

inbetweenness

Exhibition Checklist

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
“*Untitled*” (*Loverboy*), 1989
Sheer blue fabric and hanging device
Dimensions vary with installation
Courtesy of the Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres
and the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
“*Untitled*”, 1991–1993
Billboard
Dimensions vary with installation
Two parts
Schenkung Sammlung Hoffmann,
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and Tate

Curated by Flavin Judd

Thank you to Andrea Rosen, Andrew Kachel,
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On Queer Brown Envy Josh T. Franco

Dear Felix,
I printed out a picture of you from the internet to meditate on as I struggle to write this letter. (Deciding this writing would be epistolary in the first place was itself a struggle.) Like any message to a person one never met and who died too soon, looking at a closeup of your face is a way of building a fantasy relationship. To some degree, imagining a relationship that can never be reciprocal describes the activity of every art historian and their chosen—or as in this case, proposed—subject. Yes, of course the artwork itself is the proposal, but let’s not pretend the desire to know the artist is not part of the equation. It turns out I have a lot to tell you, and it’s as uncomfortable as corresponding with a ghost should be.

First things first: your work sits at the end of my rope. Despite being an art historian invested in so-called Minimalism and its legacies, and art by U.S. Latino folks, I have always kept your practice at arm’s length. The reasons will become apparent shortly. Now, here you are in the form of your work, barreling into the home of an artist whose objects and stories I have examined closely for years. I have been an employee in this home, spending hours showing its details to visitors and exploring them for myself. After such sustained attention, I identify with this place to a certain degree, so even if it makes all the art historical sense in the world, I am still jarred by the thought of your presence here. I take back my description though; your work never barrels. It whispers, it arrives stealthily, it sneaks up on us. One might not even notice brushing up against a sheer blue curtain, whereas walking into the sharp edge of a human-scaled aluminum object can injure. In art, I like that potential hurt that your work refuses to give. I realize I am drawn to art with which I could physically brawl.

Your work does not injure, but it does cling;

I never know what to do with the sheet of paper an hour later, for instance. And it’s a minor annoyance to find candy wrapper trash in one’s coat pocket a year later when the weather turns cold again. I find myself exasperated by the stickiness of your ephemera. Of course, I had to take the sheet, had to pick out and unwrap the candy, to perform the museological transgression that proves “I get it” to whatever audience of strangers are in the gallery at the moment performing the same. For all of these reasons and others, it’s no wonder I have paid so much more attention to Judd, in addition to the fact that he became a Texan, whereas I’m not sure if you ever visited my homeland. The thought of you on the border is intriguing, but I imagine the form of your thinking looks more like archipelagos. (I wish we could explore this distinction. Were you still here, we could swap copies of books by Walter Mignolo and Édouard Glissant, two of the thinkers associated with these ideas respectively. We could trade notes in the margins.)

But these are formalist defenses and matters of taste. (And indeed, whether they bring me pleasure or not, your work is clearly successful as art, if success is marked by an experience that one cannot forget easily.) These are things an art historian can say, to avoid being fully human before art. What I do not want to acknowledge out loud (so here it is in a letter) is the special envy one queer brown boy can have for another. I hate to admit it. Do you know what I’m talking about? I am all but certain you do. This particular envy has to do with success and ascension in the historically white-dominated New York-centric art world that touches and touched both our lives. It is a sense of competition based on the implicit message that the space for queer brown artists is limited. A few of us are celebrated; too many of us are feared. A salient example is the Whitney Independent Study Program, in which you participated twice while I was rejected the same number of times. One almost certainly had nothing to do with the other in any practical terms, but the feeling is there nonetheless. Why do I feel a special envy toward your participation, but not toward the legions of other alumni? Because of that feeling that there can only be so many of us—queer brown boys—

in a given epoch. It does us no good to perpetuate such a notion, and I am eager to see what’s on the other side of this admission. So, besides the pettiness of holding envy for someone I’ve never even met, this also means admitting to being seduced by class and ethnic hierarchies that pervade our shared social world.

