Felix Gonzalez-Torres

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In January 1990, the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York inaugurated its activities with a solo show exhibiting works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The key pieces presented by the artist were exemplary of his new series - and these had a lasting impact on everyone who saw the exhibition. Positioned around the gallery's main room were stacks of papers resting on the floor and rising to different heights (ill. p. 15). This aspect of the installation impressed the viewer with the feeling of being in the (albeit quite orderly) storage cellar of a printing house. Two of the stacks were placed against the wall; the other two stood some distance away from the wall. "Untitled" (1990) (cat. no. 76) was the first piece viewers caught sight of upon entering the gallery. It consists of three stacked piles of paper of diminishing height, shoved together, with a blue strip printed across the middle. Another of these pieces, "Untitled" (Loverboy) (1990, cat. no. 78) is comprised of a stack of heavy, azure paper; the stack is positioned so that the long edge touches the wall where the blue surface casts a subtle reflection on its white surface. The object "Untitled" (The End) (cat. no. 77) dating from the same year is a stack of white paper heavily edged in black. The fourth piece is composed of two closely positioned stacks of paper with a single line of text (cat. no. 104). "SOMEWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE" is the legend inscribed on the top sheet of one stack; the other reads "NOWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE." The same room contained "Untitled" (cat. no. 79) and the multipart piece "Untitled" (Blue Cross) (cat. no. 75), both dating from 1990 and hence created especially for the show. The press release sent out to announce the opening quotes a letter which Felix Gonzalez-Torres sent to the gallery owner, acknowledging:

I feel this particular installation is about vulnerability, about having nothing to lose, about the possibility of renewal through the re-contextualization of each piece every time it's taken by the viewer. It is also a comment on the passage of time and on the possibility of erasure and disappearance, it is about the poetics of space, presence and the beauty of chance. The same chance that makes love possible. It is about life and its most radical definition or demarcation: death. Like all art, it is about leaving this place for some other place maybe better than this place.¹

Gonzalez-Torres had been assembling these so-called "stacks" since 1989, and some had already been shown in group exhibits. The first such piece was "Untitled" (Monument), a two-part work exhibited as a whole in 1989 at "In the Center of Doubt" at the Massimo Audiello Gallery in New York before the artist separated the two stacks, proclaiming them two distinct objects and christening each with its own name: "Untitled" (Veteran's Day Sale) (cat. no. 64) and "Untitled" (Memorial Day Weekend) (cat. no. 69). In developing this series, Felix Gonzalez-Torres took a clearly critical stance vis-à-vis the painterly positions of the 'eighties:

Around 1989 when I started these "stack pieces," everyone in New York was fighting for room on the walls, and you would have had to win a fistfight to conquer two inches on the wall. So I said, 'Forget the walls, I'll do something on the floor.'²

Whereas the initial presentations took place within the context of group exhibits showing only isolated pieces, the installation at the Andrea Rosen gallery provided the opportunity to place the stacks center-stage in a one-man-show, where they could be positioned in their own space and in relation to one another, providing mutual interpretation and frames of reference. This constellation serves to reveal, in a striking fashion, their radical nature, innovative character and historic context.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres' stacks are not monolithic, hierarchic blocks. Rather, the artist invites the viewer to help him- or herself to one of the pages and take it home. Hence the stacks grow smaller the longer the show lasts; the exhibition gradually disintegrates, the pages disappear from the gallery and are dispersed throughout the city. Felix Gonzalez-Torres is partial above all to the spirit of generosity inherent in these pieces - an obligation which he passes on to the new owners of the objects. "I wanted people to have my work. The fact that someone could just come and take my work and carry it with them was very exciting,"³ he recalls about this exhibit.

