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Body, Love, and Loss: Analyzing Felix Gonzalez-Torres's Works About Ross Laycock through the Lens of Disability

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996) was a Cuban-born and American-based conceptual artist who worked largely with readymades[1] during the 1980s and '90s before his death in 1996 from AIDs complications. Much of his work related to his partner, Ross Laycock while others related to larger social and political challenges Gonzalez-Torres encountered as a man of intersecting identities. As an immigrant and gay man living in America in the 1980s, Gonzalez-Torres used accessible art[2] and audience inclusion to raise awareness and challenge the failings of the American political system, including the lack of response to the AIDS epidemic. Larger themes throughout Gonzalez-Torres's career include portrayals of the body [or bodies], queer love and relationships, death and loss, and temporality. In this essay, I recontextualize Gonzalez-Torres's works about his partner Ross Laycock, specifically looking at *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* from 1981-90 and *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* from 1991, through a critical disability studies lens using the social and political context of the 1980s and 90s and contemporary disability conversations in order to underscore the importance of interdisciplinary analysis for a deeper understanding of his portrayal of body, love, and loss. For the purposes of this essay, the two works being analyzed will be referred to as their parenthetical titles, though it

[1] Readymade in art refers to the use of store-bought or premade objects within a work and was made popular by the conceptual artist Marcel DuChamp.
[2] Accessible art in this context refers to Gonzalez-Torres's use of endlessly replicable materials such as the paper print out in his *Stacks* series and candies used in many of his installations that the audience was encouraged to take with them and interact with.

is important to acknowledge Gonzalez-Torres's choice to leave his works untitled, which encourages personal interpretation from the viewer, furthering the intimacy of his work.

Perfect Lovers (fig. 1) was created between 1981-1990. It was a readymade installation of two identical wall clocks with a white face and black Arabic numerals from one to twelve, hour and minute hand, and ticks around the edge with a red seconds hand. It is instructed that they are hung level on the wall of the gallery with edges touching, and an optional part of the exhibition instructions include painting the wall the clocks are being hung upon a light shade of blue (Wadsworth, "Perfect Lovers"). The identicality of the clocks and their intimate positioning allude heavily to the presence of a same-sex relationship in the work. This point is driven further by the optional blue background, a color culturally associated with boys. Gonzalez-Torres works with the idea of subversion and messages hidden in plain sight, a common survival tactic in the queer community at the time and even today. He claimed, "some homophobic senator is going to have a very hard time trying to explain to his constituency that [Gonzalez-Torres's] work is homoerotic or pornographic" (Gonzalez-Torres qtd. Graf, "Haunting Works") as opposed to other artists using "HIV positive blood" (Graf 2021) within their work. Through the use of culturally charged symbols rather than explicit imagery, Gonzalez-Torres is able to avoid censorship which ultimately lends itself to his larger goal as an artist of accessibility. *Perfect Lovers*, according to Gonzalez-Torres, represents the time he and Ross Laycock had left together. Laycock was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988 (Visual Aids "An Archive of Love and Loss"), during the creation of this installation, and the image of a clock already had a history between the two lovers. In a letter written to Laycock, Gonzalez-Torres sketches a simple rendering of the installation with the following words types below:

> Don't be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous to us. We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain place. We are a product of the time, therefore we give back credit where it is due: time.
>
> We are synchronized, now and forever.
>
> I love you. (Gonzalez-Torres qtd. in Public Delivery, "What does it mean?")

This relationship between time and the body-mind[3] is reminiscent of a concept within disability studies referred to as "crip time." In Ellen Samuels piece "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time" published in Disability Studies Quarterly, she grappled with the concept of crip time and how it had been applied to her life, for better and worse, as a woman living with chronic illness. Samuels quotes Alison Kafer to define crip time as the concept that "'rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds'" but what stuck most with me in the writing was Samuels second way of viewing crip time: "*Crip time is grief time*" (Samuels, emphasis original). Samuels recounts the differing sension of time when in mourning of others and one's own past self. She also borrows Dana Luciano's definition of grief time to draw further connections between the two. Luciano writes in *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth Century America* that "grief was aligned with a sensibility that sought to provide time with a 'human' dimension, one that would be collective rather than productive, repetitive rather than linear, reflective rather than forward-moving" (Luciano). Samuels asserts that the nonlinearity connects the two concepts of time, and that the longing and remembrance of the past can be tied to the mourning of a past state of being. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Perfect Lovers* was meant to be remade and reinstalled again

[3] Body-Mind is a disability studies term that refers to the inseparable mind and body of an individual rather than discussing one without the other.

and again in different galleries and with different clocks and batteries to emphasize how he and Ross Laycock may have fallen out of sync near the end, but that their love will always be aligned again. Gonzalez-Torres follows this cyclical process in both his stacks series and candy series as well. Not only does this practice allow for a larger and more general audience, the cyclical nature paired with his allusion to body disrupts traditional ideas of temporality and instead aligns more with rebirth and biorhythm. By embracing and elongating this concept of time left with Laycock, Gonzalez-Torres's *Perfect Lovers* speaks to the idea of crip time even before the term was brought into the conversation.

