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What Remains: The Practice and Presence of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Jessica Olivia Yee
San Jose State University

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WHAT REMAINS: THE PRACTICE AND PRESENCE OF FELIX
GONZALEZ-TORRES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of The Department of Art and Art History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jessica O. Yee

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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by

Jessica O. Yee

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ART HISTORY

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2020

Dore Bowen, Ph.D.

Department of Art and Art History

Janet Silk, M.F.A.

Department of Art and Art History

Liz Linden, Ph.D.

Department of Art and Art History

ABSTRACT

WHAT REMAINS: THE PRACTICE AND PRESENCE OF FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

by Jessica O. Yee

Contradiction has been widely used to describe the work of the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996); however, it does not fully encapsulate the complexity of the artist's oeuvre. This thesis turns to the German director Bertolt Brecht's notion of dialectical theater, which highlights the tensions, struggles, and interplay between contrary tendencies as a way to understand Gonzalez-Torres's work. When the contradiction that marks the artist's work is thought of in terms of dialectical theater, it can be better understood as layered and intentional. This thesis examines the necessary dialectical relationship presented in his work through the artist's employment of theatrical devices that have allowed the artist to navigate the dialectical display of his public and private self. As a result, the scholarship debating Gonzalez-Torres's work must also be viewed collectively as a necessary dialectical relationship that highlights the artist's strategic exchange between his own practice and presence. It is essential to understand Gonzalez-Torres's strategy to allow for the continual unearthing of ephemera related to the artist's life that ultimately carries forth the dialectic, or tensions, between the artist's practice and everlasting presence he ultimately staged.

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With my deepest gratitude, I share my thanks to my friends, colleagues, and family that have undoubtedly championed the completion of this thesis. It is because of their support, I am most proud to have completed the project of a lifetime.

With only the utmost respect to Felix Gonzalez-Torres, I am thankful for the opportunity to carry forth his memory by stimulating the conversation around him in my own graduate work.

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Introduction

In the collection of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York, is an archive of love letters sent between the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his partner Ross Laycock spanning the couple's eight-year relationship from 1983 until 1991, the year of Laycock's untimely passing due to AIDS.¹ Andrea Rosen, the artist's long-time gallerist reflects on the presence of this archive:

He also left his correspondence with Ross to an archive. Of course, Felix could not escape the basic contradiction between his insistence that value not be placed on background and source material, that aggrandizing of memorabilia, even though personally meaningful, undermined his extreme efforts to liberate himself from concretization, and his very human desire to insure that his love letters—clearly also source material—did not disappear.²

This “basic contradiction” Rosen describes is the underpinning of Gonzalez-Torres's work, which fluctuates between private (“his insistence that value not be placed on background and source material”) and public (the existence of the archive of letters deliberately left behind by the artist to ensure their preservation).³ This thesis argues that the idea of contradiction, or an opposition of two statements or ideas, informs both the

¹ The archive of letters at the Center for Curatorial Studies is a facsimile set produced by

² Andrea Rosen, “Untitled (The Neverending Portrait),” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Dietmar Elger (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz; New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1997), 55-56.

³ While there are many “contradictory” elements to Gonzalez-Torres practice, in this thesis, I will focus on the parameters that connect the artist to his work via his personal relationship with his longtime partner, Ross Laycock and the implications of politicizing a homosexual relationship in the public's heteronormative domain. For further discussion on contradiction in regard to the Gonzalez-Torres's originality, authenticity, and uniqueness given the artist's flexibility of medium and reproduction, please see David Deitcher, “Contradictions and Containment,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, 104-110.

work and the way the work is interpreted. Indeed, as I will argue, this contradiction is consistently threaded throughout the literature and criticism surrounding the artist and his work.

Contradiction alone, however, does not fully encapsulate the complexity of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. As curator Nancy Spector articulates, “For [Felix Gonzalez-Torres], the balance between aesthetic form and its open-ended content is very important and very deliberate; the work shifts between two poles, never privileging one over the other.”⁴ Spector largely underscores Rosen’s specific comments of the “basic contradiction” the artist faced noting the two points of connection one can enter Gonzalez-Torres’s work: aesthetic form and open-ended content. While contradiction is marked by a combination of statements, ideas, or features of a situation that are opposed to one another, Spector describes a new way to understand Gonzalez-Torres’s approach, but fails to outright identify a new model for interpretation. What Spector does outline is Gonzalez-Torres’s very deliberate balance between form and content.

When the contradiction that marks Gonzalez-Torres’s work is thought in terms of German theater director Bertolt Brecht’s notion of dialectical theater, it can be better understood as significant, layered, and intentional. The artist stated, “I tend to think of myself as a theatre director who is trying to convey some ideas by reinterpreting the notion of the division of roles: author, public, and director,” exemplifying his self-awareness to the performativity his work provokes and the various perspectives he brings

⁴ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 87.

forth to his work.⁵ It comes as no surprise that Gonzalez-Torres often cited Brecht as the primary source of inspiration to his practice. In an interview with Tim Rollins, Gonzalez-Torres stated, “Last but not least, Brecht is an influence. I think if I started this list of influences again, I would start with Brecht.”⁶ Brecht, a champion of epic theatre, or as later in his life became to know it as dialectical theatre, was discussed repeatedly by Gonzalez-Torres.⁷

In light of the artist’s interest to Brecht, this thesis turns to the Brechtian dialectic, which highlights the tensions, struggles, and interplay between contrary tendencies, as a way to understand Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work, criticism, and the dynamic of ongoing remembrance and memory surrounding the artist. There is a dialectical tension fundamental to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres charged with reflections on the artist’s personal biography. This dialectical tension mirrors the divide in criticism surrounding his work, which focuses on the queer political implications of Gonzalez-Torres and his

⁵ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. William S. Bartman (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 23.

⁶ Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 19.

⁷ See also Robert Nickas, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All The Time in the World,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, (Germany: Steidl, 2006), 40. In conversation with Nickas, Gonzalez-Torres’s notes: “I would like to jump to Brecht’s concept of epic distance. I like the strategy of taking something very common, very normal, and shifting it a little bit so that object can establish a different relationship with the viewer.”

work, and the importance of love in regards to the artist's romantic relationship with his longtime partner, Ross Laycock.⁸

Brecht describes the dialectical model:

In order to unearth society's laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself.⁹

This thesis draws out these inconsistencies under the terms *practice* and *presence* to encapsulate the two poles that inform Gonzalez-Torres's work. His practice is marked by the attempt to liberate his work from the weight of background material on his life, a political reading detailed by his performativity as an "infiltrator," and his presence is carried forth by the preservation of the artist's memorabilia of his romantic relationship with his partner. Below, I further detail the intricacies of practice and presence in regard to Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In chapter one, I discuss the interplay between the scholarship surrounding the artist, noting the distinction of two camps of scholarship that follow either the artist's practice or presence. Chapter two acknowledges the role of theatricality, and argues that the artist's strategies are informed by Brechtian practice. Lastly, chapter three discusses the status of available memorabilia and ephemera that are most closely

⁸ Roland Wäspe, "Private and Public" in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, 19. Wäspe discusses queer, relating to Gonzalez-Torres's own theory behind his art and his own personal background. Queer, as Wäspe borrows from Thomas Eggerer and Jochen Klein, "Virtually Queer – Gay Politics in der Clinton-Ära" in *Texte zur Kunst, Sexuelle Politik?* characterizes the politicization of sexualities that, beyond all binary identity classifications, find themselves in active contradiction to the masculine-dominated, white, capitalist and heterosexist culture.

⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 193.

linked to the artist's personal background. Under a dialectical model, I stress that the knowledge and available means of the artist's personal life should be available to continuously question and shift the ever changing and growing narrative surrounding the artist. The result is, I argue, a dialectic that relies on implicit contradictions the artist left behind to be discovered.

Gonzalez-Torres's *practice* includes the post-modern aspect of the artist's oeuvre as defined by institutional critique, including his strategic infiltration into the contemporary art canon. In this light, the political power in Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre is not found in the experiences that pertain to *why* he is an infiltrator (an outsider with distinct experiences as Cuban-born American queer man impacted by AIDS), but as to *how* he overcomes these character traits through the deployment of his work. It is important to note that practice does not strip the artist of his personal biography; however, practice also does not emphasize these personal experiences. Under practice, empathy for the artist's self-experience is instead minimized.¹⁰ The script is flipped and rather than focus on Gonzalez-Torres as an outsider or other, illustrative of a negative connotation, the artist self-identifies rather as an infiltrator, signifying a self-activation and purpose. Gonzalez-Torres's deliberate strategy to remove the burden of self-experience on his work but capitalize on the political underpinnings represent the artist's practice.

Just as Gonzalez-Torres's self-identity is masked under the all-encompassing blanket of "infiltrator," the formal qualities of his work utilize clean, minimalistic veneers to

¹⁰ As Joan Scott argues, "experience" (something that is present, real, felt, interior) is not an adequate way to argue for the political reality of something. See Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience" (Critical Inquiry Vol. 17, No. 4 Summer, 1991), 773-797.

carry forth the possibility of political implications. The importance in practice is how Gonzalez-Torres employed his work to act on his behalf; thus, the artist's catalogue raisonné serves as support material for this view. Gonzalez-Torres's works are each accompanied by a certificate of authenticity that provide guidelines for their re-creation, installation, and maintenance. Though they provide parameters, the certificates also allow for "open-endedness for interpretation."¹¹ As Spector notes, Gonzalez-Torres's balance of "aesthetic form and [the work's] open-ended content" never privileges one over the other. In this case, Gonzalez-Torres's practice propels Spector's analysis of his work. His aesthetic form is the vehicle for queer activism to take place in plain sight. His non-traditional media: paper stacks on the floor, light strings strewn across a room, or cellophane-wrapped candy for endless taking undercut the traditional nods to explicit queer imagery normally under represented in art institutions.