To shed the envy I have toward you, which is a result of these acquired desires, I am writing them out loud. This is a method of unlearning. I do so with hope that I can lead myself to something more important: leaving behind desires for whiteness and certain brands of artworld prestige in order to reach a place of solidarity with you in your afterlife. (In broader terms, I wonder how you would inhabit the increasingly solid and powerful Latinx presence in the same art circuits you traversed in your day?)

What if I consider my envy a legitimate starting point for knowing? Already, I find a more generative place to look anew at, for instance, “*Untitled*” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*). Any time I encounter this work, a frustration emerges that comes squarely from male-on-male desire. It is adolescent, but inevitable: I both want to be and be with the body dancing alone on the platform. Before I begin dwelling on my own physical shortcomings compared to the often jacked and beautiful dancer on the platform, I walk away. I never want to be reminded that I’ve lapsed at the gym, or that, were I to encounter the dancer at a club, he could reject me. And because the situation is your creation, my resentment ultimately lands on you. By even briefly acknowledging this here, however, I feel more prepared to do my job as an art historian the next time I encounter the work. I’ll put it in writing: I promise not to curse your name and run away again.

There is one envy that I don’t think is problematic in itself, but which raises other issues with which I want to imagine you are deeply familiar. This is the fact that you inhabited New York City at the same time as Donald Judd. In your daily life, it was possible for you to run into him, converse with him, develop a relationship, however minor. It’s possible that I also could have inhabited the same space as Judd, but time is also a factor: even if we had crossed paths in West Texas, I was only eight years old when he died, so any exchange would have been on very different terms. You could have met him as more of an equal than I ever could have, and I envy you that. I imagine you two downtown gallery hopping, eating with a crew, hanging out with your friends and doing it all in the proximity of 101 Spring Street. I wonder at what chance encounters might have occurred: did you ever turn the corner on Spring and find the other door open on to Mercer? Did you sneak into a party there? Did you flirt with white daddy, and did he know what you were doing? I like it when they play along. Clearly an insightful and observant man, I bet Judd was one who knew our game. I wish I had got to meet him. I wish it was my art displayed in his home, so he might walk by one late morning, bare-chested and thoughtful. To be a muscled go-go boy dancing in spectacular solitude on an aluminum object ... this human art historian’s ultimate dream.

What I must have always sensed in keeping your work at a distance is that were I to face it, I would fall apart, as has happened here. I can only hope someone wraps my pieces in shiny paper. Maybe that will be installed in this house I love in my own way; not like his son and daughter do, nor the orbit of friends and collaborators who knew him well, but as a member of a generation who takes up both of your legacies in ways neither of you might have predicted. In being ancestors who are never far from our thoughts, there is no distance between you two.

You will never read this letter. The point of it was to write through envy to reach a sense of something else, solidarity perhaps. I wrote this to inject queer brown backup into your legacy as you haunt many Daddies’ houses. However complicated my feelings for you, I hope to have conveyed this fact: You are not alone here.

Yours, Josh

C/S

During the Spring of 1995, Felix Gonzalez-Torres responded to a woman who asked a question from the audience during an artist talk with curator Gary Garrels at SFMOMA. She asked if the artist’s work is ever accompanied by commentary. Gonzalez-Torres responded to the query by narrating the essential functions of the certificate of authenticity that accompanies his works during their exhibiting trajectories. Politely dissatisfied with the artist’s response the woman in the audience further clarified what she meant: that if the artist wasn’t present in the there and then of the artist talk, she wouldn’t understand a fraction of what his work meant. For her, hearing his voice and seeing his embodied presence gave her more insight into the work itself. And again she wondered if whether or not the statements he made during the artist talk provided the context needed for the work to be understood correctly. Gonzalez-Torres demurred and offered that he trusted the viewer and the viewer’s intuition and emphasized his commitment to the formalism in his work, adding:

The content is just an accident I cannot escape as someone living, someone who lives in the late 20th century.¹

However, this response warrants a consideration.

