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# FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES and KEN OKIISHI: The Evolution and Representation of Experience

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FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES and KEN OKIISHI:  
The Evolution and Representation of Experience

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## Introduction

The two artists Ken Okiishi and Felix Gonzalez-Torres--though separated by a generation--both use physical objects to signify the loss of human presence, connection or connections. Both instill meaning into familiar physical objects such as candy, clocks, or television screens, and both are able to provoke feelings associated with the kinds of presence objects can represent – without that actual presence. Gonzalez-Torres worked during a time when digital technology was not yet an existent medium, while Okiishi worked during a time in which the technological world and its social effects are central to his work and message. In fact, a central point of his work *gesture/data* is to replicate our dependent relationship with technology and how people interact with the virtual world. This world is only available through viewing by screen; it is unreachable, unlike the tangible objects, that we can physically feel, via which Gonzalez-Torres' works often confronted viewers.

These two artists demonstrate stark, pivotal generational differences: a world and society before technology, *art* before digital technology (Gonzalez-Torres), and the effects and experiences of art in a world engulfed by such technology entirely (Okiishi). One relies on physical interaction, and the other responds and relays the effects of infinite, intangible spectacles. Both speak to the importance and meaning of presence, or being, and what part

that presence or absence plays in art experience during these juxtaposing time periods: before and after the Internet.

In his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, French theorist Guy Debord wrote, “in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation”.<sup>1</sup> Gonzalez-Torres’ and Okiishi’s artworks both could be said to exemplify this idea of evolution and generational transformation, but in Okiishi’s work there is an increased disconnection, to the point that everything may be mere representation. This raises the question: has art changed with technology? Have we lost actual experience to mere representation?

Gonzalez-Torres’ work is an example of a rejection of the problems posed by Debord on the spectacle’s and mass media’s exertion of social control. Gonzalez-Torres’ artwork represents a production of a counter-spectacle, arguably using the spectacle as against itself. While Gonzalez-Torres did not make this a central focus of his work, nor outwardly speak on these issues as being a chief takeaway of his work, conceptual artists during the 90s were aware of the importance of connectedness in response to mass media’s emerging role into culture. Okiishi, like Pop artists, uses well-known pop culture iconography and commoditized imagery, and skews it. As these images are a main component of exhibitions like *gesture/data*, they are responding to the immense impact and social control these images hold. These two artists are important to bring into the conversation of representation and loss of experience because they

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<sup>1</sup>Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Buchet-Chastel, 1967

either replicate or comment on, "...artists' attitudes toward mass media and popular culture with the Situationists' pragmatic approach (....twisting the intended meaning of ads, TV programs...)"<sup>2</sup> Gonzalez-Torres rejects the spectacle in the sense of his encouraging connection through experience versus solely image, and Okiishi replicating the spectacle through his literal use of it, as well as being a form of it.

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<sup>2</sup>Readies, DJ. *Intimate Bureaucracies*. Punctum Books, Brooklyn, New York, 2012, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/87178435/Intimate-Bureaucracies-A-Manifesto>. (pp.46-48)

PART I – GONZALEZ-TORRES AND TANGIBILITY

“I need the public to complete my work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in.”

-Felix Gonzalez-Torres

from *Portrait of Ross*, 1991, Art Institute of Chicago



Fig. 1

(Untitled) *Portrait of Ross*, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1991

Imagine walking into a bare room. All white walls, hovering over a sole shadow of a corner. In this corner, is Ross. He's there, wrappers blinking under the museum light, a cellophane mountain of 175 lbs. Imagine an artwork that allows you to take it apart, to ingest it, and to have it inside of you. You become as much a piece of the artwork as the pieces of candy. This is the beauty of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' 1991 work *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, it moves past purely aesthetic experience and connects with the viewer on a personal, narrative level. Gonzalez-Torres (1956-1996) was a Cuban-born artist whose work often deals with the metaphor of journey and the subject of loss. In most cases, he uses objects to represent the memory of his late partner Ross Laycock rather than using direct images of his likeness. For example, *Perfect Lovers* (1991) and *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* both display the idea of absence through a physical form. *Perfect Lovers* takes two clocks to represent the fragility of human lives; while in *Portrait of Ross*, the absent figure is a somber pile of candy that instructs viewers to take a piece. Customarily, artworks inside in galleries or museums are more often than not unable to be touched by viewers. Gonzalez-Torres rejects this art convention of not touching. Instead, his work relies upon physical touch and viewer interaction. His use of instructive interaction reinforces a sense of human connection. In *Portrait of Ross*, each piece of candy picked from the gallery corner diminished the weight of the actual sculpture, metaphorical of the memory of Ross (Fig. 1). Gonzalez-Torres' work uses a familiar object representative of a specific memory; an experience much more relatable and intimate than an

unobtainable virtual world. Tangible, familiar objects coupled with sensory interaction are central to his work.