As opposed to looking for the meaning of the work in its political resonance through form, presence finds meaning in its biographical associations to the artist's life. Presence is comprised of elements of the artist's personal biography that animate the memory, understanding, and knowledge of the artist's life existing extraneous to his work. The artist's presence is most notably found in the publicly available interviews, lectures, talks, artist statements, archives, ephemera, and memorabilia that exist today, left behind by the

¹¹ See "Key to Catalogue Entries," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, 14-17.

artist or close confidants, in tandem to his practice. The elements of the artist's presence are not immediately identifiable via his work and thus exist beyond its formalities.¹²

The delineation between *practice* and *presence* is perhaps most well exemplified by a question and answer segment following a conversation between Gonzalez-Torres and curator Gary Garrels at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) on March 23, 1995. In the audience, a woman inquired if the artist's work is accompanied by commentary.¹³ Gonzalez-Torres first answers, "Yes, there is a—there is a certificate that explains how it should be made. Like, what it is, the—the thing," and the artist continues to describe a simple certificate of authenticity for a light string piece that details a preferred light bulb brand over another.¹⁴ In response, the woman clarifies her question stating, "The—the question really means—I mean, like, if you weren't here talking, I wouldn't get a quarter of what you're about, because you are very funny and witty and

¹² For example, a clear foil to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's approach to ephemera is that of Keith Haring, a contemporary artist to Gonzalez-Torres whose brief but intense career in the 1980s ended with Haring's death due to AIDS related complications at the age of 31 in 1990. The Keith Haring Foundation has digitized and made publicly available the artist's journals and sketchbooks online and have permitted the inclusion of such materials in high-profile exhibitions including *Keith Haring: The Political Line* organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 2014. By contrast, Gonzalez-Torres's exhibitions and retrospectives are devoid of such personal ephemera. For more information on the Keith Haring Foundation and archival access, please visit www.haring.com.

¹³ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled (A Talk)," Lecture and Conversation with Gary Garrels, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, March 23, 1995.

¹⁴ There are six series within the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres that are accompanied by certificates of authenticity, due to the nature of the pieces. The certificates offer basic guidelines for maintaining and in most cases, recreating the works. These certificates will be further explored in chapter two.

aware. And I'm just wondering if the accompanying statements express that."¹⁵

Gonzalez-Torres responds:

“No. No. I trust the viewer. I trust the viewer’s intuition. . . . But no, I—I don’t like those labels explaining the work on the walls. Or either, in the certificate. What I’m asking for is for people to look at the work differently. . . . I always say that my work is just totally formal. And that content is just an accident I cannot escape, as someone living—as someone who lives in the late 20th century. I just cannot escape that.”¹⁶

Here, the woman poses the question to Gonzalez-Torres—how does he insert himself into his practice? Gonzalez-Torres’s notes he does not—he states that a work’s certificate of authenticity stands alone and provides pragmatic instruction to recreate his work. The certificates thus do not read like interpretative wall labels found in museum galleries to provide suggested interpretation. Yet, Gonzalez-Torres also notes that “content is just an accident I cannot escape,” and alludes to the inevitable blurring of what his practice means in relation to his (own) presence. The conundrum is exemplified in that very moment, too: the artist’s talk at SFMOMA provides exactly an element of the artist’s *presence*, the activation of the artist lending us his innermost thoughts and insights in regards to his *practice*. Unbeknownst to the woman who posed the question, it was in that moment Gonzalez-Torres *did* provide the commentary she sought for in conjunction to his practice. As Gonzalez-Torres describes, it is in this moment those blurred boundaries between content (presence) and formality (practice) are inescapable.

Though the collection of love letters shared between Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his partner Ross Laycock is currently inaccessible, one letter found in the archive at the

¹⁵ Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled (A Talk).”

¹⁶ Ibid.

Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College has been widely published.¹⁷ One letter notably appears in the artist's monograph edited by Julie Ault in 2005 that offers a full-page reproduction of the "source material" Gonzalez-Torres sought to preserve.¹⁸ In the letter, Gonzalez-Torres writes to Laycock:

Lovers, 1988

Don't be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous to us. We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain space. We are a product of the time, therefore we give back credit were [sic] it is due: time. We are synchronized, now and forever. I love you.

Accompanying the typewritten text of the letter is a hand drawn sketch of two clocks, side-by-side, indicating the same time in vivid blue ink. The letter suggests that the clocks serve as a dedicated example of the pair's coupling: as Gonzalez-Torres writes, "We are synchronized, now and forever."

The letter and accompanying drawing refers to Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*). *Perfect Lovers*, which features a pair of identical clocks mounted side-

¹⁷ The last documentation of access to the full archive is from 2009. See Jared Ledesma, "Perfect Lovers: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Marshall Laycock" (Master's thesis, San Francisco State University, 2009). It is significant to note that through the course of my own research, I was repeatedly denied access to view the archive of correspondence at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in New York. I first contacted the Center for Curatorial Studies in October 2014 and corresponded via email with the Ann E. Butler, director of library and archives. It was explained to me the status of the archive is "restricted," per the guidance of The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. After following a suggestion from Butler to contact Emilie Keldie, director of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation for permission to access the archive, I was once again denied access in a meeting with Keldie in February 2015. The last known access to the archive is noted in Jared Ledesma's master's thesis from 2009, to which I further explore in chapter one.

¹⁸ See Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Germany: Steidl, 2006), 155.

by-side mounted to a wall. Two versions of the work exist, from 1987-90 and 1991. The earlier version features two clocks with a black trimming, black hour and minute dials that are contrasted with a thin red second hand, and a white face; the later features two identical clocks with a white, angelic outer edging. The timepieces resemble those found in ordinary offices, public spaces, or clinical areas like a hospital. Touching, the edges of the clocks stand flush together. Battery-operated, the devices are initially set to reflect the same moment as the hands—to the hour, minute, and second—tick in unison; however, both will inevitably fall out of sync. One’s second dial will skip a beat too soon, the minute hand will fall behind on the other, and eventually, one’s battery will falter before the other. As indicated by the parenthetical citation of the title, *Perfect Lovers* suggest the time-trackers as a metaphor for two loving individuals. However, the presence of the love letter written by Gonzalez-Torres to Laycock also suggests that the clocks stand in as undeniable, perfect fill-ins for the distinct couple. The “basic contradiction,” that Rosen noted regarding the archive itself is encapsulated here. The love letters—that Rosen cites as “clearly source material”—including the one letter published in Ault’s monograph of the artist begs to be connected to the artist’s work. Here, the artist’s presence found within the letters, outside the arena of the gallery, exist parallel to his practice, or work, but the desire to draw the connection between the two illustrates the distinct tension between the two realms.

It is difficult to imagine how, as Rosen describes, an artist so private could leave something so intimate—not just one letter, but the entire collection of correspondence he shared with his partner—to an archive for public consumption. As a result, while

personal biography is critical to the underlying structure to how Gonzalez-Torres approached his practice during his lifetime, the relationship between the artist's practice and presence is much more complicated than either approach can bring to it.

Gonzalez-Torres was widely self-aware of these apparent contradictions at stake. In an interview with Tim Rollins in 1993, three years before his passing due to AIDS in 1996 at the age of 38, Gonzalez-Torres stated, "I don't want a revolution anymore, it's too much energy for too little. So I want to work within the system, I want to work within the contradictions of the system."¹⁹ Though the beginning of Gonzalez-Torres marks a sentiment of defeat by announcing, "[revolution is] too much energy for too little," Gonzalez-Torres finds rejuvenation in his ability to conform to a presumed standard, finding a platform "within the contradictions of the system." For example, in 1994, leading up to the opening of Gonzalez-Torres's solo exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., a Smithsonian Institution, Republican Senator Ted Stevens threatened to shut down the artist's show.²⁰ Gonzalez-Torres recalls:

Senator Stevens, who is one of the most homophobic anti-art senators, said he was going to come to the opening and I thought he's going to have a really hard time trying to explain to his constituency how pornographic and how homoerotic

¹⁹ Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview by Tim Rollins," 27.

²⁰ In 1994, Gonzalez-Torres's solo exhibition, *Traveling*, was co-organized by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. (cur. Amada Cruz), The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (cur. Ann Goldstein), and The Renaissance Society at The University Chicago (cur. Susanne Ghez). For the exhibition, Gonzalez-Torres selected works for each specific venue, working intimately with each institution's curator.

two clocks side by side are. He came there looking for dicks and asses. There was nothing like that. Now you try to see the homoeroticism in that piece.²¹

The piece Gonzalez-Torres cites is the aforementioned work by the artist, “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*). The sameness of the rounded dials mirror a same-sex coupling without the agitprop-esque imagery afforded by the “dicks and asses” Gonzalez-Torres alludes to as overt sexually-charged counter imagery to his artistic practice. By using a plain, ordinary object to depict his homosexual relationship with his partner, Gonzalez-Torres subverts the system by appropriating the banal. This is an exemplary case of the artist’s *practice at play*—the “homoeroticism” of the piece is found within the artist’s personal biography, known to the public, but is undetectable through the ordinary use of “two clocks side by side.”

Gonzalez-Torres encouraged the restructuring of strategies, of and relating to “so-called gay art.”²² Cautious in the ways he might be easily compartmentalized as a gay artist, Gonzalez-Torres’s activation of the banal subverts the meaning of what may be perceived as images belonging and marked by “the other.” Though the artist’s aesthetic appears to borrow Marcel Duchamp’s employment of the readymade, Gonzalez-Torres appropriates the everyday under a new guise. His work seemingly falls in line with a Duchampian aesthetic through his use of everyday materials: clocks, commercial candies, or copy paper. Yet, Senator Steven’s remarks on the Gonzalez-Torres exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum echo the controversy surrounding the explicit and sexually charged,

²¹ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Être un espion/Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Being a Spy,” Interview by Robert Storr in *Art Press*, no. 198 (January 1995): 28.

