

Poem  
danilo machado

## and the body, Felix, where is it?

A



A "Untitled", 1991

Billboard; Dimensions vary with installation

Mettenwylstrasse 1, Luzern, Switzerland. 1 of multiple billboard locations as part of the exhibition *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form*. Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland. 21 May – 25 Jul. 2010. Cur. Elena Filipovic [shown]; 31 Jul. – 29 Aug. 2010. Cur. Carol Bove. [One of three parts. Additional parts: Wiels, Brussels, Belgium. 16 Jan. – 2 May 2010; MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany. 28 Jan – 25 Apr. 2011]. Photographer: Mark Niedermann.

© Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Essay  
Re'al Christian

## A Living Presence

The following texts are the result of a collaboration between Re'al Christian and danilo machado. Christian's essay and machado's poem produce a dialogue that—in content and form—responds to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. These interwoven texts can be read separately or as one dialogue in two voices.

it was beside you, then we both got up from bed leaving creases and our sweat  
it was staring at the same bird in the fog you were  
its body open curtains sheets surrounded by gray and white

body cropped to palm open open open  
callus lines short fingernails not holding any thing

what sweet fortune futures and sequenced numbers  
one thousand corners folded white strips unwrap plastic takeout

it's just a matter of out in time out of time undated it's just  
a matter of mine yours white sheets unmade unmet kept unkempt  
your bed vacant above my own pink sheets unmade gray curtains drawn  
folds at the end flowers on our pillow cases

it was beside the other bodies at the coalition meeting yelling at the court  
testifying at city hall steps outside the dim bar at the march holding signs

so many other bodies other others  
you saw the crowds, right? (the police did) there were so many  
of us at the same time were you there then?  
where then? then where? i must have missed you, too

There is a distinction between *memorials* and *monuments* that often goes unaddressed. The two words are etymologically related to memory and sometimes used interchangeably, or in proximity. Although a monument celebrates a noteworthy memory — a historical moment, an achievement, a victory — a memorial commemorates loss: an elegy set in stone. A rupture, an ideological rift, exists between memory and history. How we remember the past, and by extension how we choose to commemorate it, can be at once synchronous and contentious. History as a discipline exists in this dualistic space, as it attempts to reconcile narratives of exceptionalism and oppression. With each monument that has been erected, we must ask whose history the structure embodies, and what histories are buried when a monument is constructed?

How do we memorialize an absent body? In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us may be asking this question. We're dealing with a particular kind of grief, a collective mourning, one that is new for some and painfully familiar for others. It's difficult to conceive how we mourn and memorialize people affected by our current pandemic. Many artists and writers have offered poetic responses to the question of what a COVID-19 monument might look like, while also assessing the risk of erasing disproportionately affected communities in the resurgence and aftermath of the disease. As we contemplate and rewrite the politics of touch, intimacy, mourning, and closeness, it seems only natural that the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–1996) has taken on new resonance. Known for his minimalist installations and sculptures, the artist was no stranger to the question of how to memorialize absent bodies. Working at the height of the HIV / AIDS pandemic, he did not propose a definitive answer to this question, but his work is an integral part of an ongoing reflection upon the poetics of commemorating the sudden absence of innumerable bodies.

B



B "Untitled" (For Jeff), 1992  
Billboard; Dimensions vary with installation  
327 Woodstock Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland. 1 of 24 outdoor billboard locations  
throughout Belfast, with 1 indoor location, as part of the exhibition  
*Felix Gonzalez-Torres: This Place*. Metropolitan Arts Centre, Belfast, Northern Ireland,  
United Kingdom. 30 Oct. 2015 – 24 Jan. 2016. Cur. Eoin Dara.  
© Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Writing in 1994, bell hooks remarked that Gonzalez-Torres' work embodied the "aesthetics of loss," losses that were, for him, quantified but incalculable. The artist's biography is almost inextricable from the way we understand his process. His works exist as both public monuments and private memorials, structures built around silence, familiarity, and interaction. Rather than figures, his "portraits" of loved ones lost to AIDS depict traces of their absence. Installations of objects such as cellophane-wrapped candy, fortune cookies, and stacked sheets of paper enact epic theaters, where objects were made to be touched, taken, and experienced. The artist's snapshot photographs could act as memorials in their own right. With images of empty, ruffled beds still showing the impression of now-absent bodies, and of vast skies punctuated by lone birds, he represented moments of absence that we often take for granted. His seminal billboards appropriate a familiar visual format and transform it into a site for memorial. The billboard "Untitled" (For Jeff) (1992), for instance, shows a single hand resting on a white background, its palm faced outward. There is no context or inherent meaning that can be derived from such a spare photograph. As with much of Gonzalez-Torres' work, the subject has been disembodied. The image acts as synecdoche, a portrait not of an individual but of a collective.

