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Cover image:

‘Banality is sometimes striking’: on Felix Gonzalez-Torres

by William J. Simmons • 04.04.2025

This is an edited excerpt from ‘Love and Degradation: Excessive Desires in Queer-Feminist Art’ by William J. Simmons, published in December 2024 by Penn State University Press.

i.

In a 1994 essay, the British artist and critic Terry Atkinson calls Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work ‘personally rich and formally bleak’.¹ I want to take that observation to heart in order to shield someone else, someone I might love, from it. The first time I went to New York City (wide-eyed and newly gay, of course) I grabbed two candies from a Gonzalez-Torres sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. My smugness at knowing I was allowed to do so was intended to conceal my earnest excitement, my unabashedly sentimental feelings at having found communion with a queer forefather, who, unlike the characters of *RENT*, was real. These candies were and remain silver and red; I have never opened them. Over the last nine years I have brought them with me, gingerly, carefully, to three dorm rooms and five apartments in New York and Los Angeles after college. I am always embarrassed by the general tendency among queer scholars and writers to reduce Gonzalez-Torres’s work to metaphor, so I balk at the urge to force these candies to speak for me and to illustrate, in a literal way, my disjointed and disappointing personal narrative of spatial and interpersonal failure.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* at Serpentine Gallery, London, 2000, showing “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. 1991. Candies in silver wrappers, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight 1,000–1,200 lb. (© Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres; courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; photograph Stephen White).

For Christmas that year, my brother-in-law gave me the Gonzalez-Torres monograph I had asked for, and the following year he called me a faggot and I threw the book away.