²² *Ibid.*, 28.

homosexual sadomasochistic imagery of Robert Mapplethorpe's infamous "X Portfolio".²³ Gonzalez-Torres's work has thus been described as a type of "deception," that ultimately alludes to his homosexual orientation, to which the artist himself refers to as a form of 'straight-acting' but through the use of commonplace objects.²⁴ He is the open 'other,' but on the surface, passes for the ordinary. As such, Gonzalez-Torres urges and reflects: "The thing that I want to do sometimes with some of these pieces about homosexual desire is to be more inclusive. Every time they see a clock or a stack of paper or a curtain, I want them to think twice."²⁵

Gonzalez-Torres continually challenges his audience to think critically. On the surface, works like "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) echo cool post-minimalist forms: candy spills, paper stacks, mirrors, curtains, or ordinary light bulbs that ultimately disguise the underlying intent behind his practice. Though Gonzalez-Torres was strategic and unabashed to share political ideologies in public interviews with colleagues as exhibited with his candor with Storr, the solo gallery work he produced in the realm of the public platform of the institution through lasting, collectible artwork, borrowed a simple visual

²³ In 1989, Robert Mapplethorpe's retrospective, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. was cancelled prior to its opening in response to the content of the show: "explicit homoerotic and violent images," and controversially funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. See Barbara Gamarekian, "Corcoran, to Foil Dispute, Drops Mapplethorpe Show," *New York Times*, June 14, 1989, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/14/arts/corcoran-to-foil-dispute-drops-mapplethorpe-show.html>.

²⁴ Amada Cruz, "The Means of Pleasure," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

vocabulary.²⁶ At every step, Gonzalez-Torres was strategic in the presentation of his identity, layering the verbal and the visual amidst reality, defying a traditional categorization. As a result, Gonzalez-Torres has been easily described as “a stirring embodiment of contradiction.”²⁷

Gonzalez-Torres’s persistent contradictory approach has resulted in the subsequent divide in scholarship of the artist. On one end, Gonzalez-Torres is celebrated for being a universal, inclusive artist; and in response to this strategic omit of the artist’s personal biography has resulted in the rise of a camp determined to count Gonzalez-Torres as a lover.²⁸ The exploration of the relationship between Brecht on Gonzalez-Torres has been minimal; while Gonzalez-Torres has cited Brecht as an influence on his practice, there has been only one essay devoted to the topic that delves into the connections between the artist’s practice and Brechtian theatre.^{29;30} In expanding the connection between

²⁶ Though Gonzalez-Torres was an active member of the artist collective Group Material from 1987-1991, I distinguish solo work as to differentiate the distinct palettes Gonzalez-Torres and Group Material represent. Gonzalez-Torres describes, “I always worked as an individual artist even when Group Material asked me to join the group. There are certain things that I can do by myself that I would never be able to do with Group Material,” in Felix Gonzalez-Torres: *Être un espion/Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Being a Spy*,” 27. For more information on Group Material, see Julie Ault, *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010).

²⁷ Curator Ann Goldstein sums, “Again, it comes back to those ideas of presence and absence, of here and not here, of nowhere and anywhere, all the contradictions. His work was really a stirring embodiment of contradictions,” in “Reflections on a Proposal for 1995,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America: United States Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale*, ed. Nancy Spector (New York: Guggenheim Publications, 2007), 58.

²⁸ The divide in scholarship will be fully outlined in my literature review in chapter one.

²⁹ To be further discussed in chapter three.

Gonzalez-Torres and theatre derived by Brecht, we can unpack the dialectical relationship brought forth by the “contradictions” that have accumulated in his work, subsequent scholarship, and posthumous surfacing of memorabilia surrounding the artist. This method of understanding Gonzalez-Torres’s strategic employment of his practice and presence in his work encourages the continuation of critical arguments for Gonzalez-Torres, on either side.

To understand the field of scholarship around Gonzalez-Torres, in chapter one I highlight what I have found to be two opposing camps of reception, affixed to ideas of queer inclusion and love.³¹ The first camp of scholarship consists of the canonical mainstream, namely characterized by those curators and colleagues that knew the artist during his lifetime and abide to the artist’s wishes to hallmark Gonzalez-Torres as a tongue-in-cheek, political infiltrator and antithesis to the public arts institution.³² As a result, this camp has omitted to detail the significance of Gonzalez-Torres’s personal narrative as a primary influence to the way he has navigated his queer identity as an artist: in essence, this camp of scholarship relies on the artist’s practice, not his presence,

³⁰ To be discussed in chapter two. See Amada Cruz, “The Means of Pleasure,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 9-22.

³¹ I borrow Gonzalez-Torres’s language of inclusivity as discussed with Robert Storr to describe the predominant imagery he sets to describe himself as opposed to the idea of being the “enemy,” or what can be understood as an alternative method of stating the other as related to his sexuality. See “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Être un espion/Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Being a Spy,” 32.

³² The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation maintains that it is critical to separate the artist’s personal biography and his work per the artist’s wishes.

to determine the work's power. The believed failure to dismiss the artist's intimate details of his personal relationship in discussing the artist's practice has brought forth a new camp of scholarship to argue the importance of love—on the artist's practice as critical to understanding Gonzalez-Torres's inevitable political categorization. This camp—defining Gonzalez-Torres as lover—is marked by a group of rising scholars focused on the artist's presence and has enlivened the stage for discussion of materials that constitute and imbue the artist's presence. This camp has served as an important prelude to the onslaught of continual surfacing of memorabilia related to the artist—from letters, to postcards, and other archival materials now accessible in the public domain that I further discuss in chapter three.

Considering Gonzalez-Torres's work under a dialectical model provides a way to understand the interpretive “camps” of literature that define his work, as well as the politics that attend his archival remains. What are we to make of an artist's private memorabilia that turns public? Or of the implications of the artist's intent on contemporary access? The theatricality of Gonzalez-Torres's work and by extension his own performance as an artist, as I discuss in chapter two, aim to offer these connections as a tool to unravel the complexities surrounding Felix Gonzalez-Torres's practice and presence in contemporary life. The relationship between the artist's practice and presence is much more complicated than either approach can bring to it. Yet, by understanding these simultaneous trajectories, I urge a critical lens be used from which to evaluate to the broader history (past and developing) that surrounds the presence and practice of the artist and further examines the implications of how the artist may be remembered.

Chapter One

Literature Review: One Artist, Two Camps

“Perhaps Felix’s greatest gift is his invitation to remember, and our obligation to act.”
—Amada Cruz, Ann Goldstein, Susanne Ghez³³

The analysis of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres generally falls within two, seemingly oppositional camps. The mainstream and post-modern view of Gonzalez-Torres is notably triumphed by the art world’s elite, primarily consisting of curators, artists, and gallerists closely associated with the artist during his career, among them, the influential curators Nancy Spector, Amada Cruz, Ann Goldstein, Susanne Ghez, artist and curator Julie Ault, and Gonzalez-Torres’s longtime gallerist, Andrea Rosen. This view acts on the notion of political inclusivity via modes of infiltration, and Gonzalez-Torres is defined as a socially and politically conscious artist. Rather than focus on *why* Gonzalez-Torres is an infiltrator (queer in a heteronormative society) by looking to the artist’s personal biography, this camp draws out the artist’s practice as its focal point.³⁴ Notably, these select curators and art influencers are Gonzalez-Torres’s closest friends privy to knowing the artist during his lifetime, and they have closely adopted the artist’s public, yet contradictory, sentiments in relation to his own work.

On the occasion of the artist’s mid-career retrospective at The Guggenheim in 1995, curated by Nancy Spector, Gonzalez-Torres reflects on his exhibition with artist Ross

³³ Amada Cruz, Ann Goldstein, and Susanne Ghez, “Preface and Acknowledgements,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 10.

³⁴ See footnote 8 for details on “queer.”

Bleckner, who coincidentally held a concurrent solo show at the Museum that year. In an interview in *BOMB Magazine*, Bleckner and Gonzalez-Torres discuss the nature of their status each as a “gay artist,” and the implications of such labels.³⁵ Yet, Gonzalez-Torres flips the script on being classified as “gay,” or being limited (as the critic David Rimanelli cited) as a victim of “gay curation,” by self-identifying instead as an “infiltrator” via his practice.^{36;37} This mainstream view follows Gonzalez-Torres’s lead and defines the artist as a socially and politically conscious artist. Rosen, describes the artist’s “greater agenda,” was to “infiltrate the system, to use the existing power structure as a means of influencing change.”³⁸ The implication of the title of “infiltrator” assumes Gonzalez-Torres is inherently understood as an outsider; however, the conversation glosses over Gonzalez-Torres sexual orientation as minimal background noise to his practice and involvement in the heteronormative art canon—yet it is very fact that he is gay that inherently fixes him as an “outsider.” Despite the artist referencing his own homosexual orientation and his capacity for “straight-acting”—of appearing to be “normal” but actually being the “other”—the focal point of being an infiltrator turns into a type of political strength embodied by the artist by rejecting the perceived sympathies

³⁵ Ross Bleckner and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *BOMB Magazine*, No. 51 (Spring 1995): 42-47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ David Rimanelli, “Ross Bleckner and Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *Frieze* (May 1995): 55-56.

³⁸ Andrea Rosen, “‘Untitled’ (The Neverending Portrait),” 46.

and limited categorization as just “the AIDS [artist].”^{39,40} As a result, Spector insists on Gonzalez-Torres’s refusal of “gay artist” nomenclature, which leaves her to declare, “The love that he hints at in his work can be either homo- or hetero-sexual—or both—depending on the viewer’s own orientation,” thus maintaining Gonzalez-Torres’s everyman-or-woman’s artist, able to appeal to simply *everyone*.⁴¹ There is an insistence that Gonzalez-Torres is for the every-audience, a type of mass appeal; consequently, Gonzalez-Torres’s presence has come secondary to his practice under this approach. Gonzalez-Torres describes to Bleckner:

RB: You don’t make work about being gay?

