals and outcomes. Bourriaud's “homosensual aesthetics” overlooks this kernel of opposition, distorting Gonzalez-Torres's practice and its effects.

What could grant legitimacy to the gift's “temporary utopia,” as envisioned by Bourriaud? A relational artwork, according to him, “acquires the status of an ensemble of units to be re-activated by the beholder-manipulator,” thereby legitimizing it; *Relational*

²⁴⁹ Rollins, 21.

Aesthetics is not just invested in but born out of this elemental genesis.²⁵⁰ After being activated and used, the work's effects or locations seem outside of Bourriaud's analysis since he expects only an ephemeral realization of utopia. Gonzalez-Torres's work, however, celebrates this uncontrolled circulation of the work since "each piece of paper gathers new meaning, to a certain extent, from its final destination, which depends on the person who takes it."²⁵¹ By recognizing the individual narrative that results from every viewer's contact with the piece, and the path that the work takes as a result, Gonzalez-Torres anticipates the viewer to have a longer lasting engagement with the work's objectives than allowed for by Bourriaud's framework. Relational aesthetics' latent artwork, awaiting germination by a public, will struggle to survive the citizenship of the vast array of participants who are sure to encounter it.

Bourriaud's stalemate is evident in the Venetian intervention and represents a problem that looms large for both democracy and relational practices. Confronting Gonzalez-Torres's posters, the interventionists worked within the artwork's authority, holding to the rules of loyalty that are reflected in the concept of *societas*. But just as the artist himself used the forms of Minimalism to serve his purposes, discussed in Chapter 2, the interventionists found a fashion to remodel a practice toward their own subjective desires by virtue of a conceptually inherent syntactical gate - one that I have argued the artist imbedded in his work intentionally.

Contributing further to this thread of *societas* and *universitas*, Jacques Rancière's writing sketches out Plato's three categories of creative expression that mirror "forms of existence": writing, theatre, and dance. His description of the third category sparks

²⁵⁰ Bourriaud, 1998, 20.

²⁵¹ Rollins, 23.

connections with the relational, “the *choreographic* form of the community that sings and dances its own proper unity.”²⁵² Rancière’s outline contrasts theatrical works – “the movement of simulacra on the stage that is offered as material for the audience’s identifications” – with choreography, “the authentic movement characteristic of communal bodies.”²⁵³ Plato, in Rancière, assumes that choreography will bring about accord, but as I have suggested, a refigured version of the relational model informed by the loyalty of the *societas* can allow for a choreography that also invites discord and insurgency. The relational practitioner and theorist should take seriously the interventionists of Venice as a successful example of adherence to the multiples’ vision of democratic standards for authority – *societas* – and the requirements of the individual.

Shadow Play: Authority and the Elusive Common Good

Arendt also uses Platonic arguments to flesh out her discussion of authority. Her observation about the nature of authority has ramifications for, and is tied to, the history of visual art and the analysis of aesthetics. As Arendt observes, a cornerstone of contemporary understandings of political authority is Plato’s *Republic*; this collection of writings includes “The Allegory of the Cave,” which has long been considered essential reading for academics and artists who hope to understand western aesthetic theory. The allegory describes a darkened grotto in which subjects in chains, facing a wall, are only able to see the transitory shadows of objects and figures moving behind them. In this text, the philosopher-king is an individual who has escaped the chains of the cave, and been

²⁵² Rancière, 2004, 14. Italics original.

²⁵³ Ibid, 14. A detailed comparison between Rancière’s discussion of Plato and Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” deserves further research.

enlightened by exposure to the true forms of the world. It is this philosopher-king's duty to return to the cave to instruct and rule over his compatriots. "The Cave," often used as an outline of the existence of pure formal elements and the role of the artist in society, is part of a handbook for governance. In the past this text has been used to construct an analogue between artist and ruler, drawing a divide between author and subject.

Within the framework of "The Cave" one could to a certain extent consider all artists as being trapped in the same struggle: to coerce and rule their citizens. The philosopher-king is ideally responsible for the guidance of his citizens toward understanding, but not through the use of coercion. Instead, the philosopher-king relies on "self evident truth" to guide his constituents.²⁵⁴ Reason as a coercive tool is not a primary force in the content of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's multiples; instead, as I have argued, authority is the work's conceptual guiding principle.²⁵⁵ The relational artist, and in our case Felix Gonzalez-Torres, gives an especially clear example of what the implications are for this kind of framework of governance in artworks. As I have explained in previous chapters, Gonzalez-Torres's work is an ideal prototype of the tendency that Bourriaud notes in art practices: involving both use and participation, it is coded with benevolence and generosity.

For the purposes of tackling Arendt and understanding this artist's practice, my analysis must discard the glow of generosity surrounding his artworks, and recognize the presence of authority in his practice. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work is meant to clarify an audience's position on an issue by drawing boundaries and encouraging arguments. It seems the viewer must take a stance in this situation even if it is one of rejection or

²⁵⁴ Arendt, 107.

²⁵⁵ His situation in this respect is not unique among contemporary artists, though many artists rely on reason, even its negation, in order to give their work authority over the viewer.

apathy; by taking a poster or by leaving it, though, does an audience either accept or reject the responsibilities associated with its message? These didactic ends should be questioned. If the multiples cannot clearly identify their supporters and detractors, what are the advantages and disadvantages of this situation? In a similar quandary, Plato's philosopher-king finds himself at risk.²⁵⁶ Not only might his judgment be hampered by his rule, his life may be lost if he cannot effectively communicate his *modus operandi* and identify his supporters; he rules out of fear for his own life, using his newfound understanding as a tool of domination. The multiples' method of operation, indicated by contracts, do not adhere to reason, but rather rely on an external set of principles, outside of the law, to maintain and secure their operation.

Since reason and coercion are outside of the work's gambit, the Venetian interventionists are able to adeptly stride into the grammar designed by *Untitled (Republican Years)*' authority, adhere to the *societas* protocol of loyalty, and through abduction effectively voice their own stake in the larger politics the artist's work presents. All of this is accomplished outside of the purchase of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics.