Under the influence of Walter Benjamin's treatise from the 1930's, "The Work of Art

² González-Torres, Felix and Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Felix Gonzalez-Torres (interview), in: Der Standard, January 10, 1996, p. 8
in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction“, in which the author described the demise of the artistic aura, Felix Gonzalez-Torres has created works representing a radical redefinition of the traditional character of art. These objects prompt uncertainty about every criterium we use to classify something as art. What is, exactly, the work? Is it the stack of paper? Or is it each sheet of paper - which also contains all the information? And where, ultimately, is the work once the stack has been diminished to nothing, its pages all carried off? The object appears to have disappeared, the viewers have destroyed it, the artwork has called itself into question. On the other hand, however, the simple fact that Gonzalez-Torres does not lend these pieces a permanent shape makes them immune to destruction. "My work cannot be destroyed. I have destroyed it already, from day one. (...) I had control over it and this is what has empowered me. But it is a very masochistic kind of power. I destroy the work before I make it,” is how he has elucidated - to Nancy Spector in an interview - this specific character of his work. The pages can be reprinted at any time, the stack replenished. The piece can be revived at another location or even presented simultaneously in several exhibitions without it being possible to make the - in these situations, quite usual - distinction between the original and the copy on display. "Untitled" (Republican Years) (1992, cat. no. 211), which belongs to the Sprengel Museum Hannover, was shown in early 1995 at the opening exhibit of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art entitled "Public Information. Desire, Disaster, Document," in a retrospective on the artist at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and in the permanent collections in Hannover. All three copies shown were originals.

Critics appraising the first exhibit at Andrea Rosen’s gallery - and all later reviews of the work - have consistently stressed Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ concern with Minimal Art and described the formal connections between the stacks in terms of the industrially manufactured objects and boxes of ‘sixties’ sculpture. Speaking with Robert Storr, the artist himself has pointed out one very pointed example of this affinity. In January 1993, the London Hayward Gallery opened an exhibit called "Gravity & Grace. The Changing Conditions of Sculpture 1965-1975." The cover of the companion catalog pictured a 1968 piece called "Nécessaire" by Giulio Paolini, one of the main proponents of the Italian Arte Povera. The object is comprised of a stack of unprinted white paper in standard DIN A4 format measuring 29.7 x 21 cm. Despite the baffling similarity between this photograph and Gonzalez-Torres’ stacks, a comparison of the originals reveals a world of differences. Paolini is playing on sculptural tradition by presenting his small-format stack as a classic pedestal plastic. The fascinating facet of the piece lies in the povera aesthetics of the unpretentious material. Gonzalez-Torres’ work, in contrast, is situated in a completely different context, and he has described the similarity - not without irony - as the outcome of his own influence on Paolini, which may not, after all, be far from the truth. It would not have been the first time that an involvement with contemporary currents in art has the power to alter our own perception of historical positions. In any case, it remains astonishing that the organizers of the exhibit chose this little-known work of Paolini as their calling card.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres has harnessed the anti-illusionist formal vocabulary of the ‘sixties and charged it with meaning in his own work. The non-static, evolving character of his paper stacks - and of the candy spills he began a few months later - served as metaphors for the artist’s very private experiences of vulnerability, impermanence and loss. "In a way this ‘letting go’ of the work, this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day right in front of my eyes,” he has said, commenting on his personal situation, his coping with the fact that his longtime lover Ross was afflicted with AIDS, and his coming to terms with these experiences in his art.

II.

Almost simultaneously with Pop Art, Minimal Art established itself in the early ‘sixties as one of the most significant and successful movements in American art. The exhibits "Shape and Structure" in early 1965 at the New York Tibor de Nagy Gallery and "Primary Structures" shown at the Jewish Museum in April of the following year, complemented by programmatic essays by artists Donald Judd and Robert Morris, helped to formulate and define the basic principles of these works and to acquaint New York’s museum-goers with
the salient representatives of Minimal Art. Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Robert Morris were among the artists participating in both these signal exhibits. From the original spate of epithets ranging from ABC ART and COOL Art to Primary Structures and Specific Objects, ultimately the term Minimal Art prevailed, a phrase coined by British philosopher Richard Wollheim. As is so often the case in the annals of art history, initially the expression was used in a derogatory sense not even confined to the artwork which would later be subsumed under this term. Wollheim's essay "Minimal Art" published in *Arts Magazine* in 1965 constituted a blanket dismissal of all modern art produced in the preceding decades: the fact being that its art content was, he argued, only "minimal."  

