

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

The Politics of Relation

Exhibition from 26 March to 12 September 2021



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987-90. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. Gift of the Peter Norton Family Foundation
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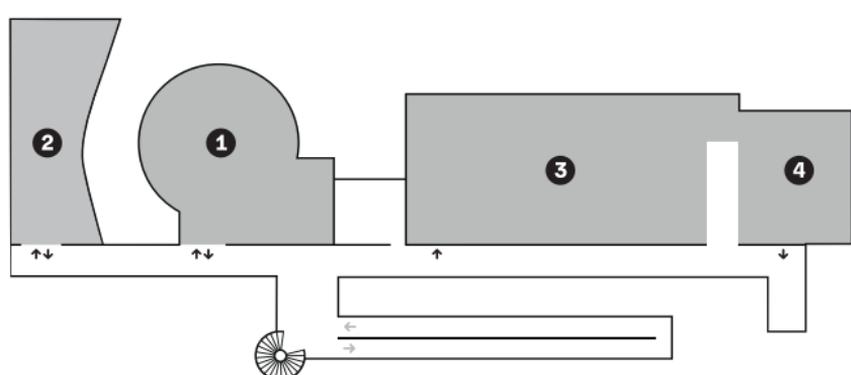
‘There is a certain amount of travelling in a dream deferred.’

Langston Hughes

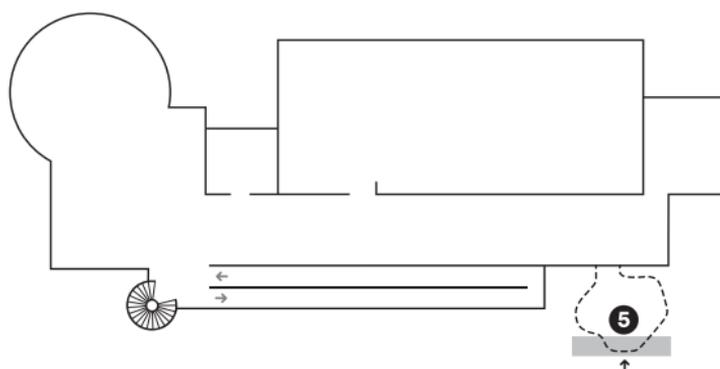
Recommended itinerary

Meier Building

Level 2



Level 0



The exhibition continues at the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion,* on the façade of L'Auditori de Barcelona, the Rambla del Raval and elsewhere in the city and its environs. More information at macba.cat.

*Admission to either institution allows free access to the other between 26 March and 12 April (ticket must be shown).

THIS EXHIBITION AFFORDS AN OPPORTUNITY to present a political reading of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work, especially as it relates to Spain, the Americas and the Caribbean, their shared histories and points of contact, and how these impact on the personal through questions of memory, authority, freedom and national identity, as well as the exemplary importance of the work for queer aesthetics. These aspects are linked, for instance, through the dialogue between militarism and homoeroticism, and through Gonzalez-Torres' engagement with the idea of the monument that can be related to the histories of race, colonialism and fascism. The exhibition places an emphasis on reading Gonzalez-Torres' work in relation to Spanish, Latin American and Caribbean culture, not as a simple, singular, biographical narrative, but rather as a way of complicating any essentialist reading of his work through any single idea, theme or identity. It is a way to rethink Gonzalez-Torres' work and its connections to histories sometimes underemphasised in presentations of his work. During the organisation of the exhibition, it has also been necessary to question, rethink and reread the work and adapt the project in the light of the current global pandemic. This has meant considering how this manifests certain challenges to the presentation of the works, but also the ways it has reinforced that it is a body of work for which the viral has a profound thematic, formal-structural and political relevance.

In 1971, Gonzalez-Torres (American, born Guáimaro, Cuba, 1957 – died Miami, USA, 1996, due to complications arising from AIDS) encountered Spain directly when he was sent as a child with his sister from Cuba to Madrid, prior to settling with an uncle in Puerto Rico. He began his artistic training in Puerto Rico and relocated to New York to continue his studies. It was in New York that he established his career working both as a solo artist and as part of the collective Group Material. Gonzalez-Torres' work speaks to a complex identity politics that resists the classifications into which it is often subsumed, and allows for a way into his work in the different contexts of Spain and Latin America. Gonzalez-Torres' subtle use of language, and his care in the construction of titles means that they are deliberately multivalent, their meaning shifting so they become a password that indicates the identification or belonging within one group or another, viewed from one or other geo-political perspective or moment in time. As someone who moved between contexts and identities, Gonzalez-Torres carefully addresses the complex encodings of a variable identity in his work. He was interested in employing strategies that subverted categorisations including the marginalising designations of immigrant, migrant and exile, and the stereotype of the "Hispanic" artist, which encompassed Gonzalez-Torres' removal of diacritical accents from his name. Instead, he aimed to address equality without negating that the act of looking is invested with identity. In this sense, he