The question at hand is: how can artworks that mimic strategies of governance hope to balance the rights of the individual and the greater good, and what are the issues for collaborative art practices coming out of this?

Arendt's discussion of systems of rule offers something of an answer, which can be grafted onto art production's concerns to flesh out an argument. She summarizes Aristotle's *Economics*, which draws a line of distinction between monarchic situations of

²⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of the reasons for this risk, see Arendt, 107.

private domestic rule – the *oikia* – and the shared rule of the many, called the *polis*.²⁵⁷ *Oikia* is focused on the household and personal matters. Gonzalez-Torres's work seems representative of the *polis* – being broadly gifted materiality – but the content of the work is grounded in his subjective position, thus being of the *oikia*. I want to suggest that space of *oikia* permits the multiples to explore subject matter concerning Gonzalez-Torres's own stake in the democratic process. If paired with the concept of *societas* – governance that is driven by a shared loyalty – *oikia* allows the kind of insurgent behavior that the multiples' contents require to negotiate within the field of possible opponents. In *oikia*, the individual can be monarch of his or her own affairs but still participate in *societas*. Likewise, the viewer is also encouraged to maintain a monarchy of subjectivity by virtue of the multiple's encouragement of dissent and reciprocity. The Venetian interventionists utilize this feature of the artist's work toward the realization of their own project, being very much “front-line troops in the so-called culture wars,” but in a way significantly different from what Robert Storr describes.²⁵⁸

The potential represented in Bishop's concerns outlined in the literature review of this thesis – that art criticism should not dwell on ethical rather than aesthetic judgments – is vividly illustrated in the Venetian intervention. Analysis might view the ecologists' initiative as a form of art criticism, certainly. However, this divide between participant and commentator is not one that should be entertained here for the simple reason that the interventionists have used the materiality and concept of Gonzalez-Torres's gift work to interrupt its movement and operation. If it is true that his “work has gained praise from

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 116. It is important to note that although Arendt situates the first appearance of authority as a concept in Roman times, she discusses Greek examples that “tried to introduce something akin to authority into the public life of the Greek polis.” See Arendt, 104.

²⁵⁸ Storr, 2006, 6.

such diverse groups in the art world: from members of the *October* group to queer critics, from art students adverse to high theory to those infatuated with it,”²⁵⁹ there is all the more reason to take into account those factions that *have not agreed*. Surely art history should be skeptical of claims that, “Gonzalez-Torres’s work has had the power to unite disparate factions in a sort of fin de siècle art consensus.”²⁶⁰ And if pronouncements such as this are in fact true, I argue that this quality of unity is one that should be scrutinized, not just celebrated. As is the case with all utopian models in art practices, the line between harmony and tyranny is easily blurred.

In conclusion, these are objects given to please, but also to encourage debate, even disaccord. These are objects that function as gifted activism. Analysis of outreach-based practices that are bent on political objectives must include an allowance for dialectic responses from participants who are not content to occupy a fixed role or static position. This is why the Venetian intervention and its successful appropriation of Gonzalez-Torres’s conceptual grammar should promote a serious reconsideration not only of the relational aesthetics model in general, but also of this artist’s work in particular.

²⁵⁹ Adriano Pedrosa, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Serpentine Gallery,” *Artforum*, Vol 39, No 4 (December, 2000): 157.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 157.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

What motivates an artist to direct their practices toward the social involvement of their viewers, through gifting? Do communities need or want the assistance, guidance, perspective and drive of artists as presented in projects that involve the participation of the viewer? With provisional art practices, analysis must consider what is given, by whom, according to what principles and potential outcomes, and to whose benefit. This line of questioning is what binds together the theories and methodologies discussed in my past chapters: haptic encounters with minimalist aesthetics as introduced by Foster and taken up in my comparison of Andre's and Gonzalez-Torres's work; Mauss's and Starobinski's views on the gift paired with the multiples as a point of dispensation that activates discussion, giving room for reciprocity; the gift works' counterposed with the democratic principles discussed by Mouffe, Rancière, and Arendt.

The questions raised by relational methodologies in light of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's influential practice are many, but this thesis has drawn into close vibration matters of aesthetic ideologies, strategies of the gift, and democratic practices, exploring how they come to bear on his multiples. I have examined how his practice has been exhibited, framed, and promoted as evidence of art's ability to promote harmony - a hypothesis that ignores the method and actual effects of his work in the public sphere. My inquiry has been guided by a skeptical attitude toward this artist's salient role in the apologetics of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. Rather than rely on analysis that foregrounding the multiples' emotional and interpersonal content, I have instead argued that these works are conceptually-based infiltrations protected by their negotiation with

art institutions and the market, using generosity as a cloak. By profiling the operation of the multiples as gifts that remain commodities invested with particular politics whose aim is to promote dispute, this thesis analyzes the nuances and ruptures of the multiples through a focus on their materiality.

These queries have highlighted a central concern: what institution, body, or individual stands to benefit from a practice that mimics Minimalist and Conceptual aesthetic forms, generosity, and dominant systems of governance?

The use of Gonzalez-Torres's giftworks as a gesture of thanks to, and popular involvement of, communities by contemporary art institutions is a visible symptom of the way that artist's collaborations with communities can be rerouted, but also reveals an institutional endgame. Examples where his work is used as an offering of appreciation are excellent sites to bring together the three primary themes of this thesis: aesthetic ideology, troubled gifts, and democratic practices. The language that public institutions use in support of this artist's practice stresses the viewers' roles as citizens of a community in which the institution in question is integrally involved. Museum director Julia Peyton-Jones's foreword in the catalogue for Gonzalez-Torres's Serpentine Gallery exhibition is revealing in this respect:

It was the desire to "give back" to our audience, to the artists, colleagues and visitors who have supported us over the years, that influenced our decision to present in conjunction with our anniversary celebrations, an exhibition devoted solely to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres ... It is the generosity reflected in Gonzalez-Torres' work that the Serpentine wishes to encapsulate in this unique year.²⁶¹

²⁶¹ *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. (London: Serpentine Gallery; New York: Andrea Rosen Gallery, 2000) Unpaginated.

