

*Untitled (Queer[ed] Affect & Spirituality)*  
Felix Gonzalez-Torres · Gordon Hall

*“In other words, this is erotics as something more (or less) than fucking or intimacy.”<sup>1</sup>*

Rami George · Spring 2012

I'm sure many have encountered the scene before I have. The body of Ross Laycock lies motionless in the corner of a white room. A child enters and is immediately drawn to the sedate form. A sense of uncertainty has been instilled in matters such as these: is it ok to approach and touch? To take, even? With given consent, the child rushes to the corner of the room and grabs a piece of the form, excitedly consuming his piece of candy. In this renewed spirit of action, the child takes on the role of supplying his guardian with a piece of her own. Watching this scene unfold before me, I cannot help but feel my emotions swell. My tear ducts have become full and heavy; I do not cry, but I become aware of the potential. Why do I feel I might cry in the presence of a child consuming a piece of candy? Generally I have a rather low tolerance for children, but here, in this space, with this scene played out before me, the candy is no longer candy and the child is no longer a child. The affect has been shifted, and I feel its effects.

The child having left the room, I stand alone in front of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*. The spill of candy at my feet is continually replenished by the museum staff to maintain an ideal weight of 175 pounds – the average weight of the artist's lover, Ross Laycock, before his gradual passing from AIDS-related complications. The spill becomes a stand-in, and memorial, for Ross. Gonzalez-Torres shares his lover's body and memory with us, the audience. The child eating the piece of candy is partaking of a piece of Ross, and participating in a continual memorialization and act of remembrance. The child – like every viewer who participates in this act – is also physically acting as the AIDS virus, helping to slowly remove and decimate pieces of the immobile body. We share in the artist's loss, comfort, and joy, while simultaneously acting as contributors to his (lover's) disappearance. The moment is both beautiful and painful, and I feel my body respond accordingly.

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“Our clocks and datebooks do more than keep us on time. Objects function to bring society within the self.”<sup>2</sup>

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There are narratives to how we interact with objects and spaces, whether they be the home, the museum, the clock, or the datebook. Our objects and spaces are also routinely sexed and gendered. These ascribed narratives often exist subconsciously, and in our society of standardized heterosexuality, they all too frequently exist within these limits. Even the terminology we use to describe – and inscribe – objects and spaces are gendered and narrativized in terms of heteronormativity. It is through a critical stance and positioning, including through the lenses of phenomenology and affect theory, that we can examine our personal and social interactions with the world around us. It is particularly through these theories of perception and experience – of our initial unconscious/preconscious reactions and receptions, of our feelings and engagements before we set language to them, and of our “conscious” reactions in the present – that we can work towards a more critical, conscious, and engaged position. And with this criticality, these objects and spaces can be (re)examined and (re)queered.<sup>3</sup>

It is by, and through, these processes and theories that I wish to explore the (queer) work of Gonzalez-Torres and contemporary artist Gordon Hall. I view both of these artists as shifting the objects and spaces they work with to that of a queer position – in a sense enacting a queer, or queered, affect. Furthermore, I believe it is specifically through this queer(ed) affect that both of these artists create work that achieves a unique quality of spirituality – again, possibly a distinctly queer one. What might a queer spirituality mean? What are its possibilities? Its potentials? Likewise, what might a queer affect mean? And what is the connection between this

queer(ed) affect and queer(ed) spirituality? Through the work of these two artists I hope to explore these questions, and if not answer them, at least pose more.

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I would like to first take a moment to define queer, at least in the contexts I will be using the word. I am intentionally referring to the term's multi-layered history and meanings. Queer as strange, as (homo)sexual (and by this I mean both "gay," as well as open to the possibility and uncensored discussion of any sexuality), as outsider looking in, as proposing alternate viewpoints to what has been described as "natural," and as merging what may have been deemed separate and oppositional (for instance ideas of public vs. private). Queer is not confined to homosexuality. Queer is inclusive, it is a positioning of differing views, it is a critique of normative culture, it can be a noun, adjective, and/or a verb. It is in these multiplicities that the term becomes so powerful; its slipperiness is a gift. I wish to invoke all of these factors and potentials when speaking of these (queer) artists and a possible queer spirituality.

I would also like to clarify my use of the term heteronormativity. What this term refers to is the oft unconscious, pervasive social and cultural conditions that establish (a narrowly defined) heterosexuality as the ubiquitous, privileged, and "natural" state. It is produced and propagated through institutions, language, and ascribed orientations towards the world. Due to our present climates that privilege heterosexuality as the standard, heteronormativity and normativity can be argued as possibly synonymous terms, or at least functions of one another – thus I prefer the syntax of (hetero)normativity. Heterosexuality is not synonymous with (hetero)normativity, and likewise people self identified as homosexual can well be – and quite often are – normative in action and thought. Queerness, and queer theory, is very much a critique of the

(hetero)normative; critique is used as a generative tool, allowing us to access hopes and work towards better futures.

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(Hetero)normativity exists not only in our public spaces, but also importantly within our so-called private spheres, such as the family home.<sup>4</sup> In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed writes of the compulsory heterosexuality that is present in most family homes. This of course extends to the pervasive ideological conception of what a “family home” should be: hetero, two-parent, married, financially stable, etc. Again, this normative conception is routinely propagated (often subconsciously) through such representations as media and marketing. Although there are undoubtedly differences between alternative family homes, socially and culturally we still hold this married (white) hetero family as the standard, ideal, and norm.

