

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
MATRIX/BERKELEY 161

University Art Museum /
Pacific Film Archive
mid January - late March 1994

Detail from Untitled, 1991



Felix Gonzalez-Torres' MATRIX exhibition consists of two greatly enlarged black-and-white photographs and two long strings of bare light bulbs hanging from the gallery ceiling. The photographs, taken by the artist, depict birds flying against banks of clouds that are suffused with the pale light of an obscured sun. Enlarged to such a degree, the images become grainy to the point of abstraction, coalescing as an image only when viewed from some distance. As part of this exhibition, the same images are installed on actual billboards at sites throughout the East Bay. Also, in conjunction with this exhibition, there is a special insert in the UAM/PFA bi-monthly calendar: a photograph by the artist depicting the rumpled sheets and pillows of an unmade bed.

The materials and techniques of Gonzalez-Torres' artworks are extremely modest: his use of commercially manufactured lighting fixtures and billboard prints neither astonish nor intimidate the viewer with the virtuosity of the artist's "hand." Rather, Gonzalez-Torres' work is based in a more conceptual tradition that is perhaps closer to the practice of poetry than to the Western tradition of visual arts. Like a poet, Gonzalez-Torres does not reinvent language with each work, but rather utilizes the language (i.e. the materials) already available to him, recombining images and forms to create a specific effect.

While the individual materials of his work may lack much intrinsic aesthetic power, in juxtaposition and in the specificity of their placement (whether in a museum gallery or in some exterior, public site), Gonzalez-Torres' works become charged with intense

emotion. Here, in particular, the artist unabashedly lays bare an expression of awesome solitude that may strike viewers alternately as sad or soothing. There is nothing obscure about this work: its appeal to the viewer is in terms of images and symbols that are rooted in the vernacular culture. For the two photographs in this exhibition, some of the possible associations that come to mind are sky/heaven, bird/individual, bird/angel, light/wisdom, lights/angels.

Gonzalez-Torres identifies with the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. Contrary to the common association of romanticism with a self-absorbed, anti-social stance, Gonzalez-Torres' work resonates with that aspect of romanticism which was imbued with social consciousness. As Raymond Williams describes:

"What were seen at the end of the nineteenth century as disparate interests, between which man must choose and in the act of choice declare himself either a poet or a sociologist, were, normally, at the beginning of the century, seen as interlocking interests: a conclusion about personal feeling became a conclusion about society, and an observation of natural beauty carried a necessary moral reference to the whole and unified life of man."

Indeed, Gonzalez-Torres' art is both by intention and by effect rooted in contemporary social conditions and comments on these conditions, albeit in an oblique and non-didactic manner. In this work, specifically, Gonzalez-Torres calls to mind both the alienation that plagues our society as well as the profound sense of loss felt for those

who have died prematurely from the ravages of disease, war, and crime. While the work is open to numerous readings, its mood of solemn meditation certainly reflects, for the artist, the tragedy of his lover's recent death from AIDS. This highly personal experience certainly lies behind the tender vacancy conveyed by the artist's photograph of an empty bed.

In addition to his solo work as an artist, Gonzalez-Torres has been active for many years with the artists' collective, Group Material (also including Julie Ault, Doug Ashford, and Karen Ranspacher). Like Gonzalez-Torres' own work, Group Material, through the creation of thematically-based group exhibitions, creates bridges between aesthetic/personal/emotional and activist/public/informational modes. In 1989, Gonzalez-Torres participated in Group Material's MATRIX exhibition, *AIDS Timeline*.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in 1957 in Güaimaro, Cuba, and currently lives and works in New York City.

Lawrence Rinder

Works in MATRIX:

Untitled, 1991-94, installation (two billboards glued to wall), dimensions and format variable. Private collection, Germany.

Untitled, 1991-94, dimensions and format variable. Berkeley and Oakland installation: offset on billboard located at 6 locations, H.

10' 5", W. 22' 6". Private collection, Germany.

Detail from Untitled billboard, 1992, dimensions and format variable. Insert in UAM/PFA January/February 1994 Calendar, Vol. XVII, No. 1: offset on newsprint, 14 1/2" x 22". Lent by Elaine and Werner Dannheisser.

Untitled (couple), 1993, two strings, each string with light bulbs, extension cords, porcelain light sockets, dimensions vary with installation. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey R. Winter.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC '88; The Brooklyn Museum, NY '89; Andrea Rosen Gallery, NYC '90 (also '91, '92, '93); Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, Germany '90; Luhring Augustine Hertzler, Santa Monica, CA '91; Massimo de Carlo, Milan, Italy '91; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC '92; Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, Sweden '92; Galerie Peter Pakesch, Vienna, Austria '92.

Selected group exhibitions:

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, *The Rhetorical Image* '90; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, *Biennial* '91; Portland Art Museum, OR, *Dissent, Difference and the*

Body Politic '92; Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Albert Oehlen, Christopher Williams: Théâtre Verité* '92; Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lausanne, Switzerland, *Post Human* '92; Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, *The Nightshade Family* '93.

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Selected bibliography:

Azgikos, Jan. "This Is My Body," *Artforum* 29, no. 6 (Feb. '91), pp. 79-83.

Deitcher, David. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Stockholm: Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall '92).

Nickas, Robert. "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (Nov./Dec. '91), pp. 86-89.

Tallman, Susan. "The Ethos of the Edition: The Stacks of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Arts* 61, no. 1 (Sept. '91), pp. 13-14.

Umland, Anne. *Currents 34: Felix Gonzales-Torres* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art '92).

Wye, Deborah. "'Untitled (Death by Gun)' by Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 22, no. 4 (Sept./Oct. '91), pp. 117-19.