FGT: No. You just include it ...

exemplifying Gonzalez-Torres’s insistence that he is not solely the other, but he is gay, and in plain sight.⁴² The strategic implementation of categorizing Gonzalez-Torres’s quiet infiltration exemplifies the necessity for the artist to pass as straight as a method of survival as we recall the artist’s own recount of Senator Ted Stevens threats to shut down his 1994 exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum. While the “homophobic anti-art” Senator came to the artist’s solo show “looking for dicks and asses,” Gonzalez-Torres cites the

³⁹ Amada Cruz, “The Means of Pleasure,” 16.

⁴⁰ Amada Cruz recalls about the artist, “He never wanted to be known as the AIDS artists, never wanted to be known by that moniker.” “Reflections on a Proposal for 1995,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America: United States Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale*, ed. Nancy Spector (New York: Guggenheim Publications, 2007), 57.

⁴¹ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 73.

⁴² Ross Bleckner and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” 44.

difficulty of viewing homoeroticism in everyday material, such as two clocks side by side.⁴³

This perceived rejection to fully embody “being gay” has fueled a new camp of rising scholars. These scholars seek a fully fleshed narrative of the artist’s coupling with his partner Ross Laycock connecting the importance of the artist’s presence on his practice. Under this trajectory, the work is understood to refer to a highly personal narrative of a tragic love story between the artist and his partner framed by the context of the AIDS epidemic. Laycock succumbed to AIDS in 1991, five years prior to the artist’s own death due to AIDS-related complications. This trajectory has been notably explored by a group of emerging scholars embarking on a discussion surrounding the artist’s loving partnership, among them are Anne Jennifer Cushwa, Jared Ledesma, Margaret Anne Wojton. The desire to narrate the love story shared between Felix and Ross is often justified by its scholars, exemplifying a type of hesitancy as they write against the grain of the dominant socio-political ideology. Cushwa encapsulates this decidedly postmodern sentiment:

Love is not for talking about in the postmodern world; it seems pointless and certainly trite, but one cannot discuss Gonzalez-Torres without discussing love, just as one cannot discuss him without discussing AIDS or sexual politics or American consumption of art (and everything else).⁴⁴

⁴³ Gonzalez-Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Être un espion/Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Being a Spy,” 28.

⁴⁴ Anne Jennifer Cushwa, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: A Legacy of Love” (Master’s thesis, University of Iowa, 2000): 80.

The work of Gonzalez-Torres requires a cross-disciplinary and multifaceted understanding in order to capture the conditions that surround his work. By extending the discussion to love, Cushwa seeks to expand the intellectual engagement of Gonzalez-Torres beyond the political and into the personal. In Ledesma's master's thesis titled, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Marshall Laycock: Perfect Lovers," he analyzes the artist's work "in dire need for further elaboration: connecting the partnership with Ross Laycock to the artwork produced through his short lifespan."⁴⁵ However, Ledesma protects his agenda asserting, "By doing so, it is not my intention to concretize Gonzalez-Torres's identity as a gay man," justifying that his thesis provides an exploration of a "vital portion of [Gonzalez-Torres's] life," essential to understanding the artist's practice at large.⁴⁶ Ledesma addresses the layers of representation in Gonzalez-Torres's work, yet the act of identifying Gonzalez-Torres as a "gay man" solely is also shunned, recalling Cushwa's insistence to broaden the considered conditions that surround the artist's work. Cushwa and Ledesma seek to engage in critical discourse on love without reducing Gonzalez-Torres's work solely to his gay identity, and arguably they reflect on Gonzalez-Torres's own insistence to detach himself from easily plastered labels such as "gay artist."⁴⁷ The justification—or hesitancy—projected by Cushwa and Ledesma imitate that of the reverse in early scholarship surrounding Gonzalez-Torres that discusses the

⁴⁵ Jared Ledesma, "Perfect Lovers: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Marshall Laycock" (Master's thesis, San Francisco State University, 2009), 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁷ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 87.

political climate of the 1980s and 90s, the AIDS epidemic, and Gonzalez-Torres's relationship with his partner, but solidify Gonzalez-Torres as indefinite with either "camp" of artist to oppose labeling him. The justification, as it stands for Cushwa and Ledesma, is that Gonzalez-Torres's acceptance into the art canon in the twenty-first century has provided the acceptance and prosperity for that of a homosexual artist in the mainstream. And as such, in 2010, Wojton proudly asserts, "The underlying message threaded within all of his compositions, interconnecting each artwork, was love.... It was his love for Ross," declaring the artist definitively as lover.⁴⁸ Notably, Wojton closes the loop on the conversation: Gonzalez-Torres need no longer be defined by his gay partnership; but rather simply, by love.⁴⁹ The risk of discussing single facets of the artist's biography is segregating other important aspects, as forewarned by Cushwa. Love is strung throughout these distinct, yet similar discussions that focus on Gonzalez-Torres's personal relationship with Ross Laycock, who happened to also be a man, and the significance of love—love in general—on the artist's work.

⁴⁸ Margaret Anne Wojton, "Love and Loss," (Master's thesis, Kent State University, 2010), 11.

⁴⁹ I would be remiss not to discuss the parallel qualities of the debate in scholarship on Felix Gonzalez-Torres's identity: politicization via focus on his practice and his so-called outing by focus on love and partnership with Ross Laycock to the public debates encapsulated by noted figures Douglas Crimp and Andrew Sullivan. Wojton's proclamation of a total love-based reading of Gonzalez-Torres parallels the journalist Sullivan's misinformed and notorious proclamation of the end of the AIDS epidemic; a proclamation made that Crimp challenges the complacency of. See Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002).

The public and scholarly outing of Gonzalez-Torres, which solidifies the artist as a seminal figure in queer art history and theory can be viewed as a way to reclaim him for that of the minority.⁵⁰ Inclusions of Gonzalez-Torres in exhibitions such as *Art AIDS America*, curated by Jonathan D. Katz and subsequent scholarship; or inclusions of Gonzalez-Torres in volumes like *Art & Queer Culture* by Richard Meyer and Catherine Lord continue to identify the artist under the guise of sexuality and associated acts.⁵¹ As described by Lord, “Many sexually dissident artists hesitate to identify as gay, lesbian or queer for fear that it might limit the visibility of their work or the progress of their careers,” which rings true to Gonzalez-Torres’s own concerns over how he was and would be labeled and as an artist.⁵² By contrast, Jose Esteban Muñoz has taken the opposite approach in exploring Gonzalez-Torres’s minimalistic approach as a means of “disidentification,” from his three main character traits: “queer, cubano, and a person living with AIDS,” enabling the artist to reflect on “a vision that is always structured through his own multiple horizons of experience,” never favoring one over the other.⁵³ Muñoz argues Gonzalez-Torres refused “to participate in a particular representational

⁵⁰ Catherine Lord describes the “canonical status” that certain artists inspired by ‘queer theory’ have been able to achieve, among them, Felix Gonzalez-Torres. See Catherine Lord, “Inside the Body Politic: 1980—present,” in *Art & Queer Culture* (London: Phaidon Press, 2013), 43.

⁵¹ See accompanying exhibition catalogue: Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka, *Art AIDS America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

⁵² Lord, *Art & Queer Culture*, 43.

⁵³ Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 165.

economy,” stating the artist’s multiplicity of representation, for instance, queer or Cuban-American, never takes priority over the other.⁵⁴ Rather than argue the extremity that contradiction connotes in Gonzalez-Torres’s identity, Muñoz blurs those distinct poles as an amalgamation of experience, rather than staking the distinct boundaries Gonzalez-Torres stretches across all facets of his performativity of self. Here, Gonzalez-Torres is a puddle of identity, to be absorbed as a whole.

While the early scholarship expressed interest in the personal life of Gonzalez-Torres but favored a political reading of “infiltrator,” and as a result, erupted an onslaught of love-based and queer-readings of Gonzalez-Torres work; the tone of the mainstream has noticeably shifted in recent memory. As the rising scholars in the first decade of the twenty-first century begin to discuss the narrative of love and personal relationship in the work of Gonzalez-Torres ten years removed from his death, those scholars who knew Gonzalez-Torres have sought to urgently reframe the artist under the guise of inclusivity. In 2007, Gonzalez-Torres was selected to be the sole United States representative for the 52nd Venice Biennale, the esteemed international contemporary art event. Nancy Spector, who organized Gonzalez-Torres’s solo exhibition at The Guggenheim, New York, in 1995 was the curator for the United States Pavilion at the Biennale in 2007. In the catalogue commemorating the occasion, Spector notes the significance of the artist’s selection as not only solidifying Gonzalez-Torres’s acceptance as an “indisputable American artist,” but she states, “it would have also fulfilled his concept of total

⁵⁴ Ibid., 165.

infiltration, of operating from the center to interrogate myths of power and privilege.”⁵⁵

Also in the catalogue, the three original curators (Cruz, Goldstein, and Ghez) of Gonzalez-Torres’s 1994 solo exhibition at The Hirshhorn Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Renaissance Society reflect on their original proposal to have the Venice Biennale be the fourth and final venue of their traveling exhibition. In the conversation, the curators also reflected on their memories of the artist. Cruz and Goldstein proudly remarked that he was “not sentimental,” and as Goldstein expands, “I think that label gets misapplied to his work,” seemingly speaking to the simultaneous rising camp of scholarship embodied by Cushwa, Ledesma, and Wojton who now argue for the recognition of love in the artist’s work.⁵⁶ And yet while Gonzalez-Torres cited his one and only audience as his partner, Goldstein remarks, “He would always say that he made his work for an audience of one, his boyfriend, Ross. I would extend that audience of one to each spectator who is offered a moment of intimacy and self-reflection with the work,” as to expand Gonzalez-Torres’s identity and scope of work to appeal to every audience as opposed to an audience of one.⁵⁷ The insistence to expand Gonzalez-Torres’s mass appeal beyond the one-to-one intimate relationship with his gay lover is essential to counter the love-based readings embodied most and driven forward by Cushwa and Ledesma.