In many ways, we are expected to aspire toward the same ambitions as our parents: to follow in their footsteps, so to speak. This is conveyed in the home – and “home” – not only through bodies (our parents), but also, importantly, through objects. “The very requirement that the child follow a parental line puts some objects and not others in reach. Compulsory heterosexuality produces a ‘field of heterosexual objects,’ by the very requirement that the subject ‘give up’ the possibility of other love objects.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, through a saturation of affect, many of the objects we may grow up with in our family homes are imbued with narratives of (hetero)normativity, unbeknownst to us, with incentives for repeating this process: i.e., getting married, having children, fashioning a home, etc. And let us not forget the potential infection of objects through media. Even in the non-traditional home, objects may take shapes/affects

through association with various normative representations via the television screen. In these ways, innumerable objects in the family home can be read as heterosexed.

And then, covering the walls, are photographs. The wedding photograph. Underneath are the family pictures, some formal (taken by photographers) and others more casual. The photographs are objects on the wall. They turn the wall into an object, something to be apprehended; something other than the edge of the room. And yet the wall in its turn disappears as an edge insofar as we apprehend the objects on its surface. Everywhere I turn, even in the failure of memory, reminds me of how the family home puts objects on display that measure sociality in terms of the heterosexual gift.<sup>6</sup>

If the walls in the family home also become objects in which (and on which) narratives of compulsory heterosexuality are imbued, it becomes possible to acknowledge a potential hetero-objectification of other common household objects: dishware might signify family union (perhaps even a gift of institutional marriage), the parents' bed can be seen as site of conception and procreation, the clock read as signifier of (hetero)normative structure and sequence, and perhaps even food as measure of family bond and sustenance to ensure future generations. If we are constantly directed towards such heterosexed objects and spaces, through something as unconscious as the affect of objects within the home, it becomes apparent that from an early age we are further pushed uncritically toward (hetero)normativity. Beyond the family home, the heterosexing of objects is commonplace: in advertising, in the workplace, in news, and television. We are constantly surrounded by objects that imbue heterosexuality as the norm, as *sine qua non*. Of course, all this is not to say that these sites and objects, including the home, cannot be queered – or even accidentally queered (as children can and frequently do) – but it is to acknowledge their potentially unconscious and pervasive sexing and gendering, as well as to recognize that possible queer objects and spaces are (forcibly) relegated to the background, if at all perceived.<sup>7</sup>

*Body One: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "We Are Synchronized Now and Forever"*

"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 space. 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."<sup>8</sup>

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"This does not prevent some of our clocks, however, from having written on their faces a mournful *memento mori*. With this reminder and this warning, forgetfulness of one figure of time brings to mind the forgetfulness of the other figure."<sup>9</sup>

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Gonzalez-Torres works within a mode of expanded sculpture, frequently employing common objects – ones that can often be found in that “family home” – such as candy, paper, light bulbs, puzzles, sheets, mirrors, and clocks. What distinguishes his work is that rather than discarding all of these potentially heterosexed objects in search of ones that speak specifically of a queer existence/experience, he instead subtly shifts their affective position or potential. This tactic is well evidenced in works such as *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* from 1991, which consists of two identical, battery-powered clocks hung on a wall, preferably painted light blue. Initially the clocks are set to the same time, but slowly fall out of sync – one inevitably wearing down and stopping before the other. The clocks at first appear rather innocuous, being so commercially ubiquitous that they could almost *pass* for the museum's own, rather than a work of art. All objects are imbued with affect whether or not we initially realize, though. It stands to be argued

that these commercially prevalent clocks can also be read as heterosexual objects, hearkening to a (hetero)normative structure, sequence, and time.

Again, rather than dismissing objects such as these, Gonzalez-Torres very specifically repositions and queers them. The two clocks juxtaposed, forever touching, initially read as ambiguous or purposeless: it is this initial response that is the first layer of queering. Reading the subtitle of the piece, we understand we are to view these clocks as lovers in (and, gradually, out of) sync. Being of the same form, they become same-sex lovers. If we choose to read them as male lovers, the hands of the clocks can be read as phallic signifiers, at certain points engaging in something akin to anal intercourse. Even the shift of the wall color to that of a light blue is meant to recall specific memories of Gonzalez-Torres:

For me if a beautiful memory could have a color that color would be light blue. There's a lot of positive dialectic, you know in blues... I love blue skies. I love blue oceans. Ross and I would spend summers next to a blue body of water or under clear, Canadian blue skies.<sup>10</sup>

Through a shift in color – and, simultaneously, affect – even the wall of the institution (which might otherwise be read as (hetero)normatively sexed and gendered) has been queered. It is through these subtle repositionings that Gonzalez-Torres directs our attention to spaces and objects – specifically, queer ones – that are frequently kept hidden, or relegated to the background of thought. His technique is a subversive repositioning of affect. He turns this “field of heterosexual objects” into a field of equally queer objects and spaces. They live amongst each other; one has only to make the queer objects visible.

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I keep a candy piece in the breast pocket of one of my button-up shirts. I forget about it, and then I feel my pocket for the lump that is there, and remember. Every time I wear the shirt, I am walking with a portion of memory and body inscribed. He moves with me, and I with him.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Golden)*

*Body Two: Observing the Observants*

“But I cannot express the uneasiness caused in me by this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room I had at last filled with myself to the point of paying no more attention to the room than to that self.”<sup>11</sup>

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“I am not sure how it will be. But it will be different than this.”<sup>12</sup>

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Like Gonzalez-Torres, Hall works within a mode of (expanded) sculpture, and frequently employs common, “everyday” objects within their practice – including speakers, stereo equipment, mirrors, key chains, CDs, books, and clothing. In contrast to Gonzalez-Torres though, Hall routinely alters these objects, often through a meticulous application of white or black paint. Many of their sculptural works are also employed in performances, with live bodies interacting physically and directly with the spaces and objects created. Throughout their work, Hall very deliberately queers these sites, actions, objects, and materials, further expanding this (expanded) sculpture.