Portrait of Ross in L.A. (fig. 2) from 1991, the same year as Laycock's death, is one of Gonzalez-Torres's candy pile installations, and arguably his most well-known work. *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* is a pile of colorfully wrapped, manufactured candies (Laycock's favorites) that are piled into the corner of a gallery space. At the time of installation, the weight of the pile is 175 pounds, what Ross Laycock weighed at the time of his HIV diagnosis, and the participants are encouraged to take candy from the pile and eat it. Throughout the exhibition, the weight of the pile dwindles, just as Laycock's body weight plummeted through the procession of HIV to AIDs. Then, when the curator feels it is appropriate, the pile is restored to its original weight and the cycle of Ross starts again. The verticality of *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* compared to his other works such as *Untitled (Placebo)* made in the same year which lay flat on the floor furthers the implication of a singular body to the audience, as if we are watching his partner curled into the corner.

The use of candy is not for nothing. In "Spit or Swallow? Orality in the Art of Felix Gonzalez‑Torres" Theo Gordon, a queer and HIV/AIDs art historian, asserts that Gonzalez-Torres's use of candy for his works is strongly suggestive of sexual pleasure and

simultaneously violence to the body. Gordon describes the pleasure of sucking on hard candy that is symbolizing someone's body as having both interwoven double meanings with gay sex while the same mouth receiving (and hypothetically giving) this pleasure is slowly destroying the "body" in the process. Although the piece is analysing different candy pile works by Gonzalez-Torres, the same line of thought can be applied to *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* with additional layers to be unfolded. Gordons interpretation furthers Gonzalez-Torres's candy installation to his sexual identity while also subversively calling out the assumptions that come with his identity at the time.

AIDs and disability have a long history together studied in both the medical field and with critical disability studies (usually integrating queer theory). The ways in which the AIDs epidemic has been and continues to be researched can fall both into the social and medical model of disability. Medical journals document the effects on the body as HIV progresses into AIDs without treatment, and even the psychological aftermath of the epidemic while disability scholars break down the social ostracization and oppression gay men faced during the epidemic in America during the 1980s and 90s. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990 under President George H.W. Bush recognized people with HIV/AIDs as people with disabilities and therefore on paper protected them from discrimination (though Social Security did agree with this categorization).

Gonzalez-Torres used these nuanced ideas of virality to engage with the fearstruck population during his time of work. In Josh Takano Chambers-Letson's piece "Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," he addresses this thread throughout Gonzalez-Torres's work and his relationship with power saying:

> Understanding his body of work as alive and interactive, Gonzalez-Torres structured his pieces as carriers or hosts infected with the artist's viruses. These viruses might be otherwise understood as his ideological critique of dominant structures of power, posed to the spectator as he or she engaged with the piece.Through the encounters with a specific piece, then, a spectator also came into contact with the artist's virus, potentially contracting the virus by engaging with the work and also becoming a carrier of the infection, spreading the virus through the body politic as he or she continued to engage with the political questions posed by Gonzalez-Torres's art. (Chambers-Letson, 560)

The candies then take on another meaning as the viewer is interacting with *Portrait of Ross in L.A.*, they are both acting as the virus ravaging Laycock's body and the victim of its spread. This further deepens Gonzalez-Torres's work as interactive with the body on several layers. For this reason, scholars like Gordon and Chambers-Letson push for further contextualization of Gonzalez-Torres's work beyond the common assertion that the minimalist and seemingly unspecified meanings and titles are solely up to the viewer. Within the rest of Chamber-Letson's piece he also draws the connection between virus/disease and homosexuality and anti-immigration rhetoric. We can broaden this assertion to include disability more generally.

Historically, homosexuality has been pathologized, criminalized, and there have been countless attempts to cure it (most notably through conversion camps sponsored by religious groups). The AIDs epidemic of the 1980s highlighted America's deeply embedded homophobia when thousands of citizens were suddenly dying, and still it was " not perceive[d] [...] as a public health crisis to be countered with swift state intervention" (Chambers-Letson 564). It wasn't until Ryan White, a young, white boy from Indianna, received HIV positive blood during a transfusion for his hemophilia which caused him to contract AIDs. Ryan White was barred from going back

to school, and after outrage broke out among his community, he soon found himself as the poster child for the fight against HIV/AIDs[4]. He exemplified that the epidemic could also affect non-sexual deviants or drug addicts. This boy made the disease more palatable to the general public in a way that was not possible for the queer population at the time.