Pop Art and Minimalism are the two great antipodes of American art of the 'sixties. Although both arose as reactions to the Abstract Expressionism of the foregoing decade, they constitute quite disparate responses to this challenge. Each movement is singular in terms of its preferred artistic media endowed with a distinct programmatic character. Where as Pop artists clung to the portrayal of representational subjects, showcasing painting technique, the advocates of Minimal Art concentrated exclusively on object-based art. In contrast to the gestural expressivity and abstract colored painting of the likes of Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell and Clifford Still, Pop Art revived the representational as the artistic focus. The artists - in the beginning, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, later Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselmann and Andy Warhol - sought subject-matter inspiration in their immediate surroundings, exploiting all the popular media as sources of images for their art. For Pop Art, taking recourse to a model constituted the fundamental premise of all artistic endeavor. Conversely, the objects of Minimal Art categorically rejected all illusion and reference to an external world. Donald Judd abstained, as a matter of principle, from implementing any traditional artistic materials such as bronze, plaster or clay; in lieu thereof he invariably chose media and methods consistent with state-of-the-art technology. Materials such as galvanized iron, aluminum, steel and plexiglass were prepared in specialized production plants to meet the artist's exact specifications. This approach was so radical a departure from the European sculpture tradition that Judd himself no longer accepted the established nomenclature, instead referring to "specific objects."  

Minimal Art works characteristically possess a highly physical presence in space and aesthetic autonomy. Their vocabulary is reduced to elementary geometric and stereometric shapes such as the square and the rectangle, the cube and the cuboid. Composition and hierarchy are abandoned in favor of serial structures and sequences of identical elements. The precision of the industrially manufactured shapes with their smooth, often reflective surfaces lends these works their hieratic character which would seem to categorically exclude all artistic subjectivity and representative or decorative functions. This non-referentiality has repeatedly been stressed by critics as being one of the typical properties of Minimal Art. Consequently, the objects are not shaped by their links to the world, but rather defined as autonomous objects within the world. The fact that Minimal artists consistently forswent the traditional pedestal to present their pieces is thereby rendered one of the basic prerequisites of their aesthetic concept. In an early essay on the work of Donald Judd, the critic Rosalind Krauss supplied a pointed characterization of the specific qualities of Minimal Art:

"Object art thus appears to reject allusion and illusion in equal measure: every reference to experiences and ideas outside the purely material presence of the work is ruled out, just as is (by virtue of the prescribed adherence to this presence) all manipulation of the apparent in contrast to the literal space."  

Such a definition links the reception of this art primarily to phenomenological experience. Standing on the same floor, the viewer encounters the object literally on the same footing, as an equal within the given spatial environment and defined by shape, material, size and volume. In a radio interview he gave together with Donald Judd in 1964, Frank Stella succinctly summed up this concurrence of form and content by saying: "What you see is what you see."  

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9 See: Judd, Donald: Specific Objects, in: *Arts Yearbook*, 1965, pp. 74-82


III.
The economic philosophy of the Reagan era served to widen the social gap; yet while the plight of the poor worsened, Wall Street saw the rise of many new fortunes. Financial prosperity fueled the desire for social prestige, manifested in a familiarity with and the possession of artwork as a desirable commodity. During the decade in question, the market witnessed an unprecedented increase in demand. Painting above all experienced a boom, and artists such as Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Jean-Michel Basquiat became stars with an aura equal only to that of Andy Warhol in the art world to date. "We had a very scary return of the bohemian painter, as if twenty years of an intellectual and conceptually based artistic practice had never existed. This was a very dangerous, anti-historical, anti-intellectual movement that served, very clearly, the needs of an artificially wealthy new clientele who wanted some art to decorate their lobbies, apartments, and (now empty) offices."