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In the middle of the gallery rests *The Observants*.<sup>13</sup> The work consists of a central configuration of four identical stereo speakers facing outward in each cardinal direction, set atop four pedestals housing stereo equipment. Below the pedestals, a layer of fabric runs from one stand to the next, forming an octagonal base on the floor connecting the four speakers. To the left of this central configuration rest four cream colored stools with fabric tops, also positioned at cardinal directions. Each of these objects is a white or a cream color, with the speakers and bases

meticulously covered with seemingly innumerable layers of white paint. Elsewhere in the room is a structure of hand-formed white bricks. In another corner are three carved wood objects variously painted and dipped in white paint. Strips of mirrors suspended from white ropes hang upon the white walls of the gallery. The objects unite in their simplicity, craftsmanship, austerity, and precision, the tones of white neither blinding nor clinical. The entire scene feels at once minimal and sacred. It is this body of work, with particular emphasis on the central speaker piece, that I wish to examine in terms of Hall's queer(ed) affect and spirituality.

As Hall writes of their work:

My objects imply a ritual. They are formal objects. They are functional objects. They are artifacts, they are tools, they are sculptures, they are ceremonial objects. They are exactly as they need to be, but they do not tell you why they need to be that way. Their specificity is a matter of faith. Faith in something, even if we do not understand what it is.

*They are extremely precise objects of ambiguous use.*

What are these things? What are they for?<sup>14</sup>

This central configuration of speakers, stools, and pedestals is a sculpture, as well as a site for performance, ritual, and use. Like much of Gonzalez-Torres' work, a multi-layered queering is again at play. Once more, the lack of functionality, the *ambiguity*, is the first aspect of queering. The four speakers facing outward, emitting only a slight warbled hum when not in use during performance, initially read as functionless, perhaps as a silent sound installation – a minimalist sculpture consisting of speakers turned on, but receiving no signal. Another level of queering is their meticulously altered state: every portion of the speakers and stereo equipment has been painstakingly coated in uncountable layers of white paint. This is particularly evinced in the stereo system, with its labels, knobs, and buttons literally white-washed over. The entire scene becomes e/strange/d. We again ask: what are they (for)?

When not in use, the objects that make up *The Observants* exist as sculptures, artifacts, and relics – the slight imprints and marks of bodies visible atop the stools and speakers. In use, they become part of a ritual involving (queer) bodies touching, chanting, resting, and creating formations in space. The four performers of the piece, myself one of them, enact an extended ritual. We enter the gallery space, sit for a moment atop our individual stools, and remove our shoes. We circle the speakers, hum to one another, gaze at one another, briefly meet to create various bodily formations in each corner of the room, and climb and settle onto our own speaker. When in use, the speakers – with a specific performer atop each – project a continuing chant of a single word repeated in song: “no” and/or “know” (the determination is precisely inexact). The word/s reverberate throughout the room from both the voices of the performers and the speakers, culminating in a chorus of over a hundred voices – the voice of each performer multiplied exponentially from their particular speaker – all chanting this simultaneous phrase of refusal, protest, exasperation, and knowledge. The chanting stops and we rest for a moment atop the speakers to gently touch one another, before descending from our stools. The ritual continues with a variety of gestures and movements performed by a participant in each corner of the room before each returns to the original site of their stool, slips their shoes back on, and exits the space.

The four performers are easily read as queer, as varied embodiments of gender. The ambiguities run amongst them as well as the objects. This “no/know” becomes a chant of alternative genders, sexualities, and narratives. The queer content is simultaneously implicit and explicit. Its silence – a literal silence when not in use, the visual silence of a sparse scene and precise ritual – can be deafening.

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Can we also describe speakers and stereo equipment as heterosexual objects? The connection may not be as readily apparent as it is with objects from the “family home” utilized by Gonzalez-Torres (although these speakers and equipment may well be objects in that [conceived] familial space). One might argue that the speakers are neutral objects, neither sexed nor gendered. In our society of pervasive (hetero)normativity, objects that appear neutral might be reexamined as unconsciously marked (hetero)normative. This prompts me to ask: Do queer objects already exist in our society? Or, due to social and political conditions, must we re-form objects as such? In Hall’s case, what is important is that that these objects have very specifically and consciously been queered; they *have* been re-formed.

*Body Three: Cruising the Gallery & (A Queer) Inhabitation of Space*

“Waiting. Interminable waiting in the midst of incessant coming.”<sup>15</sup>

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When I inhabited a heterosexual world... my relation to public space was in some ways at least quite easy. I would kiss and hold hands with a lover without thinking, without hesitation. I would not notice other forms of intimacy, even when on display... In a lesbian relationship I have had to reinhabit space... by seeing what before was in the background, *as bodies and things gathered in specific ways*. For me, this has felt like inhabiting a new body, as it puts some things “out of reach” that I didn’t even notice when they were in reach. In a way, my body now extends less easily into space.<sup>16</sup>

This queer inhabitation of space that Ahmed is working to articulate can be used to interpret *The Observants* performance. The bodies of the action/ritual extend and reinhabit space, a space (within society and the institution) that has often excluded these types of bodies. Forms of (queer) intimacy are publicly displayed through these four bodies: they touch, lean on, rest

with, collect and activate one another. They chant to one another, and gaze at one another. The gestures are not easily understood, but they are clear, precise, and intimate. Do these bodies move so slowly and precisely because they extend into space less easily than others? Do they rest and collect on one another as a means of support, as a proclamation of inhabitation? “The gesture interrupts the normative flow of time and movement. The image of the lover holding/enduring/supporting the other’s battered body is poignant...”<sup>17</sup> The bodies support one another out of necessity. It is a generative act.