⁵⁵ Nancy Spector, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: A Possible Narrative,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America: United States Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale*, ed. Nancy Spector (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 37.

⁵⁶ Cruz and Goldstein, “Reflections on a Proposal for 1995,” 49.

⁵⁷ Goldstein, “Reflection on a Proposal for 1995,” 49.

The dialectic between the two camps (one is based on politics or the artist's practice, devoid of an emphasis on his personal background, and the other is based on love and the clear source of the artist's presence as indicated by the memorabilia left behind of his love for his partner, Ross Laycock) have dictated the dialectic in the literature about the artist.

Chapter Two

Theatricality in the Practice and Presence of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

“I need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without a public these works are nothing, nothing. I need the public interaction. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work. I tend to think of myself as a theatre director who is trying to convey some ideas by reinterpreting the notion of the division of roles: author, public, and director.”

—Felix Gonzalez-Torres⁵⁸

In 1988, Felix Gonzalez-Torres had one of his first solo exhibitions at INTAR Latin American Gallery, a small gallery located on the backside of INTAR Theatre in New York.⁵⁹ Founded in 1966, INTAR Theatre is one of the oldest Hispanic theatre companies in the United States; in 1978, the gallery was established as an alternative arts space to provide exposure for emerging and established Latino and Latin American artists.⁶⁰

The exhibition at INTAR included *Double Fear* (1987-88), transfer rubbings presenting clusters of small, circular photographs of scenes of densely packed crowds of people, out of focus yet also seemingly magnified. Gonzalez-Torres’s *Double Fear* and accompanying series resemble a clinical petri dish under microscopic scrutiny, almost

⁵⁸ Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 23.

⁵⁹ Prior to 1988, Gonzalez-Torres had three solo exhibitions (two in 1994 and one in 1987) and appeared in only three group exhibitions. Arguably, his career lifts off in 1988 with the show at INTAR Latin American Gallery, New York, in which a short 8-page illustrated catalogue was produced, *I wonder if men sleep better in uniform after performing their duties*, ultimately leading to his solo project at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, *Workspace: Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, later that year.

⁶⁰ Elisa de la Roche, *Teatro Hispano!: Three Major New York Companies* (New York: Garland, 1995), 29.

alluding to HIV-infected cells. Each dish, or circle, captures a nondescript sample of mobs of people, awaiting their inevitable examination and scrutiny. As the title suggests, what is seen is an image of double anxiety provoked by fear of AIDS/HIV. During the time these works were created, testing for AIDS was not yet widely available. Additionally included in the exhibition, an early work from 1987, “*Untested*,” featuring a glass bottle with newsprint inside capturing the same essence of the crowded unnamed faces as seen in *Double Fear*. Captured in a glass bottle, the fragility of the *untested* contents, as the title suggests, is put to the test as it rests on a slender pedestal at five feet above the ground. The fragility of the bottle is at stake as it rests on a slender pedestal at five feet above the ground, in the slender neck of the bottle.

While Gonzalez-Torres’s early works beg for a deeper dive before Gonzalez-Torres’s familiar “*Untitled*” works came commonplace, the location of Gonzalez-Torres’s early exhibition is of particular interest. INTAR is a theatre company known for a production style featuring bilingual dialogue accompanied with music in the structure of Mexican dramatic forms: corridos, rancheras, and boleros. The theater has been the stage for social and political dramas, which have been compared to that of Bertolt Brecht.⁶¹ The distinct venue, located on the backside of a theatre, coincidentally sets the stage for discussing Gonzalez-Torres’s work, and career, under the guises of theatricality.

In looking at Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s oeuvre under the framework of Bertolt Brecht’s discussion of dialectical theatre, I seek to engage the artist’s work under new parameters. As I detail in my introduction, Gonzalez-Torres’s work is interpreted in one of two ways:

⁶¹ Ibid, 40-41.

as practice or presence. Under practice, Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre is understood not in why he is categorized as an infiltrator, but focuses on the strategies he deployed to skirt the heteronormative art institution as an openly queer man. Via presence, the work's meaning is understood through the biographical associations to the artist's life that animates the memory and knowledge of the artist's life intertwined with his work. The artist's attempt to regulate the separation of his work through his practice and his presence signifies the existence of two parallel planes of identity that we, as the viewer, must negotiate between. This negotiation is most openly played out in the discussion of two camps of scholarship that have formed in response to Gonzalez-Torres's deployment of his competing visions of his work. However, the ideological core of both camps rely on elements of the artist's personal biography to stake their claims, whether focused on his identity as a queer man to describe why is an outsider, or details of the artist's personal relationship to define his status as lover. In this chapter, I highlight Gonzalez-Torres's relationship to theatre's basic principles. In discussing Gonzalez-Torres's employment of theatrical strategies, we are able to examine the built tension of the multiplicity of meaning encompassed by Gonzalez-Torres's work and the personal biography laced within it. We must look at the artist's practice and presence not as competing contradictions but as operating under a dialectic that ultimately allows his work to thrive. As a result, the two camps of scholarship that reflect the artist's practice and presence must also be viewed as a necessary dialectic.

Gonzalez-Torres attributed the German director Bertolt Brecht (1895-1956) as his primary source of inspiration to the underlying theoretical models that inform his

practice. In an interview with Tim Rollins, Gonzalez-Torres stated, “Last but not least, Brecht is an influence. I think if I started this list of influences again, I would start with Brecht.”⁶² Though Gonzalez-Torres openly cited Brecht as an influence on his practice, and while sprinkled in the discussion revolving Gonzalez-Torres, there has only been one essay devoted to the discussion on the artist’s practice as informed by Brecht’s theory of epic theatre.⁶³ As Amada Cruz details in, “The Means of Pleasure,” Gonzalez-Torres is situated in alignment with Brecht. As Brecht’s goal was “to develop the means of pleasure into an object of instruction, and to convert certain institutions from places of entertainment into organs of mass communication,” Gonzalez-Torres followed suit. Cruz argues, he “makes use of seductive forms and methods of public address to force viewers into a complicity with him in questioning established conventions.”⁶⁴ As such, Gonzalez-Torres uses a simple visual vocabulary in his work, candy wrapped in brightly colored cellophane. Undeniably “a treat,” the candy suggests pleasure but beneath, as with a candy spill like “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), the viewer is coaxed into taking a candy from a stand-in corpse of his homosexual lover dying of AIDS, a candy spill that carries the ideal weight of his *healthy lover*. As Cruz sums, “the practice of concealing radical content under an acceptable, even beautiful, veneer is as central to Gonzalez-

⁶² Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 19.

⁶³ A sprinkling is seen in the artist’s monograph edited by Julie Ault to which she supplements the “Method and Morphology” chapter with a reprinted copy of Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” to offer a parallel insight and text to his practice. See Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 60-67.

⁶⁴ Amada Cruz, “The Means of Pleasure,” 21-22.

Torres's strategy as it was for Brecht."⁶⁵ It is my intent to expand upon Cruz's connections of Gonzalez-Torres's practice to Brecht to dissect Gonzalez-Torres's use of theatrical devices. Through these devices, Gonzalez-Torres strategically dictates the way his audience engages with his work. The artist's attempt to regulate the separation of his work via his practice and his presence signifies the existence of two parallel planes of identity that we, as the viewer, must negotiate between.

Inherent Theatricality

There is a level of theatricality inherently fixed to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's practice. The artist stated, "One of the beauties of theory is when you can actually make it into a practice," showcasing his attention to theater.⁶⁶ The essential principles engrained in Gonzalez-Torres's body of work establish a veritable connection to theater. At the core of Gonzalez-Torres's practice are six series: stacks, candy pieces, billboards, light strings, beaded curtains, and portraits, that are accompanied by certificates of authenticity / ownership.⁶⁷ These certificates of authenticity provide guidelines for re-creating works, instructions for installation, and maintenance, all while offering an, "open-endedness for interpretation." A candy piece, such as "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991) is designated with an "ideal weight," and his stacks such as "*Untitled*" (*Double Portrait*) (1991) have an "ideal height." In *Portrait of Ross in L.A.*, a pile of multi-colored

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁶ Felix Gonzalez Torres and Ross Bleckner, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *BOMB Magazine* no. 51 (Spring 1995): 47.

⁶⁷ I utilize the six series designations as defined in the artist's catalogue raisonné. See "Key to Catalogue Entries," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, 14-17.

cellophane wrapped candy shimmers on the floor under the warm gallery spotlights, reflecting the “ideal weight” of 175 pounds, the same weight of Ross Laycock when healthy, prior to his AIDS diagnosis; and *Double Portrait* features a stark stack of copy paper featuring the outline of two black circles printed on one side of each sheet of paper. Each work, however, is inherently unstable as the certificates stipulate that “third parties” may take individual pieces of candy or sheets of paper from the stacks available. The *actual* weight and *actual* height of each work thus is in a perpetual state of flux. To keep the works at their ideal state would call for the requirement of no viewer participation, yet as the certificates state, part of the intention of the work is to allow for individuals to take from the work; it is the owner’s right thereafter to “replace, at any time, the quantity of candies necessary to regenerate the piece back to ideal weight.”⁶⁸ The work remains in a state of constant participatory flux—of the owner to take on a proactive role to maintain the work and of the viewer to engage.