Félix Gonzalez-Torres described his view of the situation in retrospect. In the prevailing political and cultural climate of the 'eighties, Minimal Art and Conceptual Art also met with an intensified reception, and thus gained significance and authority for scores of young artists. Particularly women artists began - successfully - to probe new conceptual strategies. Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine, to cite a few, represent an unambiguously feminist position; they take a political stand in their work as well. Gonzalez-Torres joined forces with Louise Lawler in 1990 in creating "Untitled" (Beautiful) (cat. no. 101) for an exhibit at the New York New Museum of Contemporary Art entitled "Rhetorical Image." This time his "stack" served as a medium to distribute Louise Lawler's contribution to the exhibit: a photographic reproduction of a rocket racing down to earth in a perfect spiral and bearing the epithet "beautiful."

However, Félix Gonzalez-Torres is also aware of the fact that works of art appearing to be pointedly apolitical are often those most capable of having the strongest political impact. In an interview, he cites Helen Frankenthaler as a prime example of this phenomenon. Her large-scale color landscapes possess a highly aesthetic appeal that meets certain decorative needs of her collectors. "That's where someone like Frankenthaler is the most politically successful artist when it comes to the political agenda that those works entail, because she serves a very clear agenda of the Right," 13 Gonzalez-Torres has noted in an interview with Robert Storr, and this insight has prompted him to develop strategies for his own work. At that point, i.e. during the late 'eighties, a reconsideration and renewed appreciation of Minimal Art must have constituted a special challenge to Félix Gonzalez-Torres; in the interim since then, architecture, design and advertising had all appropriated the formal vocabulary of Minimalism. "The formal language of the pioneers has long since been perverted into the decorum of power and, as a monotone ideal of what an omnipresent bureaucracy seems beautiful, presides over the design of our environment from the cool elegance of banking halls to the matt gray casing of fax machines,"

"observed Philip Ursprung, lamenting the transformation of a radical, anti-aesthetic concept of art from the 'sixties into an elegant design concept some twenty years later. These aesthetics of power, of which the Minimal artists themselves were repeatedly accused, held a near irresistible attraction for Félix Gonzalez-Torres. He wanted to harness that power to his own ends, to infiltrate its function, to shift and reverse its meaning. Speaking to Nancy Spector, he explained his approach when dealing with the Minimalist formal canon:

In our case we should not be afraid of using such formal references, since they're present authority and history. Why not take them? When we insert our own discourse into these forms, we soil them. We make them dark. We make them our own and that is our final revenge. We become part of the language of the authority, part of history."

Félix Gonzalez-Torres has compared this aesthetic strategy with the workings of a virus. Instead of rejecting the institutions or completely ignoring them, he becomes part of the system, a satellite of sorts, inhabiting the existing structures, drawing from their vocabulary and exploiting the given potential for his own ends:

Well, my first reaction was a very predictable leftist reaction which more and more I am questioning and finding very static and self-defeating. At this point I do not want to be outside the structure of power, I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative

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14 Ursprung, Philip: Materialschlächten gegen die Kunst, in: Daidalos, Juni 1995, p. 85

"Untitled" (Public Opinion), 1991 (Kat. Nr/cat. no. 167)
"Untitled", 1987 (Kat. Nr/cat. no. 16)
A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres. Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility", Camden Arts Centre, London 1994
to what? To power? No, I want to have power. It's effective in terms of change. I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are, in other words, replicating themselves, because that's the way the culture works. So if I function as a virus, an imposter, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions. And I think that maybe I'm embracing those institutions which before I would have rejected. Money and capitalism are powers that are here to stay, at least for the moment. It's within those structures that change can and will take place.  