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With this continued cry of “no” and “know” atop the speakers, these bodies simultaneously mourn and celebrate. The chant reverberates around the room. They mourn for loss, for pain, for their own histories, for genders oppressed and previously broken. “The optical images that represent lost lives and vanished histories engender a cry to the heavens, a hymn to the ancestors, a memorial to all that was destroyed in the histories of colonial subjugation and official forgetting. And let us remember that rituals, including rituals of mourning, are not final acts but beginnings.”<sup>18</sup> This ritual, this chant, is not the final act, but the beginning. The bodies leave their traces; voices linger and drift in the room. There is a queering of vision that persists long after the performance has finished. A queered affect (perhaps) left as a mark – an imprint – upon the viewer, upon the actor. This is the beginning; there is space to continue.

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I see a form of cruising occurring in Hall’s performance – the way the bodies move about the space, the way they interact with one another. Cruising for sex can also be a cruising for intimacy. It can be a search for a connection with the other, as well as a possible connection with the otherness of oneself.<sup>19</sup> It is these latter potentials I see at play in this piece. The figures begin

the performance by slowly circling the speaker formation, passing one another. They gaze directly at each other as they pass, eyes locked in sight – a gaze so direct you see pieces of yourself in the other, a connection across space. Each figure hums the same tune in unison, acting as code or signal, acknowledging one another’s interest, knowledge, or consent. As the bodies complete a set of rotations around the speakers, they pause for a moment, hands pressed with a partner. The pairs’ eyes meet as their bodies share this initial contact. They then rotate, meeting together with the other palm; once more the moment of contact is brief.

Separating, the bodies again rotate around the speakers, ultimately meeting in a corner of the room. All four gather: they rest, lean, and collect upon one another. Formations are created, and momentarily captured in stillness, the four invoking something akin to classical statuary. Cheeks resting on a shoulder blade, on the crook of a lower back, thumbs touching, hands reaching to the head of a partner, arms wrapped around one another, heads leaned together. Their bodies touching and grasped together, momentarily joined – a palpable intimacy.

What do I bring to the work in invoking cruising? Cruising as an alternate representation of sexuality and desire. An alternative to prescribed notions of sex. A visible enactment of desire (within the gallery). Can desire be divine? Can the cruising site be a spiritual site? Can the gallery? Can our interior bodies? What can we learn of our selves within the body of the other? And what is achieved through a public disclosure of our bodies? Of (queer) intimacy?

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My body reaches a certain state of ecstasy through the performance. It feels different, quivers. The continued chanting atop the speakers, with increasing vibrations of voices echoing underneath, enacts a physical shift: I feel light, perhaps even faint. My body, our bodies, spent and ecstatic.

*These are the axes:*

*1. Bodies are inherently valid*

*2. Remember death*

*3. Be ugly*

*4. Know beauty*

*5. It is complicated*

*6. Empathy*

*7. Choice*

*8. Reconstruct, reify*

*9. Respect, negotiate*

*-Mark Aguhar  
1987-2012*

*Body Four: Silence as Affect, Radical Content Under an Acceptable Veneer*

Red Canoe 1987 Paris 1985 Blue Flowers 1984 Harry the Dog 1983 Blue Lake 1986

Interferon 1989 Ross 1983<sup>20</sup>

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“The effectiveness of speech does not simply lie in speaking, in making statements, but at the same time and of necessity, in a relinquishing of speech, a keeping quiet, a being silent!”<sup>21</sup>

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As a society, we actively label certain traumas and disasters as obscene, and often work to expel these events from public visibility and discussion. AIDS is a clear example of this: frequently labeled obscene through associations with (homo)sexuality. Gonzalez-Torres continually bears witness to this particular trauma. His approach, though, is arguably a subversive one, using ordinary objects – one might even say “happy objects” – to touch this taboo territory.<sup>22</sup> Whether this is a successful expression of the traumatic event can be debated. For instance, in examining Gonzalez-Torres’ work (specifically *Untitled [Perfect Lovers]* and *Untitled [1991]*, a sparse billboard depicting an empty bed) in light of the AIDS crisis and issues of visibility, Richard Meyer writes:

The absence that structures both the bed billboard and *Perfect Lovers* is not only that of the human figure but also that of any content that might arouse censorship. Such strategies of erasure may, however, court a different kind of danger, namely, that they mimic invisibility so well as to enact the very suppressions that they seek to elude... [We] might ask whether works such as *Perfect Lovers* or the bed billboards reinforce, however unintentionally, the external threat of censorship to which gay artists are subjected.<sup>23</sup>

This question of silence is crucial to position in terms of the work of Gonzalez-Torres and Hall. Both of these artists are extremely conscious of their silence though, and as Hall states:

In silence we are still here. Silence is not nothing, but something. Something else. It can be a way of spending time with others. It is a mode of communication, a presence, an invitation to diverse practices of perception. When we don't speak, we will hear different things.  
Or maybe we will be able to say different things.<sup>24</sup>

There is an affect in silence and the potential for a subversive power. Both of these artists grasp and explore the act of silence within these terms. It is at once a dodging of censors – to insert a queer desire and presence within the institution through something as subtle as two clocks, for example – while also, potentially, existing as a queer act in itself by embracing that which has traditionally been diminished by society: a power in silence. This is not to deny that there exists a time/necessity to yell and raise one's voice – and potentially one's fist – particularly in the case of gay rights and gender politics, but it is also to acknowledge that this volume or aggression is not our only tool at hand.<sup>25</sup> It is to open ourselves to the unique potentials of silence.