Museums such as the Serpentine are, like Bourriaud, professing faith in the gift work's symbolic ability to breed contentment and fuel stable communities in an attempt to establish a whole community. As discussed in my previous chapters, this use of his practice as a gesture of thanks overlooks the quality of disagreement inherent to Gonzalez-Torres's work.

Infinitely supplied gifts conceptualized by Gonzalez-Torres, but financed and provided by steward institutions, can lead to conflict and confusion regarding their status as artwork, as well as the form that reciprocity might take for the receiver. Entangled in this situation is the lack of transparency about what force is providing the gift. As the artist who instigated the multiples, Gonzalez-Torres himself makes the first gesture that leads to the gift's reception by viewers, but several bodies contribute to this force before the gift reaches audiences' hands. A key conclusion that this thesis presents, therefore, is that gallerists, curators, and museums all have purchase in the process that leads to the gift's creation. But what motivates this involvement? The gift acts as a token proving the institution's involvement with its constituents in a democratic setting. What is vital in this display is the way that the artist's co-opting of Minimal and Conceptual aesthetics in tandem with the museum's support of his work gives the apparent signal that the institution is receptive to re-imaginings of its own authority and role in the evaluation of aesthetic histories. Gestures of munificence represented through an artwork are potent demonstrations of how institutions might use these works to authenticate their role as organizations that operate to the benefit of their communities. Such gestures by institutions should be approached with a critical attitude, particularly given the commodious nature of Gonzalez-Torres's work. Both parsimonious and gratuitous gifts

can reinforce understandings of institutional authorities as forces that are meant to be considered as benevolent agents in the process of the multiples' distribution, as made evident by the writing that surrounds this artist's practice.

Linked to the question of reciprocity, Gonzalez-Torres's project provokes discussion between those who see the posters and candies – once gifted – as mere objects, and those who insist their qualities, effects, and methods of distribution qualify them as artworks. Their final status, art objects or otherwise, scarcely seems determined or certain, and rather than obfuscate the matter, my intent has been to closely examine the materiality of the multiples and their circulation as the prime ground for determining their potential natures.

Artworks that establish authority in communities on moral grounds, using relational strategies to develop shared ethics and shared concerns might find themselves quickly swayed by the rhetoric of universalism provided by Bourriaud's theory. But what are the alternatives? Risks lie on either side: the artist could defend universal boundaries and authorities as necessities in order to achieve creative objectives that involve communities; aiming for particularism, the artist could make work that creates accordance based on the individual needs of its collaborators. The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres does not permit a succinct conclusion or fall neatly in either category. If the gift is accepted, even this does not result in a sanguine collaborative outcome, since its content may disrupt the viewer's initial agreement with the principle of generosity. Utopian expectations for the giftworks are thus dashed, since Gonzalez-Torres's so-called temporary community of viewers is motivated simultaneously by the lure of inter-human communication, as well as greed or desire to consume.

Deliberate design of ambiguously structured artworks is intended to put the viewer and also the curator into an authorial role.²⁶² Bourriaud's relational methodology embarks from the assumption that works of art are "devices requiring [the viewer] to make a decision."²⁶³ Freedom of choice – whether to accept or reject the gift, but also how to later display or discard it, alter or re-gift it – suggests that the multiples and works like them are not just reflections of liberty but are capable of bringing about temporary utopias. Ambiguity or "in-betweenness" is the route Gonzalez-Torres utilizes to critique the institution and its relationship with publics but it is not aimed toward neutralizing conflict or promoting harmony as Bourriaud presumes. The agency to circumvent the structures outlined by the exhibition and the object, and the liberty of choice allowed by Gonzalez-Torres's practice present several unique possibilities for these works as explored in Chapters 3 and 4. These examples show that the artist's open installation specifications and the perambulation of the gifts themselves enable confusion and absurdity to play significant roles in their potential realization through the participations of viewers, as well as the future reception and fabrication of his work.

In closing, I propose that we consider the multiples of Felix Gonzalez-Torres as a display of "faulty" democracy. By this I mean to offer the work room to be contingent on the viewer's response – be it disinterest, hostility, or acceptance – incorporating what I see as Bishop's most useful remark, that a participatory artwork that aims for democracy should support disagreement.²⁶⁴ This attitude is reflected in the syntactical gateway provided by Gonzalez-Torres's multiples, which invited abduction by the Venetian interventionists and continue to encourage the reciprocity of its viewers. Confronting the

²⁶² Bourriaud, 1998, 18.

²⁶³ Ibid, 39.

²⁶⁴ Bishop, 2004, 51-79.

discomfort of a democracy that is never at rest but always in conflict, art objects like the giftworks are poetic gestures, in part, but much more importantly encourage viewers to question their own desires and the responsibilities involved in claiming ownership of property. Relational abductions like the ones I've discussed suggest that if a relational practice is to effectively operate in communities, it has to make allowance for unexpected contributions from audiences that will promote discord. Gonzalez-Torres' multiples engage with their constituents on a meaningful level, as commodified gifts, welcoming and even fostering dissent as a formative element in the conceptual representation of provisional and faulty democracy.