As a result, one strand of this strategy was - rather than rejecting the traditional art market - to accept the commercial gallery system as a platform for presentation and action. The greater challenge to Felix Gonzalez-Torres lay in producing for this market, disseminating his messages by appropriating its distribution channels and gaining a much more effective access, via the exhibition circuit and the museums, to a broad public than he would have achieved had he withdrawn to an alternative scene where his art would only have served to confirm what everyone thought they knew anyway.  

IV.

In a formal sense, many of Gonzalez-Torres’ works recall - at least initially - the sculptural vocabulary familiar since the sixties. The very term “stack” traces back to a series begun by Donald Judd in 1965. This artist’s “specific objects” are comprised of ten identical boxes positioned above another on the wall. Judd often combined iron and plexiglass, allowing the filtered light to cast colored shadows on the surface of the walls. Gonzalez-Torres integrated this in an early stack called “Untitled” (Loverboy) (cat. no. 78) exhibited at the Andrea Rosen Gallery. The reflection of the azure paper lends a blue hue to the adjacent white wall, crowning the work with an aureole. The early object boxes by Robert Morris and the work of Carl Andre have also been frequently cited as sources of inspiration. Gonzalez-Torres’ candy spills reminded critics of the ashfall avalanches of Robert Smithson, Barry Le Va’s scattered pieces and Richard Serra’s actionistic splashing for the exhibit “Nine at Castelli” held at the Castelli Warehouse in December 1968. Serra heated lead and flung the molten metal a length of eight meters between the wall and floor, where it froze in flux. As these examples illustrate, Felix Gonzalez-Torres did not cull his ideas exclusively from Minimal Art. Proponents of the following generation of artists who first began to make public appearances at the end of the decade, have also been cited as references. Post-Minimalism, a/k/a Anti-Form, bears in its very name the claim to being a countermovement with the declared aim of overcoming the formal Minimalist vocabulary. With the emergence of Conceptual Artists such as Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, the concept of the artwork was taken one step further, radicalized to reach its complete material dissolution. In the purest exponents of this art, traditional material is replaced by language as a new plastic medium. Felix Gonzalez-Torres has profited like virtually no other artist of the ‘nineties from this triumph of form and aesthetic liberation. And like no other artist of his generation, he has thereby succeeded in establishing his own independent position and developing his own idiom of images. This autonomy is perhaps most striking in his work because he has never held that an affinity for existing formal repertoires, aesthetically defined decades ago, is the stuff of artistic conflict. In the interview with Robert Storr published in January 1995 in the French art magazine Art Press cited above, Felix Gonzalez-Torres clarified his own attitude towards his predecessors and his position within a historical context:

I think more than anything else I'm just an extension of certain practices, minimalism or conceptualism, that I'm developing areas I think were not totally dealt with. I don't like this idea of having to undermine your ancestors, of ridiculing them, undermining them, and making less out of them. I think we're here because we're part of a historical process and I think that this attitude that you have to murder your father in order to start something new is bullshit. We are part of this culture, we don't come from outer space, so whatever I do is already something that has entered my brain from some other sources


17 Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, pp. 20, 27

and is then synthesized into something new. I respect my elders and I learn from them. There's nothing wrong with accepting that. I'm secure enough to accept those influences. I do not have anxiety about originality, I really don't.¹⁹

Felix Gonzalez-Torres draws on the historic idiom of Minimal Art and makes it accessible by allowing his audiences to participate in the work. Viewers are asked to - quite literally - take possession of a piece or even digest it. Within this framework, viewers become active players, taking a sheet of paper home or eating a piece of candy. It is not until this process takes place - an active involvement with art rather than mere contemplation from a distance - that the work becomes complete, consummated. The radical element of this artistic attitude is evidenced in every public museum exhibition of these works. Where every contact with art is usually strictly prohibited (and that for good reason), viewers are actually encouraged to take a part of the work home, and this act makes the viewer the artist’s partner. Felix Gonzalez-Torres assigns a part of his work and his responsibility to the public. The artist describes his own expectations of his audience as follows: "Without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in."²⁰