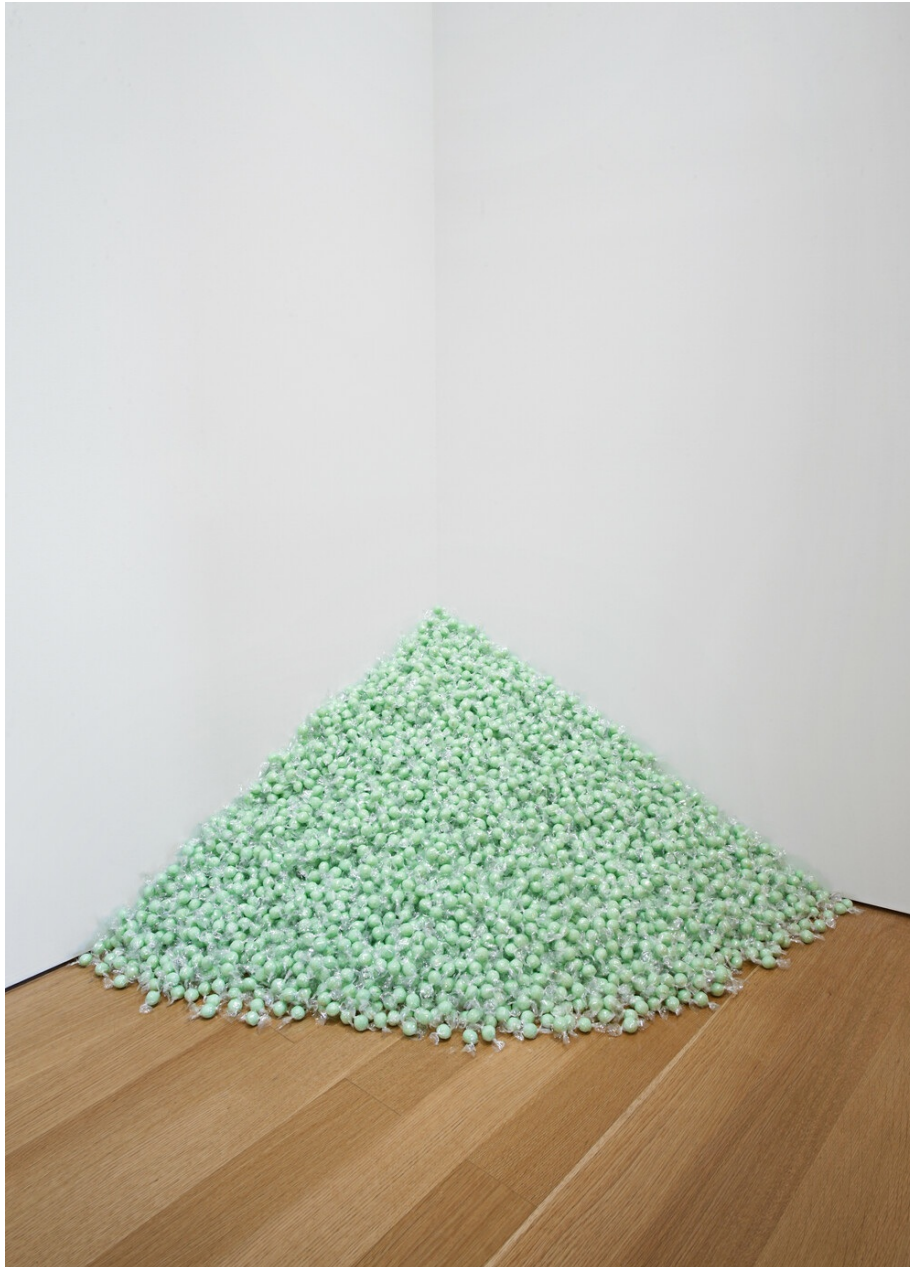


Fig. 2 Installation view of *Floating a Boulder: Works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Jim Hodges* at FLAG Art Foundation, New York, 2009–10, showing “*Untitled*” (*Rossmore II*), by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. 1991. Green candies in clear wrappers, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight 75 lb. (© Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres; courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; photograph Genevieve Hanson).

I picked up the candies recently and one of them stuck to the bookshelf. The silver one has a seam of crusted, brown discharge. It must have gotten wet and leaked at some point. Thus, aware that they will not last forever, what else could I do but offer an interpretation? I immediately jump to stickiness, infection, infiltrating the canon or the museum, AIDS and abjection. In some instances, these lines of thinking would suffice. We could think of Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Marilyn Minter and other feminist artists for whom fluids represent a site of simultaneous liberation and coercion. In this way, we might connect at last

strands of queer and feminist art histories that have remained largely separate, something I have always tried to do in my scholarly work. Yet Gonzalez-Torres took on the labour of academic discourse as forcefully as he did the labour of the diary, of memory and joy and regret. The latter qualities, it seems to me, ought to be treated as seriously as a dissertation. Of course, interpretation and critique are always valuable, but I think that weeping candies might be as deconstructive as they are affirmative, sincere, sexy and loving. They are both stoic and melodramatic. There is something about us queers that always requires a backward glance (at a boy, at a bully, at history) and nostalgia, so maybe this is all just true to our nature, if we might entertain an essentialism. The candies now sit in a ceramic vessel that says 'EAT ASS', in case of any further drippage, in case of tear-jerking films and fluid histories and histories of fluids.

In a 1993 interview with Tim Rollins, Gonzalez-Torres responds to a question about *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, a 1959 film by Alain Resnais with a screenplay by Marguerite Duras.² Gonzalez-Torres explores the emotional capacity of repetition, which is the root of cliché and romance and melodrama: 'I used to go to the movies with Ross mostly. Nowadays it's so much easier to rent a video; I got used to being able to replay the important parts'.³ We might recall Laura U. Marks's formulation of haptic visuality here, in which now-obsolete filmic media imply a bodily relationship with film exactly because of their markers of obsolescence (blurriness, lines, scratches).⁴ With a VHS tape, there is the glorious ability to perennially review the same melodramatic death and the same cock, even within the unpredictability of the buzzing and crackling of video. And so we might say that Gonzalez-Torres craves to relive that visual/bodily experience again and again exactly in and because of its sameness and amorous repetition. Love, like a VHS tape, can become obsolete, and street corners and restaurants that once told vast stories seem both tragically commonplace and unendingly replete with meaning.



Fig. 3 Detail of “Untitled” (*Rossmore II*), by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. 1991. Green candies in clear wrappers, endless supply. (© Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres; courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; photograph Genevieve Hanson).

The year that I took the candies, I went on my first ever date with a boy. He looked like Rock Hudson, but with more delicate features and even larger arms. We were at the Cheesecake Factory in Boston’s Prudential Center. We met on OkCupid, which no one uses anymore, and that fact of erotic pastness is clear to me and it is painful. I don’t remember what we talked about, but at a certain point, I noticed that he was looking over my shoulder as I talked. I asked him why, and he replied that he used to figure skate. Figure skating was on TV, and he just wanted to keep an eye on it. I turned around and there was indeed figure skating on the Cheesecake Factory TV, which, in retrospect, seems impossible and so strange, since I have never since seen a Cheesecake Factory that even has a TV. We talked about something and he watched TV and I picked up the bill, which was probably close to \$100. It felt enormous and irresponsible and necessary and impossible to pay back for a college student. It felt like an indictment of my gayness. We stood out in the street in front of the Pru and I remember we did not kiss and I walked down into the T station. In retrospect, it was a tragic not-kissing, but at the time I was convinced that it was the kind of not-kissing that meant that kissing would come soon, when it was right – a symptom of an eroticism of deferral that would characterise most of my twenties. I wonder if Gonzalez-Torres ever felt that way too, and I wonder if I love him like I did the figure skater.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form* at Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, 2011, showing “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. 1991. Candies in silver wrappers, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight 1,000–1,200 lb. (© Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres; courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation; photograph Axel Schneider).