Illustrations

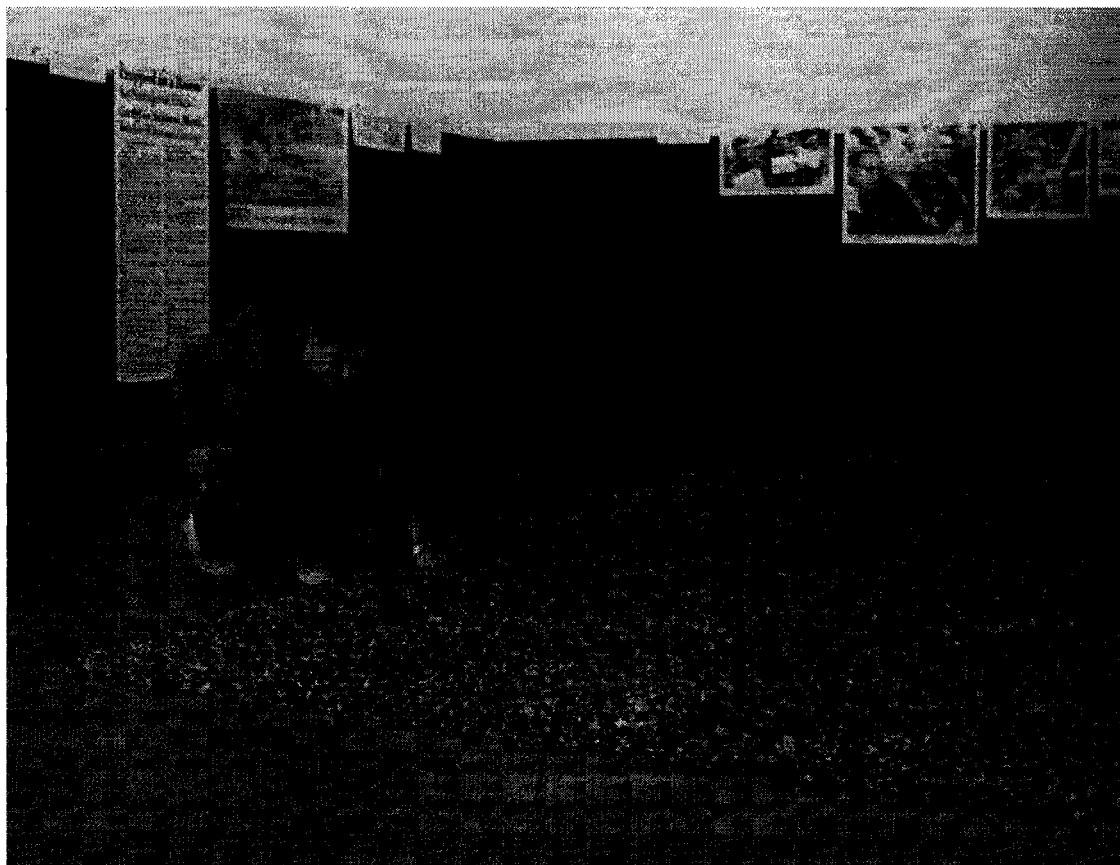


Illustration 1: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Public Opinion)*. 1991. Black rod licorice candies wrapped in cellophane. Endless supply. Dimensions vary with installation. Ideal weight of 700 lb. Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Joseph Kosuth*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 2005. Reprinted from Julie Ault. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin. 2006.

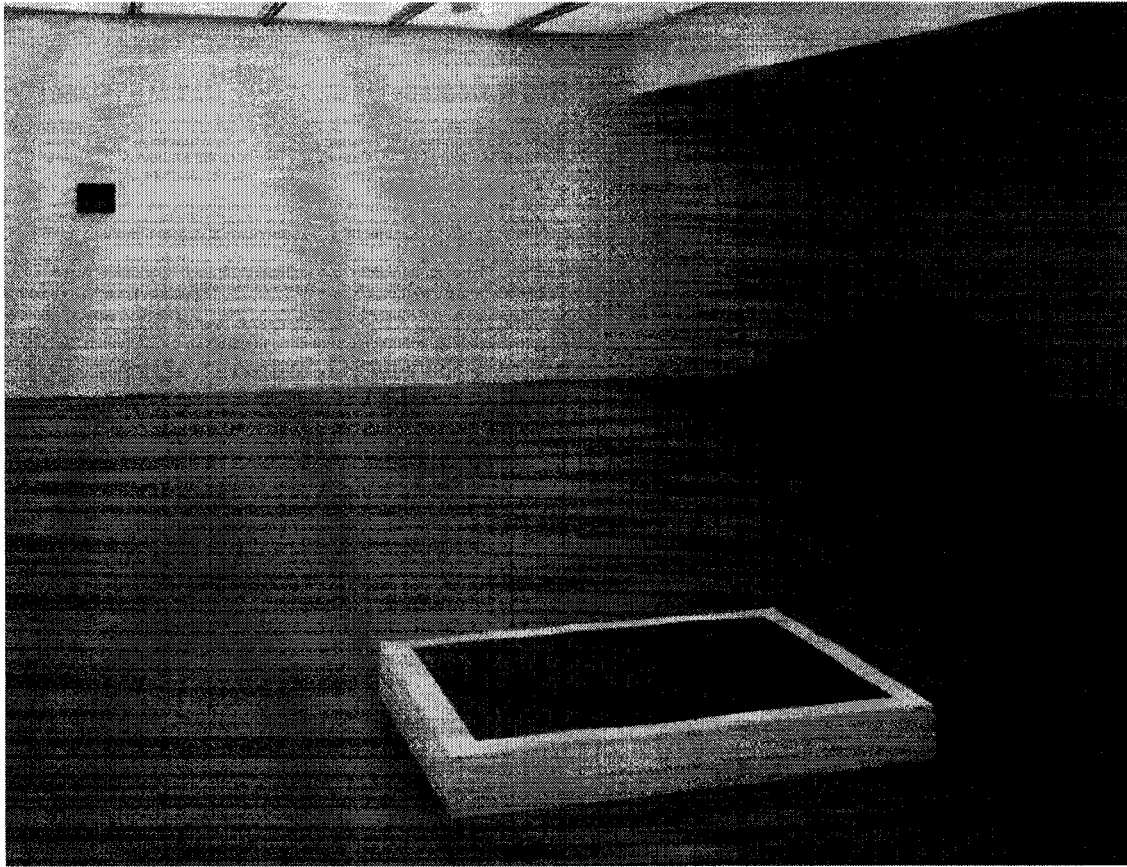


Illustration 2: Rear: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Public Opinion)*. 1991. Black rod licorice candies wrapped in cellophane. Endless supply. Dimensions vary with installation. Ideal weight of 700 lb. Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Girlfriend in a Coma)* at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1996. Reprinted from Julie Ault. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin. 2006.