In 1992, Gonzalez-Torres designed a limited edition (12) of an empty, leatherbound photo album for Julie Sylvester Editions in New York. "Untitled" (Album)(cat. no. 218) was given to buyers together with the request to fill the book with one's own private photographs - to complete the object. Other series, such as the lightbulb strings begun that same year, are similarly rooted in this premise: they require their owner to participate in the aesthetic process. The artists of the 'sixties such as Carl Andre, Barry Le Va and Sol LeWitt were still concerned in rendering the concept and process of creation visible in the finished work and hence comprehensible for the viewer.²¹ Conceptual artists held that the artistic achievement was confined strictly to the idea behind the work, effectively placing the question of material execution on a secondary level which meant it could be left to third parties without qualms. All these artists can all cite Marcel Duchamp who, as early as the 'fifties, regarded art as a joint venture produced by the artist and the viewer. However, Felix Gonzalez-Torres goes an important step further than his antecedents. He questions the authority of the artist when making aesthetic decisions by asserting that he is not the only or even the best person to install his works.

"I don't necessarily know how these pieces are best displayed. I don't have all the answers - you decide how you want it done. Whatever you want to do, try it. This is not some Minimalist artwork that has to be exactly two inches to the left and six inches down. Play with it, please. Have fun. Give yourself that freedom. Put my creativity into question, minimize the preciousness of the piece. It is much easier and safer for an artist to just frame something."²²

The role and responsibility to the work were discussed from the opposite perspective by the artists of the 'sixties. At that time, the objective was to strengthen one's own position vis-à-vis gallery owners, museums and collectors - and by no means to surrender control over the presentation of one's own pieces. Artists succeeded in achieving these aims by producing works that were created on-site, difficult or impossible to transport and requiring re-installation by the artist at every new showing. The perennial debates ignited by the need to constantly re-build Joseph Beuys sculptures presents the best example of this type of aesthetic concept - and its posthumous complexities.

V.

For Felix Gonzalez-Torres, public participation has become a constituent part of his work: art that permanently calls into question the distinction between public and private. While the stacks and candy spills can become the property of a collector, they do not unfold their true function, evolving character and explosive aesthetic power until that moment in which they come into contact with the public, however it may be defined. The public presentation of the poster series works is ideally a conditio sine qua non. Gonzalez-Torres decided that, while a private collector can purchase the title to these works, the collector will never actually privately own them. Instead of hanging the posters on the walls of their homes,
buyers are under obligation to exhibit the works on public billboards, affording every passerby the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with them. The two best known examples of such works originated for exhibits in New York. In 1989 Gonzalez-Torres had a white text printed on a black background at Sheridan Square in Manhattan (cat. no. 65). Commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, the text cites several key dates from the history of the gay rights movement. The artist created the second such piece for an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art two years later. The same image was scattered throughout the city on 24 billboards: an empty but apparently slept-in double bed (ill. p. 65, cat. no. 184). This work was later purchased by Elaine and Werner Dannheisser and donated by the collectors to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Here Felix Gonzalez-Torres has succeeded in putting his radical concept into practice. Private collectors, having purchased the work under the stated conditions, accepted that. In the 'seventies, Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth had attempted - in vain - to promote a similar idea, as he has noted to Felix Gonzalez-Torres:

Through to 1979, I refused to sell anything. In particular, I didn't want those investigations that were large installations to end up in somebody's home. I said, you can't buy it, but you can give me a grant like you give a scientist. And for this, I'll give you the right to put it in a public space. (...) I got support from the National Gallery in Canada and the Neue Gallery in Kassel which displayed a work for years on loan from a collector. But there were very few people who wanted to spend their money without getting some 'goods,' you know.23