His works also push the boundaries between public and private space. He is able to “make a cultural and political act out of the authority of the form that has always been there, unproblematically...”<sup>3</sup> In 1991, Gonzalez-Torres began to present works on billboards in public space, such as *Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)*. These forced a wide variety of viewers to gaze upon them, if they just so happened to be walking or driving by. The starkness of the placement of the billboard, and the emptiness of the bed and indented pillows draws viewers in with initial curiosity. The intimacy that is meant to be so profoundly conveyed by this work is blatantly casted out into the world, for all public to see as they are simply living their daily lives. This differs from a private setting, or a public setting that is privately owned such as a museum or gallery. Viewers must purposefully make their way to these areas rather than happening upon a work so casually. The idea of intellectual and emotional engagement is what makes these conceptual pieces work rather than becoming just another “nice decoration”<sup>4</sup> in a home, these works must be public in order for them to become complete.

This is part of what makes his work “Post-Minimal,” a critical designation that described works that were rooted in Minimalism aesthetically, but sought to instill more specific subject matter into sculptural objects. His forms are not accidentally geometric, but relate formally to his artistic predecessors like Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. Gonzalez-Torres’ use of the titling

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<sup>3</sup> Kosuth, Joseph and Gonzalez-Torres, Felix. A Conversation. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Ault, Julie. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Dap-distributed Art, 2016. (pp. 348-58)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 349-50



convention “untitled” reinforces this relationship. “Untitled” was used by a generation of American avant-garde artists to indicate a purity and rejection of representation. Gonzalez-Torres continued with the tradition, but added a parenthetical description of a specific event, person, or idea, highlighting his simultaneous admiration and rejection of Minimalism. Gonzalez-Torres’ titles form aesthetic presence, along with the object itself; his artistic voice is inherently added within the title, and in a way, guides the viewer. Gonzalez-Torres notably, “refused to enforce a single reading of any work, [he] allows, even encourages, the context in which his art is encountered to impinge on the perception of it.”<sup>5</sup> The addition of encouraging the viewer to form their own experience adds to the authenticity of Gonzalez-Torres’ works, it is what in turn forms the initial experience of the work altogether: the meaning the work imparts at that particular moment in time.

Gonzalez-Torres’ works also have ongoing political relevance, partially due to their deeply rooted, personal connection to the ongoing AIDS epidemic. This is an important aspect of his installations because it forms an intensity and meaningful emotive experience for the viewer. Knowing and acknowledging the departed presence his works often represent, creates an emotional weight as one steps into the space his artworks create, and touches the objects encapsulating the loss of life Gonzalez-Torres represents.

Many artworks prompt interaction. However, Gonzalez-Torres explicitly asks his viewers to participate in the completion of his work. The metaphor, the presence within the candy or

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<sup>5</sup> Ault, Julie. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Dap-distributed Art, 2016. (Pp. 249-254)

object would not form without touch, without an exchange of energy. Gonzalez-Torres' work holds a timeless quality<sup>6</sup>, in that it is continuously able to be taken down and put back up. In *Portrait of Ross*, this timelessness is the recycling of an actual former presence: Ross. It is fascinating to consider that Gonzalez-Torres, himself, would not be able to determine his work's future form, after his death in 1996. He instructed curators of future exhibitions to continue the installations the way they had previously been installed, all the candy to equal the same weight, the same set-up...etc. He was not there to determine anything, however. He would not be able to see technology's impact on his own work either, the way his works have been replicated through image and circulated over the internet. It would be interesting to see how Gonzalez-Torres would have reacted to this loss of tangibility.