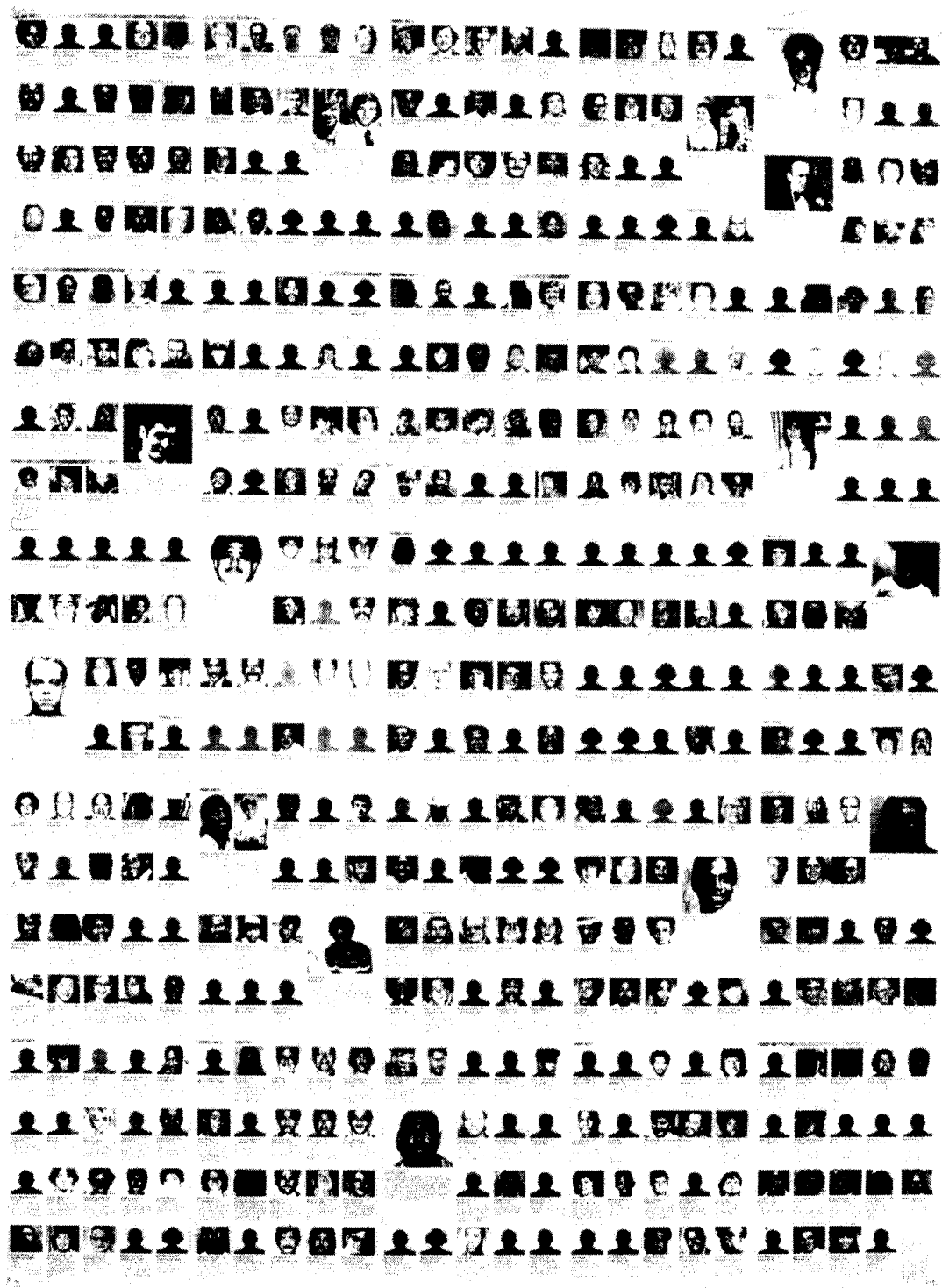


Illustration 3: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Death By Gun)*. Detail. Offset print on paper, endless copies. 8 inches at ideal height x 48 x 34 inches. Reprinted from Julie Ault. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin. 2006.



Illustration 4: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Death By Gun)*. Detail. Offset print on paper, endless copies. 8 inches at ideal height x 48 x 34 inches. Photograph by Mark Clintberg



Illustration 5: Carl Andre. *Forty-third Copper Cardinal* (1975). (Foreground.) Copper, 43 units. Each unit: $3/16 \times 19 \frac{5}{8} \times 19 \frac{5}{8}$ in. Total composition: $3/16 \times 19 \frac{5}{8} \times 843 \frac{7}{8}$ in. Reprinted from Mark Coetzee. *Rubell Family Collection: Not Afraid*. London; New York: Phaidon Press. 2004.