This interview was published in a catalog accompanying the exhibit "A. Reinhart, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres. Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility" shown in 1994 under Kosuth's curatorialship at the London Camden Arts Centre. Commenting on this project, which contrasted the works of three generations, Gonzalez-Torres reiterated his admiration for the artists of the 'sixties, stressing their influence on his own work. "I think that we in the new generation, the one that has used some of the same ideas for the advance- ment of social issues, owe a lot to artists of the past like Lawrence Weiner and Kosuth."24

But the art of the 'sixties was political too. Several of Minimal Art's hermetic objects possessed their own iconography and sparked any number of associations. Dan Flavin penned an erotic allusion on a preliminary drawing of his first sculpture made exclusively of neon tubes - "The Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (To Robert Rosenblum)," writing "the diagonal of personal ecstasy." In 1962 Tony Smith christened a black steel cube "Die." Walter de Maria used similar terms in 1965 when naming his sculpture "Death Wall": the slender steel column with a gate-like aperture in its base and bearing the stamp "DEATH" combines Minimalist aesthetics with echoes of current politics. Even Frank Stella, who so adamantly supported the autonomy of the artwork and the identity of painterly depiction and compositional significance, expanded his early black striped pictures from 1958 and 1959 to include a comment on contemporary history by giving them German titles such as "Die Fahne hoch" or "Arbeit Macht Frei."

Within the social constellation of the late 'sixties, when the military involvement of the U.S. in Vietnam was the subject of increasing public controversy and even threatened to divide the nation, every artistic manifestation automatically constituted a political statement. Even when a work asserted exclusively formal arguments, these took place in a social context and expressed a certain political attitude. Befitting the tenor of the times, the magazine Artforum conducted a survey of artists in 1970, publishing in its September issue statements by Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Lawrence Weiner, among others, in response to the question: "What is your position regarding the kind of political action that should be taken by artists?" The artists were virtually unanimous in accepting political responsibility. Yet when it came to putting this into practice, the opinions were varied, ranging from a call to take political action to the belief that art was totally unfeasible as a political instrument. "Art may change things a little, but not much; I suspect one reason for the popularity of American art is that the museums and the collectors didn't understand it enough to realize that it was against much in the society,"25 Donald Judd noted, describing characteristics of a type of art which, as was later also the intention of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, infiltrated society and its cultural institutions as a virus, undetected to the last.
Felix Gonzalez-Torres as well sees this melding of Minimalist aesthetics with political affairs as the unavoidable consequence of conditions in society which shaped the genesis of art at that time. "That work could only have been made because of the extreme positions that Vietnam created." Whereas the foremost proponents of Minimal Art such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd had declared their distance from the institutions-that-be as a political attitude, Gonzalez-Torres has adopted what is practically the opposite approach in his own work. What distinguishes him from his precursors of the 'sixties is the fact that, instead of subjecting the Minimalist vocabulary to formal analysis or aesthetization, he instrumentalizes it for his own political purposes - in works such as "Untitled" (cat. no. 82) and "Untitled" (Death by Gun) (ill. p. 33, cat. no. 100), both "stacks" dating from 1990, but also in photostats, the medium for disseminating information. Other works constitute an artistic coming-to-terms with very private experiences. The artist's relationship with Ross Laycock and coping with AIDS form the starting point for numerous objects, photo pieces and drawings. Even where the titles indicate specific names or places, the formal language of Minimalism helps the artist prevent the works from being illustrative or bogged down in the description of personal emotion. By adopting and adapting the strategies of Minimal and Conceptual Art, Felix Gonzalez-Torres is able to transcend his own situation - in a literal sense - and formulate private experience with universal validity. Hence the private and public spheres fuse in any number of ways. While the parenthetical descriptions in the titles facilitate links with the artist's biography, the open-endedness of the Minimalist vocabulary enables each and every viewer to contribute his or her own experiences to the work. (Perfect) love and hope, disease, loss, transience and death are the recurring, existential themes for which Felix Gonzalez-Torres has found metaphors in his art: images at once simple, persuasive and emotionally arresting.

Translation from the German by Mary Fran Gilbert & Keith Bartlett