It is an ambivalent sensation to be tasked with the trust of any artist, living or not, to co-author meaning onto their creative corpus. How do our viewing intuitions fortify the recognition a work of art demands while honoring the vulnerable legacies of its maker? As much as Gonzalez-Torres tried to secure a future that would heed his posthumous requests for the handling and exhibition of his work, there is always the possibility of misfires in the dizzying depths of Gonzalez-Torres’s minimalist signatures. His is a minimalism that is almost deceptive for those of us with intuitive receptors that feel the excess of these gestures. Whether it’s taking a piece of candy into your mouth or snagging a poster from a pile to preserve in your personal archive, being left with traces of an artist’s creative body is heavy with familiar grief. What is it that we give back to the work or the artist in return?

I find it difficult to look at *“Untitled” (Loverboy)* (1989) from my vantage point here in the Sonoran Desert and not consider borderlands philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of liminality. She referred to it as *nepantla*, which she described as “a zone of impetuous transition, the point of contact between the worlds of nature and spirit.”² Anzaldúa’s formulation of *nepantla* is a way to make sense of, as well as heal from, the violent complexities of her upbringing in the Río Grande Valley of Texas just a few miles north of the U.S.–Mexico border.

While the coupling of nature and spirit as a critical lens might seem a counter-intuitive method of interpreting the works of the avowedly atheist Gonzalez-Torres, I find it useful for weighing the implications of the violent contextual space from which Gonzalez-Torres’s work emerged. In my viewing of *“Untitled” (Loverboy)* my gaze falls on the subdued mood of a powder blue curtain panel hanging in a room lit by the first hint of the morning sun. I feel the weight of loss. And on top of that loss, the delirium of ecstatic desire. I feel the agony of anticipatory grief. And yet, I am compelled to host it, make it comfortable in a corner of my psychic space for the rest of my days. This is how I tie myself to the memory of the artist and his muse(s) who have since perished in the AIDS pandemic. It is how I tie myself to those of us still grieving.

As a cultural hermeneutic *nepantla* facilitates another entry point into the liminal space present in Gonzalez-Torres’s critical titling practice that bears the mark of meaning made between artist and viewer. That relationship is at the center of the subtitular ontologic of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work. What, exactly, lives in between the space of the untitled and the parenthetical clue that inspires the viewer to consider loss, harness grief, question authority, and more importantly, keep living?

Whether or not the content of Gonzalez-Torres’s work is merely an accident, the structuring conse-

quences of the epoch in which he lived, it is within the space of the subtitular that some of the un-articulated dimensions of the experience of the late 20th century are elucidated. While it has been described in the short-hand of “the culture wars,” it’s worth stating that Gonzalez-Torres’s work converged in between “overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures and social and geographic locations, of events and realities in all of their psychological, sociological, political, spiritual, historical, creative and imagined capacities.”³ Gonzalez-Torres’s work brings the violence of his era so powerfully into focus.

Any viewing practice today in 2021, nearly twenty-five years after Gonzalez-Torres’s death from AIDS, might be a trauma-informed consideration of the rage that contextualizes that period of the 1980s and 1990s, which was engulfed in the violence of the Reagan administration. It is a rage that hides in plain sight. An untitled rage roaming in the ethers that connect our present to the past.

Gonzalez-Torres’s life, death and legacy exist in between two pandemics. To study Gonzalez-Torres necessitates revisiting one of the more dangerous chapters of the late 20th century, a period of bureaucratic violence, of genocidal neglect. It is also considered the big bang theory of queer agitation. Gonzalez-Torres took umbrage with the way mainstream outlets portrayed the face of AIDS. For the artist AIDS was inextricably connected to the lack of adequate healthcare and housing, racism, fear, homophobia, and the elimination of welfare programs. These connections emerge from their dormancy as we near the end of 2021, a time when the death rate of the 21st century’s pandemic surpasses that of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic.

For the rest of us who have learned to live in between pandemics we have learned again to long in the distance. We have learned to keep living.