viewed aesthetics as inherently political. Following the thinking of Martinican writer and philosopher Edouard Glissant (1928–2011), the exhibition emphasises the conceptual openness of Gonzalez-Torres' work as a political commitment, which parallels Glissant's position through their shared emphasis on mutability, and through the dynamics as well as the *poetics of relation*, which could thus also encompass the *politics of relation*.

The first room addresses the broad politics of Gonzalez-Torres' practice as it relates to ideas of authority, judgment and memory/amnesia. The works are linked through oblique references to authoritarian or establishment culture, to fascism and social conservatism, as well as to the repression of the gay community and homophobic attitudes that might refer to the USA during the AIDS crisis in the eighties and nineties, but which can also be connected to Spain and an equivalent repression under, and persisting after, Franco. There is an immediate visual and ideological link through the colours red, black and white. Within this grouping works such as **"Untitled" (Republican Years)**, 1992, might seem to make a clear reference to the politics of the United States, therefore evoking the politically polarising years of the most recent Republican incumbent, Donald Trump, but in Barcelona they could suggest a different interpretation, that of the history of the Spanish Republic, Barcelona's support for this legitimate government during the Spanish Civil war and the repercussions during the subsequent years of dictatorship. **"Untitled" (We Don't Remember)**, 1991, written in German and in a Gothic script recalling that favoured by the Nazi regime, can be related to Spain's historical connections with the German regime, Spain's amnesia about and irresolution of its own fascist past, and its contemporary resonances. **"Untitled"**, 1990, a medical kit that contains a number of press clippings, images and ephemera – notably Goya's painting *The Straw Manikin*, 1791–92, images of neo-Nazi groups, material related to a right-wing motivated murder and China's treatment of homosexuals – suggests Gonzalez-Torres was employing Goya's work to represent the politics of fascistic, homophobic and racist violence, perpetrated by the state or populist 'mob' alike. Dominating this room (and also shown at various sites within the city), **"Untitled" (It's Just a Matter of Time)**, 1992, again through text and typography reinforces the theme of the threat from the far right and the resurgence of populism. Time itself can also be seen as political through this work and **"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)**, 1987–90, which can also be seen as a representation of gay love, but gains additional meaning because, since Franco, the clocks in Spain have been aligned with those of Germany rather than its geographically-defined time zone.

The second room considers ideas of coupling, touching, doubling, sameness and equilibrium. It demonstrates Gonzalez-Torres' exemplary importance in providing a subtle and often intentionally cryptic language of queerness but also images of the broader idea of equality, and shows how he recast the vocabulary of Minimalism and Conceptual art as vehicles for affective content, one of his most important contributions to the canon. This, however, is also one of his most political gestures, given that he acknowledged that this approach would enable him to speak about homosexuality, specifically to address homosexual desire, love and vulnerability, while eluding far right conservatives and their efforts to censor such content. At the same time, the open character of his language makes it available or accessible to whoever might view the work, open to the specificity of individual identity, while at the same time offering an image of equivalence, community and the commons. Through the dialogue between mutability and eternity in the work, this room also foregrounds forms of affective or romantic conceptualism and draws on feminism's political interpretation of the personal. On the windows opposite the entrance to this room, **"Untitled" (Loverboy)**, 1989, bathes the corridor and entrance in a soft blue light; this work will also be shown for a limited time as an intervention in the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion. In Gonzalez-Torres' work, the colour blue has often stood for love or beauty, as well as for fear. **"Untitled" (Double Portrait)**, 1991, with its double-ring design, is an abstract yet potent rendition of the theme of the couple. These rings could be seen as matching wedding bands, referencing the use of both the circle and the figure 8 as symbols of eternity or enduring love. This motif, or that of two identical circular objects (such as mirrors, clocks, metal rings and light bulbs), occurs frequently in Gonzalez-Torres' work as a sign of 'perfect lovers'. In its use of exact symmetry, it also alludes to equivalence and to homosexual love. The paired drawings **"Untitled" (Bloodworks)**, 1989, embody both a clear reference to the AIDS crisis and physical or bodily fragility, and a further recasting of the aesthetics of Minimalism, here through a hand-drawn line that transforms a minimal grid into a reflection on health, life and death. Meanwhile **"Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice)**, 1991, two full-length mirrors placed side by side, encapsulates Gonzalez-Torres' use of the anthropomorphic in relation to everyday objects. It engages with poetry through the theme of love and loss. The story of Orpheus, one of fateful love that highlights the gaze, has come to us through Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, when, after losing Euridice, Orpheus sings of the love of boys: Jupiter and Ganymede, Apollo and Hyacinthus. The photograph **"Untitled" (Alice B. Toklas' and Gertrude Stein's Grave, Paris)**, 1992, is a further example of the theme of couples and mutability, here manifested through the memorial and the dual presence and absence of the body. It also reinforces Gonzalez-Torres' engagement with queer aesthetics in poetry and writing, and suggests the theme of exile.