Rollins goes on to suggest of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, ‘That’s a great movie about love’. Gonzalez-Torres replies, ‘No, it’s about meaning and how meaning is dependent on the context’ and immediately transitions into a discussion of Brecht. However, not much later in the interview, Gonzalez-Torres expands upon his previous statement: ‘Earlier I mentioned *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*; it took me a long time to understand the opening sequence. The female character says, ‘You are good for me because you destroy me’, I finally understand what that means. You can be destroyed because of love and as a result of fear. Love is very particular because it gives a reason to live but it’s also a great reason to be afraid, to be terrified of losing that love’.⁵ This exchange encapsulates that moment between finding a lover and theorising him or narrating him, before and after the body becomes discourse or cum congeals in the shower. These liminalities recall Julia Kristeva’s suggestion that love is both real in and of itself, and a nexus of metaphors exterior to it: ‘Finally, to speak of love may be, perhaps, a simple condensation of speech that merely arouses, in the one spoken to, metaphorical capabilities – a whole imaginary, uncontrollable, undecidable flood, of which the loved one alone unknowingly possesses the key [...] What does he understand me to be saying?’.⁶ Love is simultaneously tragic and glamorous and grand and as simple as words strung together into a stuttering stream or a mixed metaphor. Love becomes a shorthand, a text to be repeated, like a scene in a film or an apotheosised cliché – no longer a derided term, but a cherished one. Love and cliché and melodrama lend words to an innumerable vast matrix of emotions that seem at once so utterly commonplace

and simultaneously beyond articulation, so near to us and so removed – like lovers who were once intertwined but make coffee and leave separately in the morning, or an interview that is at once not about love and only, always about it.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form* at Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2010, showing “*Untitled*” (*Rossmore II*), by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. 1991. Green candies in clear wrappers, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight 75 lb. (© Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres; courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation).

‘And at this point the film comes back to their own story’, according to Duras. Indeed!



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Every Week There is Something Different* at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1991, showing “*Untitled*” (*Rossmore II*), by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. 1991. Green candies in clear wrappers, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight 75 lb. (© Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres: courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation).

‘A banal tale, one that happens thousands of times every day’.

‘Their embrace – so banal, so commonplace – takes place in the one city of the world where it is hardest to imagine it: Hiroshima’.⁷

And then Gonzalez-Torres: ‘We conquered fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain place’.⁸

And then myself: you know, speaking of place, I think that I stayed in New York for as long as I did because of Gonzalez-Torres, or at least what he came to represent for me. Then I ask myself, what if, now that part of my life is over, now that all those banal embraces have since dissolved, now that I've forgotten the emotions attached to certain street corners and certain ways of writing: could I, should I return the candies to the pile? I think that Gonzalez-Torres's conceptual rules would allow me to do so. Could I come back to get them some day, and would I be able to identify them by their texture, or might someone else take them and interpolate them into their own story? Will these new owners notice the traumas, the leaks? If I keep them, how much longer will it be until they unravel and need to be thrown away? Will either exegesis or ekphrasis be enough to process that loss? I think neither and both. My candies are no different from anybody else's, although it may be the case that I will always need them. They are bodies and memories and memories of bodies. They are the moment that I step foot in Washington Square Park again, and I still feel hands on long-gone cocks, and I still hear the piano player, whose upturned hat is filled with coins as shiny as cellophane.

ii.

Gretchen: Um, where do I sit?

Karen Pomeroy: Sit next to the boy you think is the cutest.

[the class gasps]

Karen Pomeroy: Quiet! Let her choose.⁹

We speak so often of art being some kind of transcendent, collective experience or a way of communing across lines of difference, when, in truth, art can be an equally solitary venture as it is a relational one. I do not mean in the sense of the heroic myth of the cloistered artist whose genius only comes about when he is alone, unperturbed by dilettantish women or the hysterical urges of the aesthete. I only mean that, at times, we/I might ask too much of Gonzalez-Torres. We might ask him to signify universally when he may want to do so at one moment and not at another. And this, after all, is what we do to our queer idols, for we must believe with every melodramatic synapse within us that they know *exactly* how we feel, how a chest was supposed to taste, how a hand was held, how a sunset was meant to be looked at together or how, once, we did look at it together, how a concept was meant to become form, how history can become connectivity, how we once lived close to Rossmore Ave with someone we loved. Those regrets and optimisms can be both pleasurable and burdensome for those who feel them and for those who we pray will feel them for us.