Immigration has been villainized as a danger to American genetics as portrayed as the infiltration of disease-ridden criminals onto the sanctity of American soil. "Beyond the targeting of disabled people, the concept of disability was instrumental in crafting the image of the undesirable immigrant" (Baynton 26) by screening immigrants at Ellis Island for physical deformities or undesirable attributes as a determining factor for their status.

As an artist who connects deeply with these aspects of his identity, Gonzalez-Torres is purposely appropriating this convention of oppression and flipping it on its head by inviting the audience to participate in this viral role. This is true for all of his candy pile works, but what is unique about *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* is that Gonzalez-Torres is acknowledging the powers at play that allowed his lover, and thousands of others, to pass without recognition while simultaneously celebrating the pleasure of enjoying Laycock and his represented body. Although his body was changing, and hurting, the use of candy in place of Laycock's own body celebrates their sexual pleasure in the face of shame and hate perpetuated by the social and political climate. Gonzalez-Torres also creates a memorial and a place of rebirth for Laycock that allows the public to acknowledge his life while still being held at a distance by ambiguity that allows the mourning to remain private.

This recontextualization comes with beneficial side effects such as being able to claim such famous pieces in disability studies and break disability studies away from its history of

[4] These "fights" also reinforced ideas of pity and cure perpetuated by the charity model of disability that ultimately hurt and infantilized the public image of people with disabilities despite the attempts to help the community.

textual analysis. Many who are not within the disability studies sphere are familiar with *Portrait of Ross in L.A.*, so by encouraging a deeper reading of this piece, a broader audience is made familiar with concepts from disability theory.

This project calls for the collaboration of scholarship from art history and crip theory[5] in order to fully understand the layers that lay beneath Gonzalez-Torres's work about his partner. When looking at his work and the social climate in which he was working, disability advocacy had just started to take off in the late 70s with the 504 and critical thinking on disability became a field in the early 80s. While already grappling with the intersections of being an immigrant, Latino, gay man, Gonzalez-Torres did not recognize himself as disabled after his HIV diagnosis. Although Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock never identified themselves as having a disability (nor do many affected with AIDs even today), the Felix Gonzalez-Torres foundation recognizes the importance of his work for the disabled community and has showcased his pieces in exhibitions highlighting disability and medicine representation in art (FGT Foundation, "For Dear Life"). Gonzalez-Torres was using his art to process and grieve for his lover's life and body while advocating for justice in subversively brilliant ways that avoided censorship but underscored underrepresented communities.

[5] Crip theory is a theoretical framework that combines disability theory and queer theory

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Figures

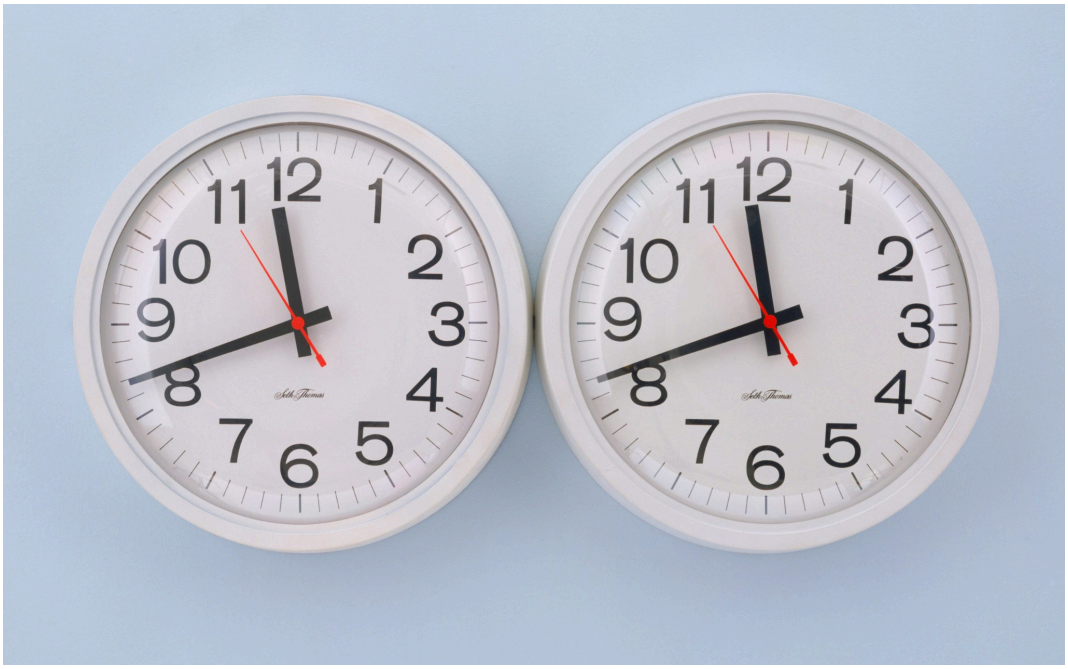

Figure 1: Felix Gonzelez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987-90

Figure 2: Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991