In 1991 Gonzalez-Torres produced *Untitled*, a series of billboards peppered across New York City consisting solely of a snapshot of an empty bed. The imprints of two bodies are visible in the image, but the physical bodies remain absent. There is no other information given to the viewing public: no title, no further explanation. There is no immediate marker of gender or sexuality – no hetero or homo reference point – but in our society of standardized heterosexuality a representation of the lovers' bed can easily, at first glance, be read as heterosexed (through associations in media, cinema, and advertising). Despite this, there is an obvious queering at work. Foremost, the untitled, sparse, *silent* image stands in stark contrast to our usual expectations of what a billboard is or should be. These images of the empty bed also lie in marked contrast to the surrounding city: loud, anxious, dirty. It is through learning of Gonzalez-Torres' personal history that we begin to read the bed as perhaps his own, imprinted with the mark of his recently deceased partner, Ross. The affect is clearly shifted. The frequently

heterosexual space had been reclaimed as equally queer, with the two bodies that once occupied the bed male. At the same moment, this site of life also becomes a site of death, and a site of mourning. Gonzalez-Torres has expanded – and simultaneously conflated – this imprinted image. The recently emptied bed holds more than what was once possible, queering our expectations and queering our standardized representations.

In the case of Gonzalez-Torres' work, it goes without saying that a pile of candy can easily be reduced to just that – and little more – by many viewers. The same goes for two clocks, two mirrors, a string of light bulbs, a photograph of an empty bed, or a stack of papers. The power of works such as *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, and the bed billboard (among others) lies in their shift of affect to that of a queer space and a queer objecthood. This repositioning of affect is undoubtedly subtle, perhaps even silent, but in resituating these objects and spaces as queer(ed), Gonzalez-Torres works to shift perceptions in the viewer's eyes, as well as declare a queer existence within these very things and spaces. This (potentially unseen) shift speaks to the subversive potential of silence in Gonzalez-Torres' work. The queering of objects has the power to free these very things from established and confined spaces, opening up our receptions and readings of them, as well as our interactions with them.

Repositioning how we interact with these objects and spaces, in turn, can reposition how we deal with deeper contents within the work. In the case of the candy spills, such as *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, to suck the sweet candy we often perform activities that recall oral sex (or communion), while simultaneously partaking of the individual who is lost from AIDS. The interaction with the disease becomes a physical, sexual, spiritual, and – importantly – an enjoyable experience. It is possible to engage with this trauma in a *positive* manner (so to speak), to individually interact with it, and experience this form as alternate to the ever-visible hospital

bed or sick individual. It is first through a shift in affect that this, now enjoyable, interaction is possible. And it is through a form of silence that Gonzalez-Torres engages all viewers in this transformative act, even those who would not be willing or comfortable (such as the potentially homophobic) to interact with representations of (homo)sexuality and AIDS so physically and intimately.

In works such as these candy spills, Gonzalez-Torres also confuses distinctions of taste and value. In their essay, “Happy Objects,” Ahmed writes of how groups will “cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight.”<sup>26</sup> It can be easy to find delight in candy, but much more difficult (for many) to find delight in representations of homosexual love. And to further confuse the scenario, there is the added association of death by AIDS embedded in these various spills – something even harder to swallow, so to speak. Gonzalez-Torres works to blur these distinctions of delight and happiness, as well as that of “good taste.”

When people say, “how can you like that?!” they make their judgment against another by refusing to like what another likes, by suggesting that the object in which another invests his or her happiness is unworthy. This affective differentiation is the basis of an essentially moral economy in which moral distinctions of worth are also social distinctions of value... What “tastes good” can function as a marker of having “good taste.”<sup>27</sup>

The pieces of candy in Gonzalez-Torres’ spills *literally* “taste good,” and as they reside in the museum we are socially taught to situate them also as appropriate markers of “good taste.”

Again, the shift in affect of the objects functions subversively, in turn conflating moral and social distinctions of worth and value, in distinctly queer terms.

And to again question and problematize Meyer’s issue of erasure is John Paul Ricco’s statement that, “in the time of AIDS, a disappeared aesthetics may be the only way to ethically relate to the historicity and sociality of AIDS; to avoid sparing loss as has occurred in the history

of symbolizing, narrativizing, and putting a face to AIDS.”<sup>28</sup> The silence of Gonzalez-Torres’ work can be viewed as a response (reaction?) to this problematic issue, acting as an ethical broach to representations of AIDS. The disappeared aesthetics is literally enacted in Torres’ work, particularly so in his candy spills and paper piles. A face is not given, but rather a body is approximated and handed away, piece by piece. Again, we both receive and become the body decimated by AIDS – as well as receive/become the virus itself. Loss is not spared, but rather transmitted to the viewer in forms of pain as well as beauty.