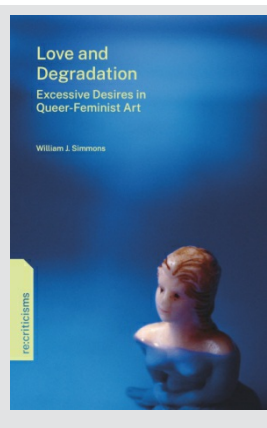
Where can we find an art of solitude that is not the clichéd and shuttered studio, but rather a form of being together in solitude? The pessimist might label solitude as loneliness and await the

pleasure of a touch or a crowd, and the optimist might insist that aloneness is a form of radical self-care or even detachment from an irreversibly evil and hostile world. Gonzalez-Torres's work, especially in this moment of global melancholia, meanders around and dances with and among relational forms both solitary and communal, between Snoopy and an Elf and their shared Snoopy-Elf love. This is the core of queer optimism in the face of an obliterated future.

The very first image in *A Selection of Snapshots Taken by Felix Gonzalez-Torres* is the one that formed Roland Barthes's punctum for me. Sometimes (in fact, by definition) the emotional heft of the punctum lives at the oft-derided surface or orifice of the image and not in some depths that require excavation. The photograph looks like a polaroid of Minnie Mouse and Porky Pig, taken from behind, as if, in a Laurie Simmons fashion, they are life-sized actors about to take a glamorous and perhaps poignant stroll on the beach, even as they and we know all the while that they are porcelain or plastic. They are both, in their own ways, beautiful sluts (two bottoms, maybe) plucked from one context into another into another, like fortune cookies that make their way from a factory in Fantasia to a refrigerator (cellar) door, offering in their journey some truth that we have been seeking. And like fortune cookies, Minnie and Porky tell the future, not like oracles but rather like beloved and reviled women in Palm Springs with frosted hair piled high and thighs as thick as Porky's that we have no choice but to envy.

I told my ex-partner, my future (now my past), that I fell in love with him because he likes cute things, and he likes comparing the archetypal 'us' to cute things: memes of cuddling animals of various species or days of golden landscapes that live beside each other in perpetuity. After having spent so long entrenched in the insufferable pretentiousness of academia, nothing could make me love him more. At the same time, I realised that in order for 'it' to be 'us', to find ourselves in Porky and Minnie or in Untitled works of art, there must also be an 'I' who longs for difference and to not replicate difference as selfhood/sameness. For there are no perfect lovers or perfect beads of meaning to be pulled forth from the spasming anus of history, no. No, there is no perfect syntax, itself a constellation of words-lovers; no, there is no cellar door on which to tape the phrase 'You have happiness and prosperity in your future'. *Donnie Darko* teaches us that a famous linguist once said that of all the phrases in the English language, of all the endless combinations of words in all of history, that 'cellar door' is the most beautiful.¹⁰ There is only a Maytag fridge with the prints of two pairs of hands that overlap on occasion and form a cloud.

About this book



Love and Degradation: Excessive Desires in Queer-Feminist Art

by William J. Simmons
Penn State University Press, University Park, 2024

Footnotes

- 1 T. Atkinson: 'Rites of passage', *Art & Design* 34 (January–February 1994), pp.12–19, at p.16. Thank you to everyone at the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, especially Andrea Rosen, Holly McHugh and Brittini Zotos, as well as Brian Sholis, who provided invaluable comments.
- 2 I am not the first to discuss Gonzalez-Torres alongside Duras. See also J.P. Ricco: *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes*, Chicago 2014, pp.123–24.
- 3 W.S. Bartman: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, New York 1993, p.5.
- 4 See L.U. Marks: *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Minneapolis 2002.
- 5 Felix Gonzales-Torres, quoted in *ibid.*, p.14. A film historian would indicate that the correct line from the film as it is spoken is 'You're destroying me. You're good for me', which is a dialectical rather than a causal statement. This modified translation could be a result of misremembering, the translation, or an error in transcribing the interview, but what is more interesting is that Gonzalez-Torres wants to indicate the *because* of suffering – a radically optimistic gesture that compels us to believe that lost love has been worth it. The definitive 1961 Grove Press edition of Duras's screenplay confirms this formulation: 'You destroy me. You're so good for me'. See M. Duras: *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, transl. R. Seaver, New York 1961, p.25.
- 6 J. Kristeva: *Tales of Love*, transl. L.S. Roudiez, New York 1987, p.3, ellipses in original.
- 7 Duras, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.9.
- 8 Quoted from *Letter from Felix Gonzalez-Torres to Ross Laycock* (1988), repr. in J. Ault, ed.: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen 2006, p.155.
- 9 *Donnie Darko*, dir. R. Kelly. 2001.
- 10 *Ibid.*

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