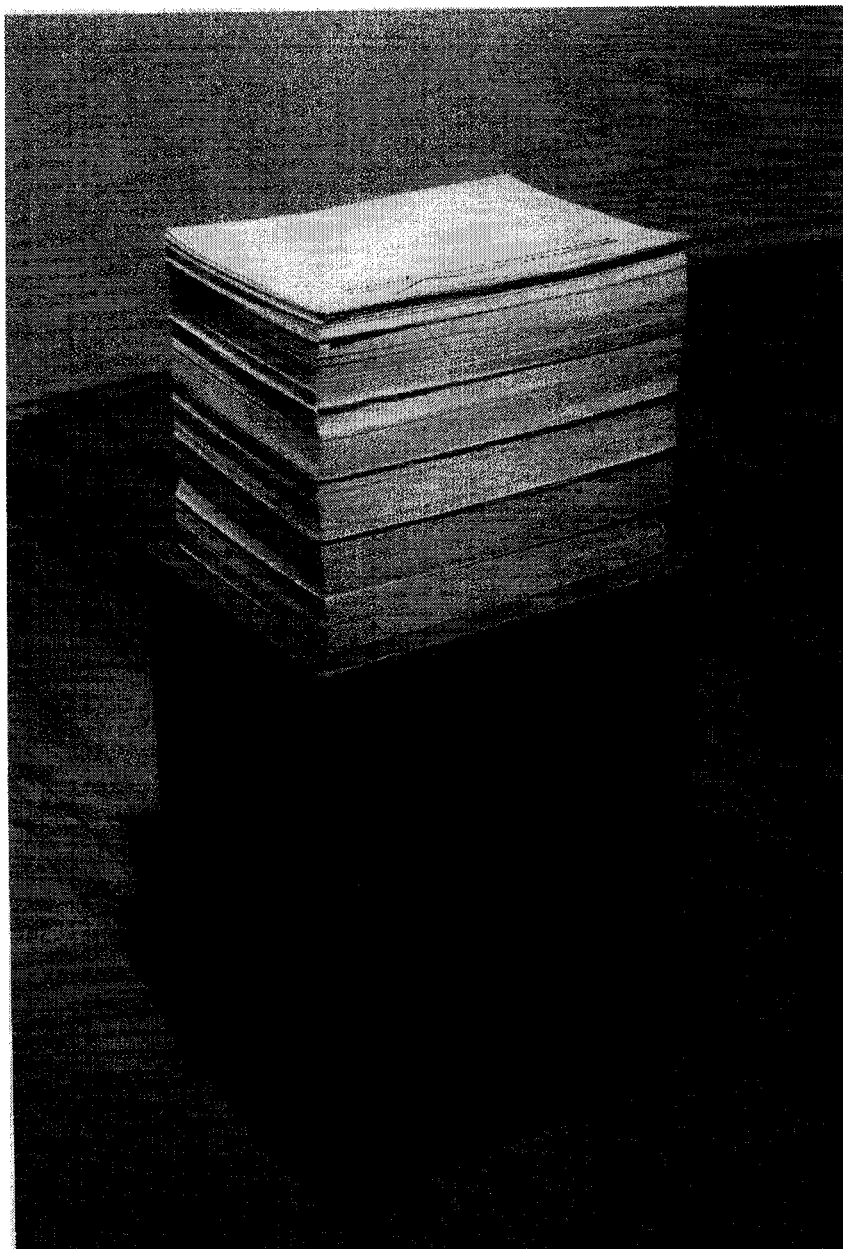


Illustration 6: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled* (1988), wooden pedestal, endless copies of photocopies printed on 8 ½ by 11-inch sheets of paper. 36 inches at ideal height x 12 ½ x 9 ½ inches. Stack: 6 inches at ideal height x 11 x 8 ½ inches. Pedestal: 30 inches x 12 ½ x 9 ½ inches. Installation at *Real World: Jon Tower, Lorna Simpson, Felix Gonzalez-Torres* at White Columns, New York, 1988. Reprinted from Julie Ault. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin. 2006.



Illustration 7: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Placebo)*. 1991. Candies wrapped in silver cellophane. Endless supply. Overall dimensions vary with installation. Ideal weight: 1,000 to 1,200 lb. Installation at *Every Week There Is Something Different* (week four), Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1991. Reprinted from Julie Ault. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin. 2006.