These certificates of authenticity hold basic yet critical guidelines the owner of the works must adhere to, much like how a playwright develops a full script. Stage directions are alluded to or provided in plays, yet the cast perpetually changes over time. Gonzalez-Torres, too, borrowed this instinct in his work, foreshadowing the future possibilities for creating his works, not to limit to a static juncture. To continue the life of his work without hiccups of material availability, the artist stipulated: “If this exact candy is not available, a similar candy may be used,” or “If this exact paper is not available, a similar paper may be used.” This indicates that the conceptual matter of the work does not rely

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

on specific materials. Similar to Brecht's epic theater, Gonzalez-Torres's production can thrive without a specific cast.⁶⁹

Gonzalez-Torres too offered parameters of display of his works, comparable to how stage directions are included in scripts. The final installation of the works are left to the owner to decide how they would like to display them, similar to how an actor may interpret a reading of a line in a script or movement on the stage. For instance, his light strings may be shown in any configuration: strung decoratively overhead, pinned to the wall, or piled on the floor, among other ways, and, additionally, may be shown with all the light bulbs all on or off. The certificates of authenticity serve as a type of instructional, written document one may consistently refer to yet also use as a basis for interpretation. These instructional documents equate to the nature of theater's scripts, written by a playwright yet relinquished to directors and actors to continuously reinterpret and perform at their freedom. In this case, Gonzalez-Torres assumed each of these roles as playwright, director, and actor while he was alive; and the curators and collectors who encounter his work now, shepherding the work's life beyond the artist's initial presence, assume the role as director.

The Fourth Wall

A key way Gonzalez-Torres is indebted to theater is how he dispels of the fourth wall—the imaginary wall between the actors and audience. An essential element in Bertolt Brecht's theory of epic theater known as the alienation effect or *verfremdungseffekt*; the fourth wall is broken in order to dispel stage illusion to the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 14-15.

spectator.⁷⁰ For Brecht, the idea of eliminating the fourth wall shocks the spectator awake. It ensures that theater is not a passive experience but rather an intellectual exercise where the audience is part of the action before the stage, making conscious decisions of what is happening. Translating stage sets of the theater to the art gallery, we can see parallels to Gonzalez-Torres's approach to his practice. Gonzalez-Torres professes, "I need the viewer.... I need public interaction. Without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work," urging for the elimination of the fourth wall—dispelling his work as a passive experience in the gallery.⁷¹ As such, the artist shatters the fourth wall in two essential ways: through physical, participatory engagement and language and linguistics.

In his stacks, like "*Untitled*" (*Double Portrait*), Gonzalez-Torres offers a stack at an "ideal height," and with an "endless supply" of paper. The printed image features two identical circles outlined in black, touching each other at the center of a rectangular sheet of paper—the image recalls the silhouette of the two clocks in "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*). Individuals are invited to take a sheet of paper from the stack. The work in turn loses its ideal height with each taken sheet, yet it may never truly be destroyed as it may be endlessly replenished and restored to its ideal state as stipulated in its certificate of authenticity. While the mere act of touching is instigated in works such as "*Untitled*" (*Double Portrait*), Gonzalez-Torres takes the corporeal references further with his candy

⁷⁰ Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91.

⁷¹ Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview by Tim Rollins," 23.

pieces. Not only are *viewers* who encounter his candy pieces invited to touch—and take—a piece of candy from the spill, they are provided with the opportunity to ingest the sweet treats as a result of taking an edible candy from the pile. As a result, the viewer turns into a participant. Gonzalez-Torres removes the barrier of the all standard “DO NOT TOUCH” warnings perpetrated by the traditional museum: a place to preserve, and protect; here Gonzalez-Torres upends these rules ultimately breaking the fourth wall in the gallery. The traditional notion of a museum of a place only to look, as opposed to touch—let alone consume—is disregarded, demonstrating how Gonzalez-Torres utilizes the alienation effect to the presentation of his work to instigate active participation with his work barring the notion and completely eliminating the idea of the fourth wall. However, while Gonzalez-Torres invites his viewer to engage with the work, he does so with a quiet seduction—any alluring quality through everyday, inviting materials that draw attention in. As Brecht would use the breaking of the fourth wall to shock his viewer awake, Gonzalez-Torres does so quietly.

Beyond physical engagement, Gonzalez-Torres also breaks the fourth wall through his use of language and linguistics, particularly as found in the titles of his work. His works, while largely “Untitled,” often are paired with parenthetical citations. These parentheses offer sound bites of the artist’s voice as they seemingly whisper to the audience his own thoughts and connections to the work; as much as Brecht’s theatrical asides in his plays offer. Parentheses are defined as a word, clause, or sentence inserted as an explanation or afterthought into a passage that is grammatically complete without it. Thus, Gonzalez-Torres’s “Untitled” works cannot stand-alone; the insertion of the

parenthetical citation allows for the work to be completed and affixed with the artist's own relationship to the piece.

Oftentimes, as in works such as "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), the parenthetical citations reveal a closer personal connection to what the artist creates. In this particular piece, the 175-pound ideal weight of candy corresponds to the ideal healthy weight of the artist's partner, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS the same year the work was created. Other times, Gonzalez-Torres gestures through his parenthetical citations personal notes and details only he can use to recall and remember the inspiration behind. Andrea Rosen describes these parenthetical titles as "Felix' personal interjections," noting that "For those of us who knew Felix, the parenthetical titles are like small gifts left behind: remember when we spoke about this, and remember how I felt about that piece."⁷² She explains that his titles, when "strung together," listed one after the other clearly relate to Gonzalez-Torres's portrait pieces that combine a mixture of non-linear significant events, strung together.⁷³ However, with each small note, a narrative between Gonzalez-Torres's practice and presence can be weaved. Rosen encapsulates the sentiment:

Felix was extremely precise about the way a title was written. Embedded within these choices seem to be the clear delineation of importance Felix placed on the work being open for interpretation, the animation of the work to go on to have it's own incarnation, vs. the inclusion of his subjectivity: both his desire to be personally remembered and as an example of the power of one's subjectivity.⁷⁴

⁷² Rosen, "'Untitled' (The Neverending Portrait)," 55.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 54-55.

As a result, Gonzalez-Torres's parenthetical citations—though filled in by the artist—can also be read as a type of fill-in-the-blank, lending to the idea he shared for the viewer to “complete the work.”

Gonzalez-Torres complicates this approach: his “Untitled” titles of his work include subjective notations selected by the artist through his use of parenthetical citation, yet they also maintain openness by gesturing through the use of parenthetical citations that it can be imbedded with one's own opinion. These two, separate voices, allow for a perceived contradiction. Gonzalez-Torres wants the viewer to complete his work, but he is too, amongst the viewers; thus, he views his engagement as parallel to anyone else's. The tension created in these two readings is thus critical to understanding how his work is received today. The delicate balance is reliant on a necessary dialectical relationship in order for Gonzalez-Torres's practice to continually engage his audience.

Separation of the Elements

In Brecht's essay, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre” the director contrasts epic theater with the dramatic theater. Epic theater, as Brecht developed throughout his career, hallmarks the spectator as an active participant as opposed to dramatic theater's goal to provide stage illusion and tap into the viewer's emotions as they become entangled with the actors on stage, ultimately empathizing with the characters—or experience catharsis. Among his notes on the key differences, dramatic theater emphasizes plot, implicates the spectator in a stage situation, and wears down a spectator's capacity for action; in turn, epic theater relies on narrative, turns the spectator

into an observer but arouses the spectator's capacity for action, forcing him to make decisions based on a reflection of the world.⁷⁵

Brecht notes that the first result of the penetration of epic theater in the opera is the “radical *separation of the elements*.”⁷⁶ He elaborates:

The great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production – which always brings up the question ‘which is the pretext for what?’: is the music the pretext for the events on the stage, or are these the pretext for the music? Etc. – can simply be by-passed by radically separating the elements.⁷⁷

Brecht cites the separation of the opera, comprised of the script, musical score, and stage design to co-exist independently; they are not “pretexts” for each other. He urges, “*Words, music and setting must become more independent of one another.*”⁷⁸ In accordance to the “radical separation of the elements” in conversation with the artist’s approach to his practice, we must look at Gonzalez-Torres’s presence not merely as aiding his practice, nor his practice as a vehicle for sharing his personal biography—but we must understand them as independent factors that act in conversation with each other. If the artist is a composite of two independent functions, we can examine and understand these “elements” as a dialectic that relies on the tensions between contrasting parts. On one end, Gonzalez-Torres’s practice is viewed in a silo with a selective understanding of

⁷⁵ See the full table of comparisons between dramatic and epic theater in Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre (Notes to the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 37.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

his presence. The opposition however views Gonzalez-Torres's practice—*with his presence*—considering the numerous interviews, artist talks, and memorabilia available, we consider the voice of the second camp of emerging scholars focused on love in relationship to the artist. Though initially viewed as two contradictory viewpoints, it is essential that these two camps exist in order to engage the dialectic Gonzalez-Torres's work initiates and which I argue is what propels it. The balance between the tensions of both opposing forces is what propels Gonzalez-Torres's work, reflecting the complexities of the ways Gonzalez-Torres engaged strategic intervention of his practice and presence.

Gonzalez-Torres was cautious in the way his public image—a Cuban-born American, homosexual man—could be co-opted. The artist elaborates on his identity in conjunction with Brecht in an interview with Tim Rollins:

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

Tim: Some people don't like that.

Felix: Of course not because they have an investment in the narrative. The artist is expected to be someone who 'feels,' the idiot-savant.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview by Tim Rollins," 10-11.

What Gonzalez-Torres reveals with Rollins is his desire to bring forth Brecht's distancing effect, or alienation effect, to the fore. Rather than base his practice on his personal narrative—or denote *his* feeling—he urges for a composite experience for his viewer to be “intellectually challenged, moved, and informed,” illustrating the multiplicity of meanings in his work.