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Furthermore, “a number of scholars have recently taken up the idea of affect as contagious[...].”<sup>29</sup> If the affect present in Gonzalez-Torres’ and Hall’s work is queer, is that queerness also potentially contagious? Herein lies another subversive potential of silence. For Gonzalez-Torres, this takes on another reference; like affect, AIDS is contagious. Gonzalez-Torres infects us with both a queer(ed) affect and an AIDS affect: neither kills us. It is a two-fold lesson in coming to terms with and embracing that so called other.

Aesthetically, as well, Gonzalez-Torres and Hall have “adopted a strategy of subverting received forms of high culture, *i.e.* minimalism, conceptualism, et al., for [their] own purpose.”<sup>30</sup> This “purpose” is certainly multilayered, but undoubtedly involves the inclusion of queer content under an acceptable veneer of formalism. They have queered the affect of this work, and in turn have exposed the possibility of queer content within any work or object, including those minimalist sculptures we have so long viewed predominantly in terms of aesthetics. The queering of objects has the potential of releasing them from their pre-established designations/positions, both within the everyday world (the candy, the clocks, the speakers), as well as the art world (minimalism, conceptualism, etc.).



Gordon Hall, *The Observants*  
(detail)

*Body Five: Queer Spaces (Lost and Found) & An Act of Seeing*

It stands to be argued that we live in a society of such immersive (hetero)normativity and gendered narratives that queer objects and spaces less frequently exist on their own accord, but are rather re-formed as such. “In the conventional family home what appears requires following a certain line, the family line that directs our gaze. The heterosexual couple becomes a ‘point’ along this line, which is given to the child as its inheritance or background. The background then *is not simply behind the child*: it is what the child is asked to aspire *toward*.” This heterosexual background becomes background, foreground, and future. Furthermore “queer objects are not ‘close enough’ to the family line in order to be seen as objects to be lost.”<sup>31</sup> Queer spaces may not be lost, if only because they are often not found to start. It is through this that Gonzalez-Torres and Hall work to resituate objects and spaces as queer, or as equally queer as they may be heterosexual. Simultaneously, “objects function to bring society within the self,” but they can also function to bring the self within society, including the queer and/or (homo)sexual self.<sup>32</sup>

.....

Is all art a queering of vision? In the sense of a shift of perspective, perhaps yes. When I use the term, I am hoping to conjure that reference, as well as, simultaneously, other aspects of “queer.” Among these, I am thinking of queer as an embrace of sexuality, acknowledging the role of desire in life. Desire as an action – an action that shapes our bodies. This position is crucial to viewing Gonzalez-Torres’ and Hall’s work.

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“But after twenty years of feminist discourse and feminist theory we have come to realize that ‘just looking’ is not *just* looking but that *looking* is invested with identity: gender, socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation... Looking is invested with lots of other texts.”<sup>33</sup>

.....

A curtain of gold hangs in front of me, almost as a wall to pass through. I linger at its gate, watching the light catch and refract off individual beads. People pass before me: push through. I linger still, watching the curtain sway, slowly returning to rest. I notice the blackened ends of the curtain, the dirt so often hidden in the museum. I shiver at the sight of it all; my spine tingles.

*Body Six: Spirituality Without Religion & Possibilities for a “Queer Spirituality”*

It is with the return of my mother that I was introduced to organized religion. With (this) religion, I found self-censorship, repression, fear, and political conservatism – all things I would come to recognize as such as I discovered my own burgeoning sexuality. I was not fond of the realities I witnessed, and I did not stay to see them further.

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I suck the saccharine-sweet candy, and feel vaguely nauseated. For myself, the experience becomes less an enjoyable consumption so much as a task I must fulfill. I live the experience of metaphorically ingesting the body of (an)other – more so than communions from my childhood. I feel the connection of bodies lost, of histories wished forgotten, of predecessors past. God has been removed and Ross, Felix, and millions of others have assumed his [*sic*] place.

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When one speaks of spirituality, many, if not most, immediately think to religion. I intend to queer this, to disentangle these two and remove God, to explore the possibilities of something such as a queer spirituality. I ask: what does it mean to be spiritual? How does this manifest outside of religions? One definition of “spiritual” is: “Of or relating to, consisting of, spirit, regarded in either a religious or intellectual aspect; of the nature of a spirit or incorporeal supernatural essence; immaterial.”<sup>34</sup> It is an alternative to a religious connotation that I wish to invoke. In many ways I view this definition as relating to theories of affect. I’m thinking about affect as perceptions of the world before we are able to give it a name, as perceptions of something perhaps hard to describe, or hard to comprehend, as something outside of us that we can feel but without a sense of certainty. Can we extend the concept of affect to that of the spirit, both existing as something supernatural and incorporeal? Let us remove the religious, and think about spirit and affect as aspects of our preconscious or unconscious selves that then extend into and have influence on our conscious bodies. Let us complicate our distinctions of the material and immaterial of our bodies; let us think of the im/material.

It is a unique quality of spirituality that I see and feel within the work of these artists. There are references to religious practices (communion, chanting, rituals), but I do not feel these works speak of religions or the institutions that house them, with their various doctrines and dictates (in fact they often speak very much *against* these institutions). It is a spirituality of another sort. A sacredness (given) to the objects selected or crafted, even when they are of the most mundane origin. A reverence to their presentation. A ritual that is not specified to a religious doctrine, that is precisely *ambiguous*, with its participants in common clothing. The presence of the ornate amidst the most mundane: objects meticulously painted a warm white, a sea of silver made of mass-produced packaged candies, a swaying curtain of gold. Gonzalez-

Torres' and Hall's work is often very much about impermanence. About what occurs and what exists once things have been taken away. About what happens when the body is removed, either physically or symbolically. About certain traces and remnants. And in the case of Gonzalez-Torres, it is also (often) a disallowal of the body to disappear completely, stand-ins being replenished *ad infinitum*. The work of both of these artists can become about the spirit, about affect, and about spirituality.

I understand that many of the foundations I am laying out as evidence of the spiritual in these artists' work have their bases in established religions – even while I am rejecting the religious. I understand the gold and silver of Gonzalez-Torres, and the white of Hall, reference materials and colors common to many religions. I understand the chanting in Hall's performance relates to various chanting practices in almost every established religion. I understand the partaking of the body in Gonzalez-Torres' candy spills is in direct reference to communion. I understand reverence for materials and the creation of sacred objects is part of almost all religions – not to mention art. And I understand my foundation for spiritual understanding undoubtedly lies in modes laid out and established for me by (western) religions, and political circumstances of my (U.S.) upbringing. I understand all these things, and yet I still see the work reaching a unique quality of (queer) spirituality – existing outside of the confines of religion. I know my own limitations in comprehending, but I see more: I see work that acknowledges the reference, but pushes further. I see something beautiful, something sacred, something spiritual, something queer.

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When asked by about the question of God in both his life and work, Gonzalez-Torres responded:

Let's get out of the area of God quickly! I have a major problem with the cultural traps and constructions of God. I think it is a good excuse for us to accept any kind of situation as natural, inevitable. Once we believe that there is no God, that there is no afterlife, then life becomes a very positive statement. It becomes a very political position because then we have no choice but to work harder to make this place the best place ever.<sup>35</sup>

So too can we distinguish and separate God from the idea of spirituality, and (hopefully) escape the political system of oppression (often) intrinsically linked with religion and God. We have removed God, and we are actively searching and working towards a state of spirituality removed from social constructs. A spirituality related to affect, to the unconscious and subconscious self. A connection with oneself, as well as with those around us. A presentness to (and within) our bodies. Perhaps a queer spirituality can also allow access to the political potential that Gonzalez-Torres speaks of.

Must a queer spirituality be rid of all conceptions of the afterlife? Not necessarily. I view a queer spirituality as not staking claims in another life, though – as not accepting what is handed to us, with all its corruptions, for hopes of a more beautiful moment in the next. A queer spirituality should be open to the possibilities of things not understood (such as what happens once our bodies are left behind) while remaining critical of blindly shoving all uncertainty into the realms of religion and God. It is not uncertainty to be feared, but rather blind acceptance and inaction. A queer spirituality does not have to be about hopes for an afterlife. A queer spirituality can be about living in and embodying the present, about making this moment as meaningful, powerful, potent, and filled as it can be. A queer spirituality can be political. We are filled – with what we may not be certain – and we have no other choice but to work to make this place the best it can be. We are extremely precise *bodies* of ambiguous use; this use can be a political one.

.....

What is my investment in a queer spirituality? Perhaps it is an attempt to find what my mother claims I have lost, but which I know I had never found – at least not in church as a young boy playing the part of altar boy. It is remembering the closed minds, and fear (of other) masked by a thin veneer. It is not closing myself off to spirituality solely because I have seen past the guise of God. It is recognizing my spirituality, and recognizing it *as my own*.

.....

These artists, like myself, have grown up in religious households. We three abandoned our religious foundations (in their original incarnations). We three – perhaps by my assertion – approach the spiritual through the alternate.

.....

A queer spirituality is a secular spirituality. We may ask: why preface spirituality as “queer?” I embrace the qualifier, for with its presence further implications are invoked. A critical stance is implicit. “Queer” situates a community of like-minded thinkers; like-minded individuals one may turn to as opposed to the establishments of organized religion. A queer spirituality signifies the once oppressed staking claim and ownership of spirituality, simultaneously allowing for an opening up of the meaning of the term through its queered state. By using “queer” I incite the first step of removing and distancing spirituality from confined locations: from there I hope it can be further opened to reception/perception.

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Under the definition of “spiritual,” there is a subheading titled “spiritual home.” From this source a spiritual home is a noun “(with no religious connotations), a place or milieu, other than one’s home, which seems especially congenial or in harmony with one’s nature, or to which

one feels a sense of belonging or indebtedness.”<sup>36</sup> I feel this is another appropriate definition to think through when examining these artists’ work. This spiritual home becomes the work itself, and specifically the queer(ed) affect of it. This “place or milieu” becomes a non-physical site, a portable site that can be transplanted and can exist within any space, including the oft-heterosexed sites of the museum or gallery. The sense of belonging lies in this extended queer(ed) space and affect, and extends from artist and work, to audience and viewer. We are all allowed access to this spiritual home.

.....

“We resolve to be present in our bodies, present to ourselves, present to each other, and present to queer spirit. We resolve to claim our voices and our collective history as queers. We are resolved that queer community is a community of the living and the dead.”<sup>37</sup>

*Body Seven: Possibilities and Potentials*

“And finally, above all else, it is about leaving a mark that I existed: I was here. I was hungry. I was defeated. I was happy. I was sad. I was in love. I was afraid. I was hopeful. I had an idea and I had a good purpose and that’s why I made works of art.”<sup>38</sup>

.....

And what then are the potentials of something such as a queer spirituality? In many ways its potentials are similar to that of a definition of queer: something outside of the standardized conceptions of what spirituality might mean, something that is purposefully inclusive rather than exclusionary. Queer spirituality can bypass the common stereotypes and prejudices of many

formal religions, particularly with regard to non-(hetero)normative individuals. Not only does it bypass these institutions, but it also positions an alternate view. Spirituality as the spirit: a secular spirit, a sexual spirit.

Ultimately, I view spirituality as another inherent aspect of our bodies. So too is desire, so too are politics. Our bodies are political bodies, they are sexual bodies, they are unconscious/subconscious/conscious, they are spiritual. They are public and they are private. Distinctions between all these categories are too stringent: they all inform one another. They all inform our bodies. We are all of these things.

.....

What queerness asks is for everyone to take a step back; this step back is where we come together, where we are inclusive in our criticality of systemized structures. Queerness is to acknowledge that we are not all the same, but that rather we are all different: all *other*. It is this otherness – whether it be sexuality, race, gender, class, (dis)abilities, or any number of variables – that ultimately brings us together.

.....

How do we organize our bodies in space? How do spaces organize our bodies? Just as institutions and places become (hetero)normative through repetition – repeated actions allowed in these spaces – so too can these sites be queer(ed) through a similar process. It undoubtedly takes much more work – and much more repetition – to queer a space, but it is possible. Our actions and our bodies shape the spaces around us. And so too can the gallery, the museum, the institution, the “home,” slowly be queered by our repeated gestures.

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While many scramble for a seat at the table (in this world and a supposed other), we know the table to be rotten. We see that the wood has long been infested, and that the seats and settings have been pre-selected for an elite few. We are looking to build something better, a space where there are no limits to who can join or sit. We reject the table and we reject the notion of getting “our share of the pie.” We are fighting for the present moment. We cannot solely hope for a better future – it is through our present that we create the future we envision. I see, realize, and accept my idealism, but it is not blind. We have too long forsaken idealism as unproductive wish making. What is unproductive, rather, is to not wish, to not demand and enact change. We can also use silence and spirituality to affect change; the queering of vision can be the first step.

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And so now, and again, I ask:

*How do we move further?*

Notes:

1. John Paul Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 12.
2. Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2007): 310.
3. Here I use the terminology “(re)queered” to acknowledge that perhaps these objects and spaces may have been queer once, but have (forcibly) lost a queer reception through (hetero)normative practices.
4. For perceived distinctions between public and private, particularly related to the queer body, see: Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998).
5. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006): 87.
6. *Ibid.*, 89-90.
7. A child can accidentally queer the home by performing actions not traditionally accepted within society – early public explorations of sexuality and gender are clear examples. The child may then be disciplined, thus learning what actions are “appropriate” and “acceptable,” further conditioned within a system of (hetero)normativity.
8. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, note to Ross Laycock in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen: SteidlDangin, 2006).
9. Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative: Vol. 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 123.
10. Gonzalez-Torres, interview with Tim Rollins. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1993): 15-16.
11. Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Viking, 2003): 10.
12. Gordon Hall, “Artist Statement #1, April 2011,” accessed March 2012, [gordonhall.net](http://gordonhall.net).
13. Performance 19 minutes. Exhibition at ACRE Galleries, Chicago, June 2011. For documentation, see: [gordonhall.net](http://gordonhall.net).
14. “Artist Statement #1,” [gordonhall.net](http://gordonhall.net).
15. Ricco, *Logic of the Lure*: 12.

16. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*: 102.
17. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 91.
18. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press): 76.
19. For explorations of cruising, including the otherness of oneself, see: Tim Dean, "Cruising as a Way of Life." *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 176-212.
20. Gonzalez-Torres' first iteration for his self-portrait (1989), from: Adair Rounthwaite, "Split Witness: Metaphorical Extensions of Life in the Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Representations* 109, no. 1 (2010): 38.
21. José Ortega y Gasset, "The Misery and the Splendor of Translation," trans. Elizabeth Gamble Miller, in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 103.
22. Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press): 29-51.
23. *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 268.
24. "Artist Statement #1," gordonhall.net.
25. For the argument of the necessity to raise one's voice and/or fist see: Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51, (1989): 3-18.
26. Ahmed, "Happy Objects:" 35.
27. Ibid.
28. *Logic of the Lure*: 40.
29. Ahmed, "Happy Objects:" 36.
30. Lewis Baltz, "(sans titre)," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen: Steidl/Dangin, 2006): 214.
31. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*: 90-1.
32. *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2007): 310.
33. Gonzalez-Torres, interview with Tim Rollins. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1993): 71.

34. "Spiritual" in Oxford English Dictionary Online, last modified March 2012, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/186900>.

35. Gonzalez-Torres, interview with Tim Rollins. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1993): 29.

36. "Spiritual" in OED Online, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/186900>.

37. AA Bronson and Peter Hobbs, *AA Bronson & Peter Hobbs: Queer Spirits* (New York: Creative Time, 2011): 26. Note: Of contemporary western artists, Bronson perhaps works most directly with ideas of a queer spirituality, but I find myself with certain reservations concerning his work that appear to me to be more exclusive than inclusive. The invocations that Bronson enacts are private events, consisting solely of male-born gay bodies. What of the female? The lesbian? The trans\* body? These invocations are also private events, with only select traces left to witness. At times it feels as if I can solely read of the spiritual in Bronson's work, whereas I can experience it in Gonzalez-Torres' and Hall's.

38. Gonzalez-Torres, interview with Tim Rollins. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1993): 31.