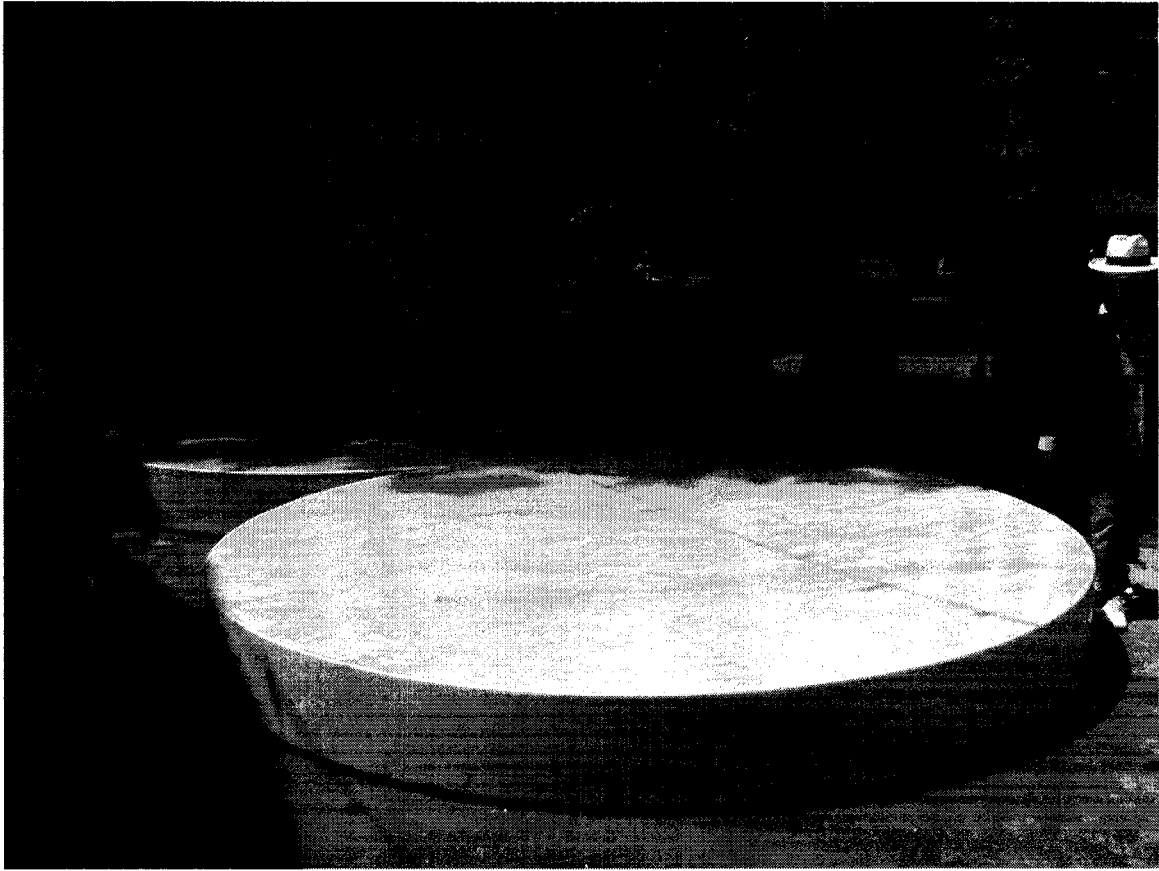


Illustration 8: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Sagitario)* (1994-1995). White marble. Installation at *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America*, Venice Biennale 2007. Photograph by Mark Clintberg.

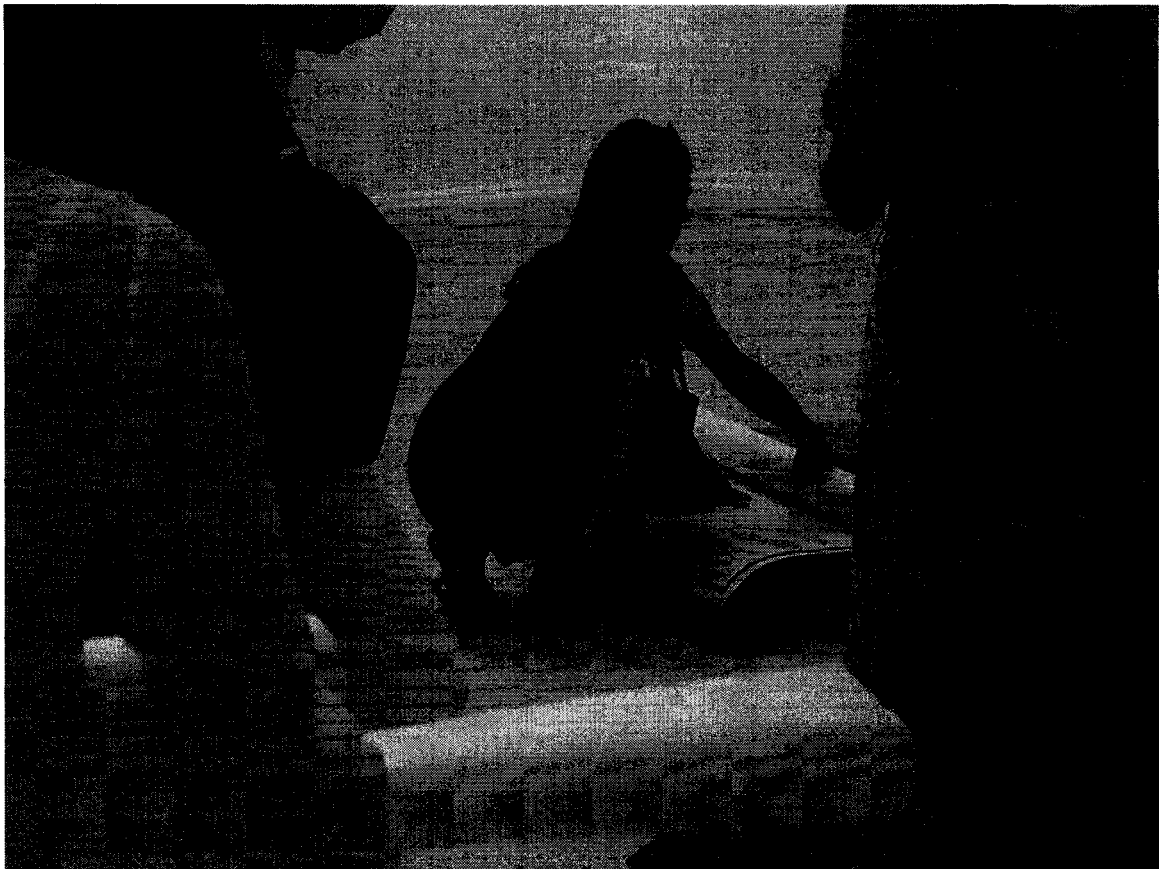


Illustration 9: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Republican Years)* (1992). (being removed by visitor) Offset print on paper. Endless copies. 8 inches at ideal height x 34 x 48 inches.. Installation view at *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America*, Venice Biennale 2007. Photograph by Mark Clintberg.