Though Gonzalez-Torres denotes that his practice is separate from “life,” it is significant to note that Gonzalez-Torres never had a dedicated studio for his practice.⁸⁰ His works were conceived of as fluid in his everyday routine, but singled out to be categorized under the umbrella of, as he describes, “*just an artwork*” in comparison to what he constitutes as reality. Here, Gonzalez-Torres presents a contradiction between what he believes is separate from his practice and his presence. This sensation of the indistinct boundaries of what constitutes the difference between life and an artwork—a product of his own life—echoes Brecht's insistence on the radical separation of the elements. Each part—his life—and his artwork—speak on its own, yet in concurrent and competing planes. As Brecht sought to silence the idea of “what is the pretext for what,” in regard to script, musical score, and stage design, we must apply the same critical lens to Gonzalez-Torres's separation of life (presence) and artwork (practice) and view both as coexisting both independently but also reliant on their inherent dialectical relationship on one another.

The importance of the “radical separation of the elements,” in relationship to understanding Gonzalez-Torres's practice in conjunction to his presence is critical to

⁸⁰ Ibid., 6-7.

understanding the state of scholarship about the artist over the last thirty years. The camp devoted to looking at the work through the lens of the artist's presence and dialogue of love—Cushwa, Ledesma, and Wojton—must be seen as a necessary counterweight to the mainstream viewpoint. The artist, who left distinct elements of his presence behind to be discovered, reinforces the “presence” camp's interpretation. In regard to the canonized interpretation of his work—supported by Gonzales-Torres's close art world confidants including curators and historians, the establishment has responded to protect the artist's practice. This is marked by their shift in discussing Gonzalez-Torres first as an “infiltrator,” through his deliberate use of postmodern material and methodologies, to declaring the artist as an American artist (as opposed to queer, cubano, or a person living with AIDS). By arguing Gonzalez-Torres as an “indisputable” American artist—they undercut the attempt to discuss Gonzalez-Torres's presence.⁸¹ However the artist provided exemplary evidence supporting each camp of reception, opting for a type of public privacy that toes the lines of both arguments. The result is a necessary dialectical challenge to singular interpretations of the artist's work.

It is imperative to understand that at every step of the way, Gonzalez-Torres *is* present. We must understand that though the canon seeks to maintain the artist's wishes of open interpretation, they are relying on the artist's own voice—his own insistence—to do so; in turn, the camp of rising scholars focused on love are merely providing the due

⁸¹ Particularly discussed by Nancy Spector on the occasion of Gonzalez-Torres's inclusion in the Venice Biennale as the US representative. Here, the artist is neither queer nor Cuban, but simply American. See Nancy Spector, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: A Possible Narrative,” 37.

diligence of the same, however, with words—or memorabilia—left behind by the artist himself.

Gonzalez-Torres's practice necessitates a discourse or dialectic between the avenues of interpretation he offers through interjections of his personal presence—whether through his voice as found in the titles of his work; the sound bites he left behind in interviews and lectures; or the memorabilia and ephemera he's left behind relating to his “personal” life. The artist did not live in a vacuum, separate from his practice, despite the attempts to soften the artist's lasting voice. The question now posed is: how do we make the determination of what may be eliminated, or rather censored, from the artist's words, thoughts, and emotions? When asked which artistic tradition the artist fell under—whether a reflection of society or of a socio-political concern, Gonzalez-Torres offered:

It depends on the day of the week. I choose from many different positions. I think I woke up on Monday in a political mood and on Tuesday in a very nostalgic mood and Wednesday in a realist mood. I don't think I'll limit myself to one choice. I'm shameless when it comes to that, I just take any position that will help me best express the way I think or feel about a particular issue.⁸²

Gonzalez-Torres's “shameless” attitude to not pledge allegiance to one type of methodology—or sentiment—underscores that the various “moods” he draws upon are not mere contradictions, but rather, they coexist to develop his own identity and characterization of self. If we limit our designation of the artist as an embodiment of contradiction, we imply that he faltered between two or many poles of thought; but rather, what we must convey is Gonzalez-Torres's insistence to live between those distinctions that allows for complementary thought, cadence, and desire to flourish.

⁸² Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” 6.

Gonzalez-Torres was explicit in what he wanted to achieve with his audience: “I want you, the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved, and informed.”⁸³ He understood it was a synthesis of competing subjective priorities, and thus, the continual dialogue now twenty-four years following his death hallmarks Gonzalez-Torres’s true wishes—to continue an intellectual dialogue, to be moved, and to be informed.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11.

Chapter Three

What Remains: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's Memory and Memorabilia

Since Felix Gonzalez-Torres's passing in 1996, the boundaries of the artist's practice and presence continue to be blurred. In 2010, Bill Bartman, founder of A.R.T. (Art Resources Transfer), a non-profit publishing company devoted to distributing and publishing books on contemporary art, published *A Selection of Snapshots Taken by Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. As the title suggests, *A Selection of Snapshots* is a compilation of various photographs the artist sent to his close confidants, an array of artists, curators, and art patrons including: Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Bill Bartman, Susan Cahan, Amada Cruz, David Deitcher, Suzanne Ghez, Ann Goldstein, Claudio Gonzalez, Jim Hodges, Susan Morgan, Robert Nickas, Mario Nunez, and Christopher Williams, sometimes accompanied with handwritten captions, notes, and sentiments to each individual recipient. The snapshots, sent between 1990 and 1995, lend a glimpse into the artist's everyday life. The published handwritten notes that accompany the array of photographs in his bedroom, collection of toy figurines, cats, gallery installations, and more, capture the intimate appeal Gonzalez-Torres carries between his personal life and his public artwork. Andrea Rosen once previously described the snapshots in an essay:

Amongst his friends he was known for sending small notes on the backs of snapshots, sometimes closely related to images of his work (seagulls flying in the distance of a cloudy skies); characters from his collection of rubber toys: arranged into loving couples (for example, Eddy Monster and Snoopy tucked in to bed), or in party groups interspersed with tropical fruits.... While these notes and letters are not art works, they are tangible physical remnants of Felix' dialogue with others."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Rosen, "'Untitled' (The Neverending Portrait)," 55. Though Andrea Rosen describes these snapshots, she is noticeably absent from the list of participants of this

The artist gave each snapshot away to the recipient, but for the purposes of this publication, they were brought back together under the shared quality of originating from Gonzalez-Torres. The snapshots thus serve a type of unification of the essence of Gonzalez-Torres through the “physical remnants” these items provide.

Though the artist may have not known his private gifts of snapshots would be compiled together in a publication, we must consider the effect of the presence of this material in the ephemera encapsulating the artist’s presence as related to his practice. This example of the artist’s presence—via the memorabilia of snapshots the artist took and provided handwritten notes on—makes it clear that there is more than one case where the artist purposefully left a once personal and intimate collection of correspondence for public consumption.⁸⁵

These public collections of private ephemera, including the collection of love letters Felix Gonzalez-Torres left to the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in New York point to the artist’s intent to make his presence accessible to future viewers. In discussing Ault’s inclusion of Gonzalez-Torres’s private correspondence in her edited volume on the artist, Rosen reflects with Ault: “It’s like your book on Felix; it’s about contradiction. That piece of information contradicts another, and you’re going to be able

compilation. Further, while Rosen is frequently cited in the credits of publications related to Gonzalez-Torres as signifying The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation’s involvement, her name is also omitted here.

⁸⁵ I argue that though Gonzalez-Torres left his collection to one individual, Marileuse Hessel, the divide between a private/personal collection and the allowance of an outsider to hold such collection automatically makes it a public item. Something once private is now shared (to who remains a contestation).

to see the contradictions.”⁸⁶ Though Rosen argues for the value of contradiction, further stating, “I’m much more interested in that situation of differences than in, ‘oh, here it is,’” she further understands Ault’s monograph as perhaps “the closest way of letting people experience Felix’s way of thinking; the way he almost trained us to think; the responsibility to not take something at face value and to be responsible for evolving the information and constantly re-contextualizing.”⁸⁷ Though she argues for “contradiction,” in Gonzalez-Torres’s projection of identity—his way of thinking—Rosen as the artist’s executrix of his estate and president of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation fails to adhere to her own words by limiting accessibility of discovering the “contradictions,” to researchers such as myself. However, the archive has not always been withheld to viewers.

Ault describes her desire to “read and see everything”⁸⁸ related to Gonzalez-Torres; she demonstrates:

For me, looking at everything I can get my hands on during research has to do with absorbing sensibility, tone, inference, and various content, ideas, and angles—all stimulating the process, but it does not imply a one-to-one

⁸⁶ Julie Ault and Andrea Rosen, “Time Frames: A Conversation,” in Julie Ault, “Remember and Forgetting the Archive: Instituting ‘Group Material’ (1979-1996)” (PhD diss., Lund University, 2011), 197.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 197-198.

⁸⁸ It is important to also note, the set of mainstream scholars that designate the universal readings of Gonzalez-Torres—that advocate for “contradiction,” are among those that were close with the artist during his lifetime. Though not detailed in this paper, it is interesting to consider further the accessibility of the artist’s archives, materials, impressions, that does not exist for the second wave of scholars *looking back*, and potentially signals a larger disruption in art history—who has access to what and when and whose voice matters most?

relationship with portrayal. There's a difference between taking it all in and what you do with it.⁸⁹

While Ault, a close friend of the artist, is granted accessibility to “everything,” in her own research; others who are compelled to investigate and research Gonzalez-Torres have not all had the same level of access. And at the same time, Ault's sentiments recall the argument of the scholars devoted to re-contextualizing Gonzalez-Torres under the auspices of love, in reference to his partnership with Laycock. While they discuss the implications of doing so, Cushwa and Ledesma particularly demonstrate the capacity to consider the totality of Gonzalez-Torres's life, including his partnership, to view the artist's relationship to his practice. Cushwa and Ledesma's scholarship echo Ault's call that the personal remnants of *everything* “does not imply a one-to-one relationship with portrayal,” as Cushwa describes the importance of looking at the multi-faceted life of Gonzalez-Torres, and Ledesma quips that he is not concretizing Gonzalez-Torres solely as a gay man, each recognizes the delicate boundary of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's presence and practice.