The third room is organised around some of Gonzalez-Torres' most existentially-oriented works, which nonetheless have an underlying political content and powerful contemporary resonance. It engages with themes of travel, emigration, exile, tourism and escape/freedom, and will foreground imagery of water, sky and beach, which function as expansive poetic metaphors within Gonzalez-Torres' work. In Spain, historically, through the era of dictatorship, travel and tourism were co-opted as part of the political narrative and the constructed identity of the state, while today they have become an economy impacting on the very existence of communities and the quality of lives lived in cities such as Barcelona. Moreover, in Gonzalez-Torres' work the theme of travel encapsulates what Nancy Spector calls a 'nomadism of the mind', but also the theme of dispersal, of people but also the dispersal of physical components of the work and their 'viral' aspect. Here the works are linked through their tonal range of white, blue and grey, and their relative lack of image content or focusing on overall pattern, enabling the visitor a space to reflect. Dominating this room, the double-wall photomural **"Untitled"**, 1993, featuring solitary birds against a vast sky, and the beaded curtain **"Untitled" (Water)**, 1995, the only division within the space through which the visitor is invited to pass, speak to a limitlessness of space and landscape, and a freedom of mind, suggesting a sense of meditation and liberation. Nevertheless, the mirror-work **"Untitled" (Fear)**, 1991, **"Untitled" (Blue Placebo)**, 1991, another viral work that connects the politics of AIDS with our current Covid-19 crisis, and **"Untitled" (Last Light)**, 1993, whilst maintaining a contemplative poetic ambiguity, nevertheless embody the confrontation with mortality and a reflection on existence itself. Minimal abstraction is addressed through a number of these works including **"Untitled" (Silver Beach)**, 1990, that can be read in the light of a personal history rooted in the Caribbean, and the artist's awareness of the beach as a symbol of both utopianism and exploitation, the politics surrounding tourism and exoticism, and histories of colonialism, migration and exile. Likewise, it can be seen from the perspective of Barcelona and the Mediterranean in the twenty-first century, the politics of human movement through refugees, migrations and trafficking. It evokes the problems of Barcelona's tourism industry, before Covid-19 frequently described as generating a plague or invasion, as well as the history through which the Franco regime tolerated a certain licence in Spain's resorts in order to generate a tourist economy.