We have eschewed our families for better families of our choosing. We have trafficked in the remote intimacies the technology of our age has enabled. We have surrendered. We have forgiven. We often leave these articulations unsaid, abort the affective excess that underpins these desires, but they reside in the liminal space between privacy and recognition.

I have looked to my gay friends nearing and passing their 60th year for solace. The ones who are still here. I looked to Joey Terrill, a Los Angeles artist I have admired for his saturated still life paintings and photographs of the gay Chicano quotidian. *What’s it like to know we’ll lose so many people?*

Our conversations are warm. I recently interviewed Joey for a piece that was published by a respected platform. They surprised me by publishing it on September 16th, a day that initiates Hispanic Heritage month. A month that starts in the middle. In the middle of a pandemic, I figure there’s nothing to lose when I ask what it was like to lose a village of friends and lovers and the lovers of your friends?

What he says is precious. It is for us. This intimacy is present in the way its contents are protected, kept *entre nos*. In the in-between there’s room for what is untitled to serve as a means towards that which passes for preservation. It is when we come together that we co-author the strategies for recognizing as well as resisting the dominant structure of power that is manufacturing our desired annihilation. There is what others see and then there is what we see.

- ¹ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled (A Talk),” Lecture and Conversation with Gary Garrels, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, March 23, 1995.
- ² Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz in lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 28.
- ³ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 176.



still functioning as a boundary, as in the theater where curtains separate the audience from the action. When applied to this installation, however, the conventional delineation of stage and audience becomes more difficult to fix. Which is the stage—the ground floor of 101 Spring Street, the adjacent street, or both? By utilizing the architecture of the building, with its many windows, *“Untitled” (Loverboy)*, allows passersby to become participants in the production of meaning.

Gonzalez-Torres found pleasure in meaning’s instability, saying in a 1994 interview with Hans Ulrich-Obrist, “The work is always extremely unstable. But that is one thing I enjoy very much. I enjoy that danger, that instability, that inbetweenness.” Yet, crucially, he added, “If you want to relate it to a personal level, I think in that case that the work is pretty close to that real life situation that I am confronted with daily as a gay man: a way of being in which I am forced by culture and by language to always live a life of ‘in-between.’”⁴

Gonzalez-Torres said, “our self is constructed through many different channels.”⁵ These channels flow, converge, and circulate concurrently and unceasingly. Culture and language can be used in law and legislation to fix identity and to govern the movement and actions of our bodies: who we can be, where we can go, what can be said, what can be memorialized, and who we can love. In defiance of this conscription of bodies and behavior Gonzalez-Torres’s work demonstrates an affirmation of love as counterhegemonic, with all its attendant complexities. We see this thinking carefully deployed in *“Untitled” (Passport)*, a stack of blank white paper in endless supply. As Gonzalez-Torres wrote of this piece in a letter to Andrea Rosen:

You know, the title (*Passport*) is very crucial and significant—a white empty blank and uninscribed piece of paper, an untouched feeling, an undiscovered experience ... an empty passport for life: to inscribe it with the best, the most painful, the most banal, the most sublime, and yet to inscribe it with life, love, memories, fears, voids, and unexpected reasons for being. A simple white object against a white wall, waiting.⁶

- ¹ Written for *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993).
- ² Letter to Robert Vifian, December 3, 1994, included in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault (New York and Göttingen, Germany: Sieidl, 2006), 170.
- ³ Originally published in *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November–December 1991): 86–89; reprinted: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault, 40.
- ⁴ Letter to Marieluise Hessel, February 8, 1994, included in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault, 173.
- ⁵ From an exhibition statement written by Gonzalez-Torres for a 1988 installation of his work at The New Museum, New York; included in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault, 121. Describing the exhibition statement as an opportunity to demystify his approach he wrote, “I hope that it will guide the viewer and will allow an active participation in the unraveling of the meaning and the purpose of the work.”
- ⁶ “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Interviews*, vol. 1, (Milan: Charta, 2003), 311.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.
- ⁸ Letter to Andrea Rosen, February 14, 1992, included in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault, 160.