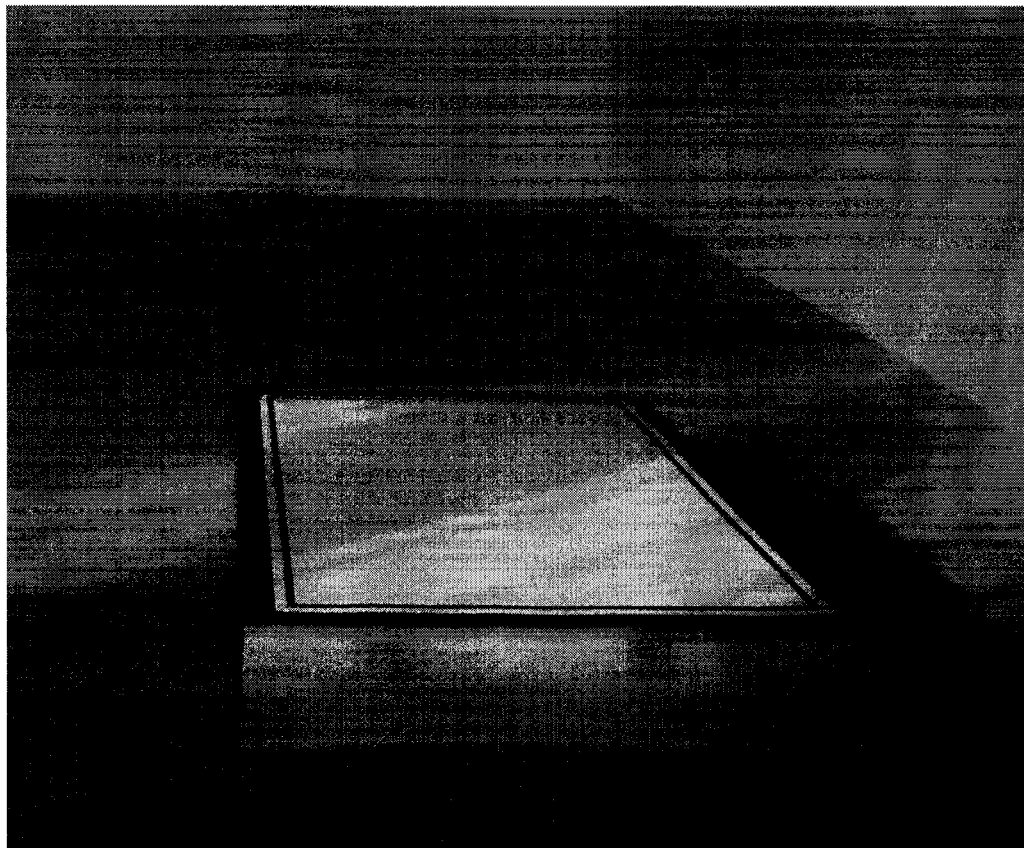


Illustration 10: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Republican Years)* (1992). Offset print on paper. Endless copies. 8 inches at ideal height x 34 x 48 inches. Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* at Le Consortium, Dijon, 2001. Reprinted from Julie Ault. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin. 2006.

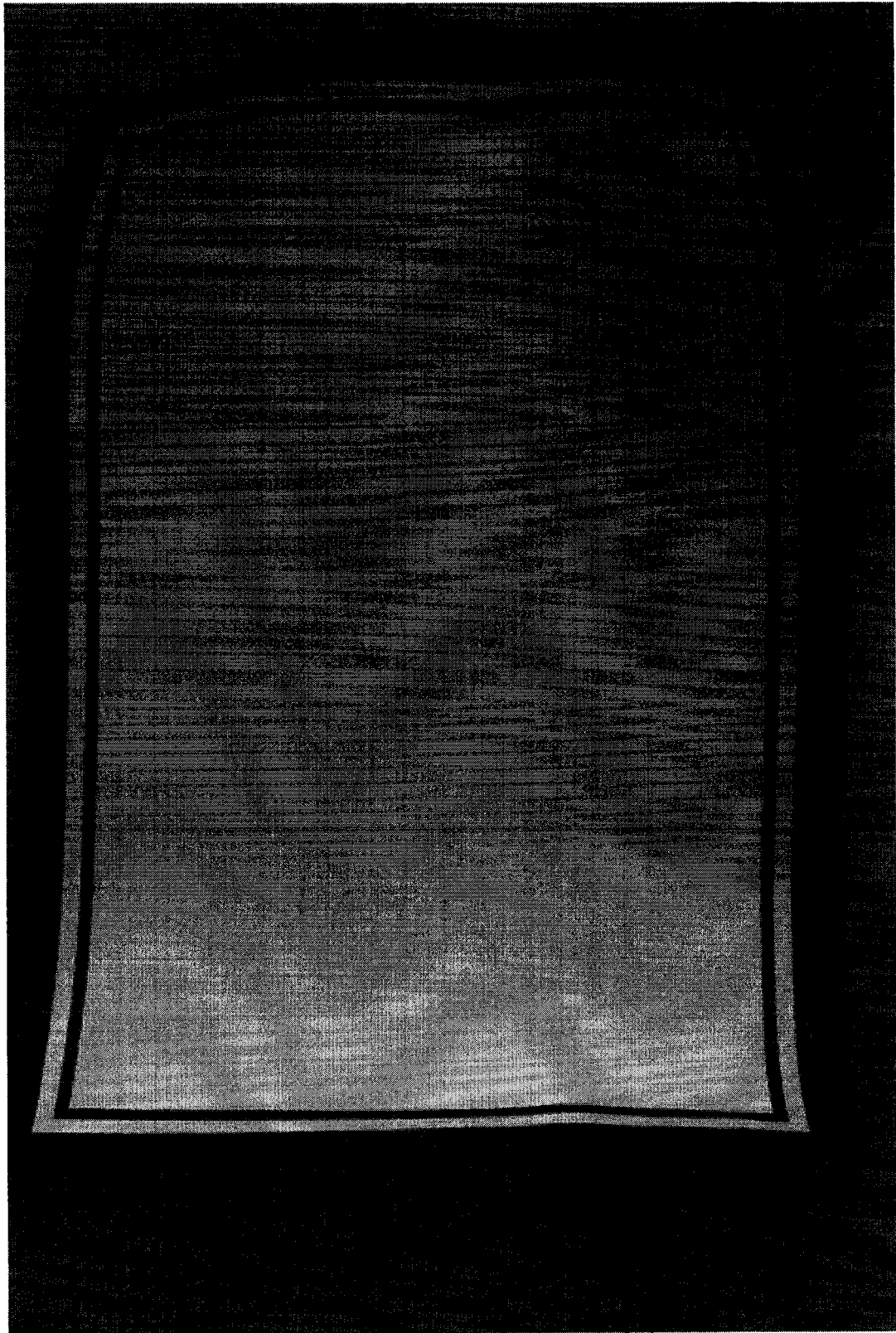


Illustration 11: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Republican Years)* (1992). Offset print on paper. Endless copies. 8 inches at ideal height x 34 x 48 inches. Photograph taken in Venice, 2007, by Elizabeth Belliveau.

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