The final room examines the ideas of patriotism, militarism, machismo and homoerotic desire, and how the nationhood of a people is also rooted in its monuments. While Spector has commented that 'monuments are historical records made manifest. Most often fixed entities, monolithic and static in theme, they denote for culture what its history and values are supposed to be', we are living through times where such monuments and the culture they represent are being vigorously contested. Gonzalez-Torres' complex engagement with the form and meaning of monuments is thus also addressed in this room. **"Untitled" (Para Un Hombre En Uniforme)**, 1991, one of the few works to which Gonzalez-Torres gave a title in Spanish, suggests homoerotic attraction towards men in uniform, perhaps specifically within the content of the military, a focus of discrimination through the ban on openly gay, lesbian or bisexual people serving, and in terms of the US military from 1994 to 2011 dominated by the policy of DADT (don't ask, don't tell), the act of non-disclosure or required suppression. In both his native Cuba and in Spain, as well as across Latin America, the subtitle suggests dictatorship. It evokes complex and deeply contradictory emotions from the fear inspired by authoritarianism and persecution, to the sometimes simultaneous presence of admiration for a strong and powerful leader, especially among the right. While in the United States this title, along with the use of red, white and blue candies, might summon thoughts of patriotic service, the fact that it is in Spanish leads to a questioning of the precise intention in the work and the specificity of its audience. Similarly, the eponymous man may not be military but wearing another kind of uniform, a judge's gown, a nurse's scrubs, a policeman's uniform or a businessman's suit. In **"Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform)**, 1991, the dancer appears unannounced and dances for some minutes to the music that only they can hear on their personal music device. The work plays on the homoerotic, emphasised through the muscular body of the dancer, wearing silver trunks, and the gaze of the spectator, unsettled by the voyeuristic situation that is heightened by the absence of ambient music, focusing attention on the dancer's movements. The platform, encircled by a row of light bulbs, recalls both early Minimalist sculpture and a kitsch, cabaret stage, is also another dialogue with the form of the monument through the stage/plinth, where the dancer stands in for the figurative statue yet replaces the inert establishment figure with a lithe and erotic living body. The work is alternated during the exhibition with **"Untitled" (Join)**, 1990, made in collaboration with artist Michael Jenkins, similarly examining homoerotic imagery. Meanwhile, **"Untitled" (God Bless Our Country and Now Back to War)**, 1989, emphasises the way that patriotism and militarism can be manipulated to become a way to distract from more acute social problems, such as the AIDS crisis.

Taking the form of adaptable installations that invite the curator or owner to place them in different locations and configuration, Gonzalez-Torres' light strings are a kind of anti-monument. **"Untitled" (America)**, 1994, one of his most ambitious works of this type, composed of twelve light strings (located on the façade of MACBA and in the Rambla del Raval), was conceived as an outdoor work, a fact that emphasises how with it the artist aimed to redefine the monument, perhaps along the lines of a communal gathering or street fiesta. The title contains within it the conflicting connotations of the name 'America' that reads differently to Anglo and Latino audiences. While to the former, especially within the USA, it speaks to a sense of seemingly straightforward patriotism, from Gonzalez-Torres' own position as a Cuban-born naturalised American citizen it signifies in one sense a place of aspiration, and as such could be associated with the so-called 'American Dream'; from the Latin-American perspective it is also the name that has been co-opted to mean the United States, yet in fact encompasses many nations throughout the continent, and it also therefore talks of the exclusions of national identity and patriotism. Using the word America highlights the entirety of the Americas, without erasure, and emphasises Gonzalez-Torres' careful usage of language in his works.

"Untitled" (Portrait of Andrea Rosen), 1992, occupying the corridor, reinforces and expands the ideas examined within the rooms. Gonzalez-Torres' portrait wall-paintings can be adapted, with additions and subtractions. When the owner lends the work, they can choose whether to lend the right to make such decisions. Here the work is presented with an entirely new text that responds with a series of dates suggested by this location and moment in time, and reflects the histories of representation, race and colonialism. Meanwhile, in the context of this exhibition, **"Untitled" (Passport #II)**, 1993, suggests the politics of immigration and documentation, the symbol of basic freedom, belonging and a humanity that is often denied to immigrants and refugees.

Exhibition organised and produced by MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.

Curated by

Tanya Barson
(Chief Curator, MACBA).

We would like to express our profound thanks to the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation for their integral support at all stages of the exhibition.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres is represented by Andrea Rosen Gallery and David Zwirner.

MACBA App

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Explore detailed information about the exhibitions and activities, as well as videos, curiosities and all the practical information regarding access to the Museum.

Visits

*Felix Gonzalez-Torres:
The Politics of Relation*

Sundays, 12 pm

By art historian Loli Acebal and artist Antonio Gagliano.

Guided tours in Spanish or Catalan. Consult specific programmes at **macba.cat**.

Included in the entrance ticket price. Saturday afternoons, free thanks to UNIQLO.

Lecture series

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Performance of the Political

Wed. 26/5 Tanya Barson, curator of the exhibition.

Wed. 2/6 Joshua Chambers-Letson, researcher.

Wed. 9/6 Cabello/Carceller, artists.

Wed. 16/6 Pablo Martínez, Head of Programmes, MACBA.

INFO 7 pm. Meier Auditorium. Free. With advance registration at **macba.cat**.

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Tuesday closed

(except for public holidays)

Saturday, 10 am to 8 pm

Sunday and public holidays, 10 am to 3 pm

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