In interviews, Gonzalez-Torres maintained that his partner, Ross Laycock, was the sole public of his artistic practice: "The rest of the people just come to the work." Gonzalez-Torres met Laycock in 1983. The two were together until 1991 when Laycock died of AIDS-related complications, five years before Gonzalez-Torres' own death. Laycock is often a suggested presence in the artist's work, as subject and audience, though physically he remains absent and bodiless. But in a 1984 snapshot, we see him standing against a pink wall, a pink-and-white-striped curtain cascading behind him. He's shirtless, grinning, and looking right into the camera (in another shot he turns away from the camera, still smiling). He looks strong and rugged—it's difficult to imagine him sick, losing weight and hair. In her essay "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," hooks considers how the snapshot functions as an altar: "Fictively dramatizing the extent to which a photograph can have a 'living presence,' [Toni] Morrison describes the way that many black folks rooted in Southern tradition once used, and still use, pictures. They were and remain a mediation between the living and the dead." Gonzalez-Torres' snapshot of Laycock serves a similar function; as a requiem, it represents a solitary moment suspended in time, both perfect and imperfect, candid and confined.



One of the most well-known billboard artworks Gonzalez-Torres created can be interpreted as a portrait of Laycock. *“Untitled”* (1991) makes use of a photograph, transforming it from a vernacular medium into a monument. The billboard, first exhibited in 1992, shows the impressions of two bodies left on the sheets of a clean white bed. Made at the height of the AIDS pandemic, and the year after Laycock died, it can serve as a powerful allegory for the multitudes lost during the crisis. In the photograph, the linens are rumpled and pulled back, the pillows dimpled by the heads of the bed’s recent inhabitants. But these are more than faint impressions. The bed seems scarred by these invisible bodies. One could make different associations with this photograph — love, loss, sleep, restlessness. As with many of his portraits, Gonzalez-Torres did not include a body, and the absence depicted remains ambiguous. The lovers are invisible but not bodiless. They are the same, not in appearance but in the space they occupied. Bodiless duos often figured in Gonzalez-Torres’ work. In *“Untitled” (Perfect Lovers)* (1991), a pair of adjacent analogue clocks slowly fall out of sync with each other over time, and can be perpetually reset. In *“Untitled” (March 5th) #2* (1991), two light bulbs hang together, suspended by a cord. They shine equally bright, but inevitably one bulb will burn out before the other — and similar to the clocks in *“Untitled” (Perfect Lovers)* 1991, when a bulb burns out, it should be replaced immediately. The work becomes infinite. The bodies in *“Untitled”* (1991) are similarly connected, tethered to each other and absent from our gaze.

The temporality of these installations touches on what it would mean for a monument to exist impermanently, for its presence to fade, or for its existence in real and imagined publics to be confined to a specific time and place. The words “It’s just a matter of time” form the sole content of *“Untitled” (It’s Just a Matter of Time)* (1992), one of Gonzalez-Torres’ earliest billboard works. This work, like many others billboard works, is installed at a minimum of six locations and had been included in multiple exhibitions since its creation. The ominous phrase appears in a white gothic typeface on a black background, raising a number of questions: Who is the subject? The speaker? Whose is the voice? The phrase has a unique temporality, at once infinite and ephemeral. No context is provided, so we must make our own associations. As a billboard the installation itself is only temporary, so the message is also self-referential — it anticipates its own disappearance. Our proximity to the work is likewise impermanent. It’s just a matter of time. The tether inevitably will break. If we return to the snapshot of Laycock enshrined in that pink room, we might think about how an object, something we hold close, carry with us, use again and again, bears traces of memory. If we lose that object, the memory we associate with it can still remain.

Gonzalez-Torres’ work treads a line between public and private, absence and presence, life and death. In their publicness, his works take on the role of monuments, addressing intimacies both individual and collective. But in referencing vernacular forms — billboards, snapshots, headlines — the monuments become part of day-to-day lives. This soft presence is antithetical to the idea of a monument, to the sovereignty a monument inherently claims the moment it is consecrated. As monuments serve to enshrine a particular ethos, the narratives behind them are assumed to be irrevocably rooted in our cultural memory. As new monuments are built and old ones torn down, however, the systems of power that these forms represent seem ever more porous. Like a snapshot, these structures are not fixed, but fluid — for better or worse, they capture moments worth remembering, albeit imperfectly.

C *“Untitled”*, 1995  
 Billboard; Dimensions vary with installation  
 1 of 6 billboard locations throughout Mexico City, Mexico, as part of the exhibition  
*Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Sonora 128, Mexico City, Mexico. Jan. – Feb. 2018.  
 © Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
 Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation



D *“Untitled” (It’s Just a Matter of Time)*, 1992  
 Billboard; Dimensions vary with installation  
 1 of 12 outdoor billboard locations throughout Madrid as part of the exhibition *ARCOmadrid*.  
 Feria Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo. Madrid, Spain. 2 Feb. – 1 Mar. 2020.  
 © Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
 Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation