

“Untitled” (Passport II), 1993

(Body)

“I think when you see a passport, really what you’re seeing is a body there.”

- Felix Gonzalez-Torres in dialogue with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 1994¹

Corporeality is central to Felix Gonzalez -Torres’ work but it is always diffuse. The shadow of his lover,² two empty chairs in Paris,³ portraits⁴ made only of dates and events. Often, with his participatory activations, like the paper stacks and candy works, the bodies are ours. The bodies are those of the people taking home the works, dipping to take a sheet, glancing furtively to make sure they are permitted, or sucking, swallowing and excreting sugary sweetness from a pile ideally calibrated to the combined weight of two lovers.⁵

With his work that trembles the fictional boundary between private and public, a passport is a microcosm of this transverse. Here is an official public document in which our biometrics intermingle with our social status to render our embodiment numerical, surveillable, and fixed. The color of our eyes, the space we take up, the places we have the right to pass into.

The artist had a formative experience as a refugee when he was a child. At 11, with his sister, he was sent from Cuba to Spain “like a package” with no agency, and no clarity about the duration. In the end, he didn’t see his parents again for 10 years, at which point the physical experience of their embrace was completely foreign : his body, his stature had shifted in the years of absence. When he left he was a child, when they reunited, an adult. He told Hans Ulrich Obrist that the experience was “very traumatic and has been, despite my denials and despite my suppression of it, has been very influential.”⁶

The artist preferred not to be boxed in to overly rigid categories, but identified first and foremost as an artist. Trained as a photographer, and with a tonality that permeates his diverse, sparse, poetic practice, another form of identity is the artist’s gaze. *“Untitled” (Passport) II* offers a portrait of the artist as dreamer. In the place of rigid passcodes, visas, permits — these things that have in some way hindered or injured or at least controlled and impacted all of the artists gathered in the

¹ Interview: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 1994

² *Untitled* (1989)

³ *“Untitled” (Paris, Last Time, 1989)*

⁴ <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/portraits><https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/portraits>

⁵ *“Untitled” (Loverboys)* 1991

⁶ Interview: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 1994

exhibition — is the bird in flight, a motif the artist photographed relentlessly throughout his life,⁷ something he looked toward continually — a way of seeing.

The image is at once melancholy and liberatory. The bird is free to pass over lines drawn on maps; to follow other currents and trajectories. It is ascending as if between realms; the bird is minute in the vastness; it is a question if the image is of the bird or the space between it. The punctum of the bird allows us to see the sky. The placement of the works brings the heavens into the mundane. But the sky is always cloudy in these works, and before his death Gonzalez-Torres filled his gallery with images of vultures⁸ rather than seagulls. The motif is always a disruption of the poetic into spaces that it doesn't often live — capitalist advertising billboards, or a government issued identity document. It is also intentionally open to interpretation. Its familiarity renders it participatory. References to migration writ large are overlaid with the intimate memory of trips North to Toronto are overlaid with all the birds we all have seen and where they take us in our imaginations.



(Milwaukee, 1993)⁹

As bell hooks wrote, in her 1994 essay *Subversive Beauty*, “This passport has no places for “irrelevant” details: where we were born, in what country, dates or numbers. A passport of dark clouds, of birds in flight, moves us to a space beyond history, a space of mystery where there is no record, no documentation, nothing to recall. What is captured here is a moment of utter oneness

⁷ <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/exhibitions/felix-gonzalez-torres28>

⁸ <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/exhibitions/untitled-vultures>

⁹ Currents 22: Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Teweles Gallery, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI

Cur. Dean Sobel

May 28 – September 12, 1993

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/exhibitions/currents-22-felix-gonzalez-torres/installation-views>

where the experience of union, of perfect love transcends the realm of the senses. No boundaries exist. There are no limits.”¹⁰

(Ashes)

*1991 ... A hundred small envelopes of my lover's ashes — his last will.*¹¹

In 1994, 5,000 details of *Untitled (Passport) II* were sent out as invitations to Gonzalez-Torres' exhibition *Traveling* at the Renaissance Society in Chicago¹² — in envelopes, presumably. This was a shift in the protocol for the paper stacks, of which *Untitled (Passport) II* is one exceptional example. It is the only paperstack comprised of booklets, rather than sheets of paper. Previously, the paper stacks had been left in exhibitions without instructions. Always participatory, they were also consensual, and not controlled: the audience enacted the works how they chose to. At a certain point, museums asked to prohibit the audience from taking from the stacks during openings, which Gonzalez-Torres first rejected, as a breach of the protocol, but later he consented and when he did, he told his gallerist, Andrea Rosen, that it was a relief because, though of course it was his intention, he hated physically seeing people taking the work. He likened it to “the demise of his own body.”¹³

The meditation behind the paper stacks is similarly mortal. Gonzalez-Torres said that he made these disappearing works as a meditation to practice, to try to resolve, to master (in the Freudian sense) the devastating and uncontrollable loss of his lover.¹⁴ The works “gradually disintegrate during the course of the exhibition before the viewer's very eyes.”¹⁵ The shapes of the paperstacks, too, directly reference tombstones and monuments.¹⁶

With these works as his body, diffuse and post-mortal, today, in 2025, then, we have the uncanny gift of experiencing a posthumous performance with the artist. The paper stack itself is the work. It is a copy with no origin. And with an endless edition — itself so subversive — the artist has managed to take a meditation on loss and turn it into a perpetually regenerating and vital, living, interactive, work. The artist is present, the artist is everywhere, like how our traces disburse into relations we had when we leave the physical body. As Rosen wrote, “the risk of annihilation breeds

¹⁰ hooks, bell. 1995. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: The New Press.

¹¹ Rosen, Andrea. 1997. “‘Untitled’ (Neverending Portrait).” In *Felix Gonzalez-Torres Catalogue Raisonné*, edited by Dietmar Elger, 53. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz.

¹² https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/exhibitions/felix-gonzalez-torres-traveling3?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹³ Rosen, 47.

¹⁴ Rosen, 44

¹⁵ Krempel, Ulrich and Waspé, Roland in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres Catalogue Raisonné*, edited by Dietmar Elger. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz.

¹⁶ Rosen, 46

the possibility of perpetuity.”¹⁷ The act of dispersal, which is the accumulation of countless acts of relation, the intimacy of tucking this piece of paper into a pocket or purse, of taking it home, of it ending up on a bookcase, or recycled, the voyage of the stacks themselves, becomes like the scattering of ashes — in a hundred small envelopes,¹⁸ or otherwise.

(Clouds)

“*The possibility of perpetuity.*”¹⁹

Gonzalez-Torres said that when he first visited Paris it was familiar to him, it was already in his “blood-memory.” “I had already been there thousands of times. I had been to Paris because I dreamt about going there with Ross and walking down the Champs-Élysées and going to the Louvre. When I finally was in Paris, it was just to bring my physical entity, my body, there as a completion of what I had dreamt before. And when that happens, that is real traveling.”²⁰

Untitled (Passport) II was first exhibited in Paris, at Galerie Jennifer Flay in 1993. It was shown in *Travel #2*, in dialogue with *Travel #1* at Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, in the Marais, not far from the Atlas Gallery, the site of the current proposed exhibition. It has traveled, psychically and physically, to Mexico, China, Denmark, and Spain without returning yet to its origin.

At a moment when migration has become a flashpoint once again for far right extremism, with immigration crackdowns occurring in the homes of green card holders in the US, and with contemporary artists, including those exhibited here, needing to migrate — again — to find safe spaces for creative expression, the works poetic and political aptitude is as present tense as the artist meant it to be. Iterative and evolving, the work, with its melancholia, mourning, disintegration and perpetuity still offers entry into the realm of psychic travel, and the endless possibility therein.

- Allyn Aglaia

¹⁷ Rosen, 47

¹⁸ Rosen, 53

¹⁹ Rosen, 47

²⁰ Spector, Nancy. *Félix González-Torres*. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995.