The knot-end of a thread being sewn, passed under and over, catches on the fabric. This is a moment of balanced tension. The thread and the fabric it passes through appear flat together. They are mirrored waves with no in-between.

This perfect point escapes from us too quickly. Our world is filled with stitches that are too slack, with threads gathering and knotting underneath, or too taut, gathering the surface of the fabric into ruffles and ridges. Our real lines of thread are compelled toward this abstraction of flatness that will always slip away. But a flat line would do no good. We already have the flat in the weave of crossed lines that is the fabric itself. A truly sewn flat would be a loom’s additional edge. It could not suture or bind, but only extend the fabric one thread’s width sideways.

A thread and fabric, a line and a field. These are not failures to become flat. It turns out that is coy talk to deflect from their work together as a tension. These are empirical geometries. The shape of their arrangement is only one of their sides. They also carry with them a confounding of expectations and tendencies. The happy trajectory diverted by a distracted hand does not vanish for failing to appear. It remains in the kink now set into the gathered fabric. The hesitation to stitch shows in the hole tearing wide open at the wrong moment.

The art of this particular geometry is slack drapery. It is the gathering beneath of the cabled string and the gather of tension on the surface of the fabric. This is not an art form that is so interested in the drape’s initial binding. Where the stitch or bunch holds firm, it does so in order to echo itself into the fabric. Even an eye for seams will note the firmness and professionalism of a stitch and then follow down the rest of the fabric. A dress flows. A banner illustrates the wind. A curtain lifts off the flat glass and rests back against it with the elegance of a dancer’s trailing leg.

The gathering at the top of a curtain is an initial impulse given breadth and extension by the loose hang of the curtain below. The excess of surface that such gathering makes possible opens the wave of the curtain and offers it as a sensitive device. In its billows, it gives movement a chance to appear; wind through windows, the passage through doors, the small displacements of a person walking nearby.

Empirical geometry also includes the world beside the shapes. Our breath can shake across the surface, but a hard glance leaves the curtain unmoved. Even beauty doesn’t register in its wave, but the tint of thin fabric can turn the whole world a hazy blue. These impositions are honest, but they are also expansive and generous. The curve and flow of the waving fabric bring the still smooth glass to our attention when it could otherwise have been absent, and the sight of beauty at a remove is a reminder that curtains wait to be opened.

The wait of this thread and fabric is not limited to windows. Lovers are draped too, in sheer fabrics begging to be unwrapped. His skin scattering the dim light, too playful or bashful or clumsy, he jokes too much, before he embraces the texture and begins to enact this nightgown. Tension arises in between threads in between us, a whine begging for the lazy fabric to loosen and drop. More coy talk.

This is no schematic dimensional progression, one thread, two fabric, three the billow. Threads are pliable. It should not be surprising that their geometry is too. Here, it is the gathering of space that raises the flat of the glass and touches us to our lovers and our memories of our lovers. But has the fabric gathered or has the loose and free fed? We need another look. This one vertiginous, a bird’s eye view inverted, shifting down and bent and over. Ruffles confront a hinge and darkness gathers in the bend like a leaking bruise.

It must be said that the sky often causes resentment. It has a form that is constantly unique but also total and undivided. The sky gathers everything together within itself, but we have no analog that can open our empathy or our mutual recognition. Its radical novelty retreats into sameness, another and