The attempt to understand and relay the work, and by extension life of an artist such as Gonzalez-Torres faces the overwhelming predicament of “contradiction.” To honor an artist's wishes for the reception of his work is to ignore the inherent desire of some researchers to fully understand all the possible meanings and interpretations as an artist's work is recontextualized over time and place. On the other hand, to go against an artist's desire for how his work should be interpreted is to ignore the intrinsic personal value that ultimately informs an artist's work. All of this raises questions about the status of the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 194.

archive, the status of the artist, and the status of scholarship on Felix Gonzalez-Torres. If we understand Gonzalez-Torres under Brecht's radical separation of the elements, we must empower the audience, including scholars, to allow for independent analyses of the various facets of the artist's life. These facets comprise a dialectical relationship reliant on the interconnectedness of competing factors that define the whole.

Other posthumous surfacing of "new" archival materials related to the artist continues to propel this conversation forward. Since 2016, amongst the archive at Visual AIDS is The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torres / Ross Laycock Archive that upends the rules of archival material, of and relating to Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In 1994, the non-profit organization Visual AIDS launched The Archive Project, the largest image database and archival reference material location dedicated to preserving the legacy of work by artists with HIV/AIDS. Welcoming any and all professional visual artists living with HIV and the estates of artists who have died of AIDS-related complications, the Archive Project serves as both a service to HIV+ artists and as a public resource, accessible to all. In 2012, Visual AIDS expanded the Archive Project and launched an online registry including digital versions of many of the original slides held in the archive as well as new work added directly by its artist members. Carl George, a close friend of the couple, donated a collection of material related to friendship shared between him and the couple in 2016 to Visual AIDS. In its short life, the archive has already grown from its initial 2016 offering from George. Organized into seven series, the archive contains: correspondence (postcards and letters), photographs, exhibition invitations, press clippings, publications, an addendum of correspondence between Georgia Title and Ross

Laycock gifted by Title in 2017, and additional ephemera donated by Sharon Campeau in May 2019 that includes Laycock's ashes.^{90;91}

The contents of the archive provide an intimate view of the close friendship shared between George, Gonzalez-Torres, and Laycock and how AIDS affected their everyday lives. Among the correspondence, Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock repeatedly thank George for the "birthday gifts," he sent.⁹² As George describes in the archive's annotations, George would send illegally imported drugs that other countries were testing to combat HIV; send postcards from their travels in France; and also contains intimate letters shared between the couple and Laycock's sister. Among the letters include a letter from Laycock his sister sharing the news he tested positive for HIV, and a letter from Gonzalez-Torres to Title sharing impressions about his work he created in Laycock's honor, "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*).^{93;94} Visual AIDS "is open to any and all individuals by appointment, regardless of affiliation," stressing accessibility of

⁹⁰ Georgia Title is Ross Laycock's sister. Title gifted Carl George an archive of correspondence shared between her and her brother and Gonzalez-Torres in 2017.

⁹¹ Laycock's ashes are not available to public as disclosed by Visual AIDS.

⁹² Notes to Correspondence #38 in The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torre / Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS. The Visual AIDS Archive Project: New York, NY.

⁹³ Correspondence from Ross Laycock to Georgia Title, approx. 1987, 2017.1.3, The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torre / Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS. The Visual AIDS Archive Project: New York, NY.

⁹⁴ Correspondence from Felix Gonzalez-Torres to Georgia Title, 15 December 1993, 2017.1.19, The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torre / Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS. The Visual AIDS Archive Project: New York, NY.

information for all.⁹⁵ The archive however is prefaced with details from The Felix

Gonzalez-Torres Foundation:

The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation has shared information from their records and archives, which shows that Gonzalez-Torres did not want photography of himself to be reproduced, and rarely shared the details of his personal life when discussing his artworks. According to the Foundation, “One of the intentions of Gonzalez-Torres’s work is that it always be present and open to new understandings and contexts. Gonzalez-Torres had an awareness of the way in which an audience’s potential understanding of an artwork could be circumscribed by the time frame and context in which the artist lived and influenced by the aura of the artist’s personal history. The artist’s decision to create distance between his personal life and his work can be seen as one of the strategies that he created in and around the artworks that allowed them to continue to exist and be contextually open to new interpretations over time.”⁹⁶

What remains is the presence and accessibility of The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torres / Ross Laycock Archive and Visual AIDS, and within it, the dictation of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Though the Foundation argues that the artist’s work was always intended to be “present and open to new understandings and contexts,” (practice) the same cannot be maintained about the artist’s “personal history” (presence) that the Foundation describes as the Gonzalez-Torres’s own “decision” to restrict. The artist was strategic and presented these barriers to interpreting the work biographically in order to allow for a seemingly open interpretation. The flaw in that approach is that in sealing off his work from the “aura of [his] personal history” one also strips the artist’s work

⁹⁵ See “Administrative Information” and “Access” in *Finding Aid for The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torre / Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS*. The Visual AIDS Archive Project: New York, NY.

⁹⁶ See “Use & Publication Rights” in the *Finding Aid for The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torre / Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS*. The Visual AIDS Archive Project: New York, NY.

produced during his life of the history and dialogue situated in specific moments in time—during the artist’s lifetime, his passing due to AIDS in 1996, the immediate years following, and the ongoing conversations and community dialogues that have surfaced since—conversations held between peers like Andrea Rosen and Julie Ault, the publication initiated by Bill Bartman and published by A.R.T. Press that recollects snapshots by the artist in 2010, and the emergence of materials such as *The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torres / Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS* in recent memory.⁹⁷ The *Finding Aid* from the Visual AIDS Archive Project declares:

As a whole, the Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torres / Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS is significant to the preservation of HIV/AIDS history and art history as it provides a window into the life and death of Laycock (b. 1959, Calgary, Canada – d. 1991, Toronto, Canada) and Gonzalez-Torres (b. 1957, Guaimaro, Cuba – d. 1996, Miami), a relationship that inspires the oeuvre of Gonzalez-Torres.⁹⁸

Visual AIDS underscores the essential preservation of the memorabilia and ephemera of the archive “as a whole,” and proudly asserts Gonzalez-Torres’s oeuvre as inspired by his personal relationship with Laycock. Though the artist’s foundation encourages the open interpretation of his work to persist in eternity, they highlight it by discouraging the direct engagement of Gonzalez-Torres’s presence. As such, the Foundation has limited the parameters of what constitutes “open interpretation” as it is clear only some interpretations are supported. This is easily described as such “contradiction,” the artist embodied, as we circle back to the art canon’s appreciation for the artist’s dare to be

⁹⁷ Julie Ault and Andrea Rosen, “Time Frames: A Conversation,” 185-195.

⁹⁸ See “Scope and Content,” in *Finding Aid for The Carl George / Felix Gonzalez-Torres / Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS*, The Visual AIDS Project: New York, NY.

neither here—nor there. Yet, the idea of “contradiction,” can only be so applied lazily here, as Gonzalez-Torres’s relationship to his own practice is much more complex.

As Julie Ault notes, engagement with material does not imply a one-to-one relationship. Under Brecht’s appeal for the separation of the elements, we must apply Ault and Brecht’s messages to continue to absorb, connect, and decode each individual view to map the web of dialectical tension present in the totality of Gonzalez-Torres’s work. Each view operates in a necessary dialectical relationship in time; this paradigm was carefully crafted by Gonzalez-Torres to develop competing, overlapping, and concurrent views that ultimately engage the dialogue further, re-contextualizing and bringing anew.

Conclusion

Dialectical readings of Gonzalez-Torres's work mirror the dialectical relationship of the criticism surrounding the artist. In understanding Gonzalez-Torres's work as a necessary tension between public and private elements of the artist's life, we must view the criticism surrounding the work in the same light as opposing, yet necessary forces. As a result, the current unearthing of ephemera surrounding the artist's life highlights the specific tensions that exist: though private, as his gallerist Andrea Rosen reminds us, Gonzalez-Torres was also extremely public. The transition of items once private to public underscores the discussion surrounding the artist's narrative and lasting memory.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres left behind a trail of devices for his viewers to engage with. The signal of scholars and information seekers do not signify the passive spectator view of the artist's work, but exactly the opposite. These scholars, such as Cushwa, Ledesma, and Wojton have surfaced to discuss another facet of the artist's life and memory in order to understand the underlying intent and circumstances of the artist's practice, of a specific moment and time. The artist left behind his voice via his use of personal titles, willingness to conduct interviews, artist lectures, and more. The significance of the artist leaving behind a dedicated archive of correspondence he shared with his partner underscores the artist's complicity. As Bertolt Brecht noted:

Even when a character behaves by contradictions that's only because nobody can be identically the same at two unidentical moments. Changes in his exterior continually lead to an inner reshuffling. The continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew. We have to show things as they are.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Bertolt Brecht, "Conversation with Bert Brecht," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 15.

Gonzalez-Torres echoes that sentiment, as we recall back in his response about affiliating with a specific artistic tradition, each day is something different; political, nostalgic, realist, etc.¹⁰⁰ As a result, we must reexamine that dialectical relationship between presence and practice posthumously; we must weigh the implications of the difference between separating and eliminating a personal history from an artist's legacy. The artist's practice and presence operate as an active dialectic that collide and necessarily coexist to ultimately form the entire interpretive environment of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's practice. We must reframe the way we look at the scholarship and terms of reception around Gonzalez-Torres, to be inclusive of all visions and versions that consider the artist's practice and presence. In closing, we must remember Gonzalez-Torres's words: "The thing that I want to do sometimes with some of these pieces about homosexual desire is to be more inclusive. Every time they see a clock or a stack of paper or a curtain, I want them to think twice."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview by Tim Rollins," 6.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

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