It’s a pretty blue and it’s a color you might want to wake up to. Blue is a color you go through. It’s an invitation and also a beckoning and a magical feeling of constant morning. Cause if you keep losing consciousness which is not so great after all you can have your mornings back again and again. A blue window is something pretty you might make instead of despair. I read in an interview with Carl George that Felix liked working with a blue that was the same color as one of Ross’s hospital gowns. Ross Laycock was the lover Felix Gonzalez-Torres lost to AIDS in 1991. So it’s easy to imagine Felix bringing Ross some beautiful pajamas. Baby we need you to wear pretty pajamas like you’d say to the lover you were cuddling who was spending plenty of time in bed. I once inherited a pair of silky shimmery pajamas my friend had been given by his older lover who liked him to look hot in bed on trips and probably at home too. They were striped white with an excellent royal blue. The two had broken up so the pajamas were now too weird for him to put on. I wd them for years until they were frayed and beyond repair but I suspect I’m lying and I think I probably lost them somewhere. In the laundry, the laundry was stolen or left or in a rush leaving a room somewhere. When color migrates to a window it’s a dream. Ross keeps waking up. A window feels like a permanent place. In my small house I grew up in my mother’s downstairs bedroom was where you slept when you got sick. You sat in the giant parent bed like a little god and hallucinated the ceiling ornament into various genitals and the windows were the best there were several because floods of light came in from the yard and the curtains gossamer like this were waving slightly in the breeze. It was like a movie. It was happening. My bedroom wasn’t pretty so this was the real deal. The hallucinatory home of dreams and illness and even sexiness all at once. I like how Felix’s curtains are bunched on the floor like socks or toys, stuffed animals. It’s vernacular and cozy. It’s my sick dream and it’s a Disney dream and it’s a forever morning where your lover is sick in pretty blue pajamas and you put that in a gallery you want to show it to the world how the light goes and the color goes and lover boy is there forever alive you want to cry in this dream.

Carl also mentioned, I think it was Carl that Felix told him that many of the birds he photographed were vultures. Are they vultures? I don’t know. It’s funny, though. We think this two-panel installation of ominous sky is ominous cause it’s grey but vultures I learned when I first went west are hopeful. They are hopeful in Florida too where Felix Gonzalez-Torres saw them. Vultures mean spring whirling up there, and someone’s dead, juicy things are frozen in the ice that were dead for a while for months are revealed to the birds who are entirely living stretching their wings up there, living their awesome lives in the sky, going ahead.

another new cloud. Most of us choose not to look so long. Our eyes rebel at attending to the details of a cloud or the density of an afternoon’s light for more than a moment or two. There is no end to what we could discover there, and only for a slight wind can impose upon us a new infinite to be overwhelmed by. Photographs threaten to go further. They turn on the sky’s singularities, uniqueness and totality, and double them in representation. Once captured and split, this infinite envelope is tied down to definite boundaries. There is very little a sky can do to escape this kind of domestication.

Until the birds came and pinned the clouds to the wall. This was not revenge. It was an anchor. Unlike the sky, a bird moves in one direction and holds a stable external edge against the world. In any photograph, we are given the contrary instructions to relate disparate elements closer than anything else on earth. This bird and this sky exclude all existence in their minor dyad but starkly break from each other. This is not a question of ground. What could be less grounded than the sky and a bird? The photographic bond of contraries lets any image seep between itself, spreading conjunctions. In this instance, skies grant space to birds and birds grant detail and direction to skies. If we have trouble imagining the progression of a cloud, a bird gives us a line to follow. As the photographs try to impose their control on the most open expanse, it is the bird’s organic movement that begins the pull against, like a dog raging at the end of its line, flexing the surface of the sky until the image bends at a right angle.

This empirical geometry is the bristling of the sky. Capture, once pinned, becomes the power of fixity. With the fall of the first control, the other goes, and boundaries become edges to overflow. Two photographs blend two skies in different lights. The break between them vanishes in the line where wall meets wall, but the darkness is no gravity pulling the light in. It is refraction weighted by the pull of the bird’s pinned fixations. This is light as unique and total, like the sky that gathers it. Tension tears at the picture, the gradient intensifies, and the ends of the curve shoot off the edge of the image. The bird’s organic flight now pulls the image apart, pouring the space of the sky into the room.

Two pins or two punctures from a needle. Taut chain or the pulled tight thread. Light in, light out, color and value, drape and image. It is not a question of reconciling these geometries, but of encountering the space that they generate and attending to where they mix and pervert and fold and redouble, and then standing within the gathering and flow of the curtain and the coalescing bend of an image wrenching itself together.