As defined by art historian Claire Bishop in *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, relational artworks, "seek to establish intersubjective encounters..." and they insist upon "use rather than contemplation" of an object. The combination of life, presence, and art offer an "impressive experience of togetherness" for the viewer.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, one of Gonzalez-Torres' contemporaries, conceptual artist Liam Gillick described his own work as being "like the light in the fridge...it only works when there are people to open the fridge door. Without people, it's not art-it's something else-stuff in a room..." While Gonzalez-Torres was not specifically engaged with the more European-oriented Relational Aesthetics movement, this explains many of Gonzalez-Torres works as well. The emphasis is put on the "*relationship between,*" the feeling

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<sup>6</sup> Rounthwaite, Adair. Split Witness: Metaphorical Extensions of Life in the Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. University of California Press, Representations, Vol. 109, No. 1 (Winter 2010), (pp. 36-37)

<sup>7</sup> Bishop, Claire. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, (pp.50-60), OCTOBER 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51-79. © 2004 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

created between the object, the presence, and the viewer/audience versus the object alone. In an interview with artist Tim Rollins, Gonzalez-Torres makes clear his goal to, “intellectually challenge, move, and inform” the viewer. He strives to unveil the reality behind the artwork by “breaking the pleasure of representation...the pleasure of the flawless narrative...”<sup>8</sup> and does so by providing an opportunity and space that will inevitably form a relationship of togetherness between object and viewer.

When asked in an interview with Ross Bleckner for *BOMB* magazine, “Do you think your work is sentimental?” Gonzalez-Torres replied, “It is sentimental, but it’s also about infiltration. It’s beautiful; people get into it. But then, the title or something, if you look really closely at the work, gives out that it’s something else.”<sup>9</sup> It is something else. It is a presence that has a foreseeable end. All the candy will eventually be taken from the pile, and the sweet taste of the candy will eventually dissolve. It is life’s course displayed full circle within one object.

What Gonzalez-Torres could not see however, is the evolution of art in general, in conjunction with technology. As his work is a practice of art that encourages, includes and *is* itself a model of sociability, Gonzalez-Torres work and conceptual works like it encourage viewer engagement, therefore create a tangible experience. While his work was able to elicit a presentation of absence—as he said: “absence [is] the primary text, and conditional, temporal

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp 55-60

<sup>9</sup> Bleckner, Ross. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres. BOMB-Artists in Conversation. BOMB Magazine, 1981-2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1847/felix-Gonzalez-Torres>.*

subject of the work”<sup>10</sup>— the experience of an absent presence has changed in a technological world in which touch is no longer central to the experience. The experience Gonzalez-Torres originally intended remains wherever his works are installed, but does the artwork and experience of his work remain the same once it has been photographed and exists online through social media? It is the basis of representation that asks viewers to relive an experience through something that is not real, not tangible in front of us, i.e. a photograph, a screen, a painting, or a window.

The difference between Gonzalez-Torres work of the 90’s and much of contemporary artwork today is clear: representation has changed and become less dependent on the viewer’s physical experience and more so on the *image* of the artwork or representation. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, author of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), explains the “precession of simulacra” in a way that connects to this idea of images, representation and misrepresentation of the experience of art. Though Baudrillard is not directly discussing the internet in his writings, it was incredibly prescient. Baudrillard continues and states that these signs and symbols change into new forms of representation, or a “precession of simulacra”<sup>11</sup>, a parade of images that stand in place of the original experience. Baudrillard discusses the relationship of absence and presence as I have mentioned, how humans create signs to simulate that loss of presence. Gonzalez-Torres’ *Loverboy* (see *fig.2*) or *Portrait of Ross* is an example of this. Images of artworks, and technologically-produced images are not only imitations or

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. From *The Precession of Simulacra*, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Second Edition. (pp. 1554-). Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc., 2011.

reduplications but are actual substitutes for the real.<sup>12</sup> We have become so accustomed to these images of the real as a part of our everyday lifestyle, that the concern or interest for the original “real” artwork has been lessened. For example, why travel in person to experience the work, when you can look up an image or video of it? Guy Debord’s theory of representation fits this recent phenomenon. If “everything once lived is now representation,”<sup>13</sup> and we are living within a world of spectacles or endless images as Baudrillard explains, Gonzalez-Torres’ work provides a real quality with an ephemeral version. It may be subject to being infinitely reproduced in image, though this image is not the work. How does this reproduction of images affect the authenticity of the real?

The conversation of the effects of media has been present for almost a century now. Walter Benjamin, the well-known German philosopher and cultural critic, explores this idea of authenticity in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. He believes, “Quantity has been transformed into quality...”<sup>14</sup> The concept of quantity over quality relates directly to the idea of an authentic work versus an uncountable amount of representations of that work. The uniqueness of the original, which Gonzalez-Torres’ works showcase with each of their individualistic importance, is dependent on its solitariness. Its quality is not determined by the quantity of the works produced, rather the opposite, focusing on the experience the work brings right when it encounters the viewer.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Schocken/Random House, ed. by Hannah Arendt, 1936.

A current example of this theory is *Da Vinci – The Genius*, a recent exhibition at the Museum of Science in Boston, Massachusetts, was a compilation of scientific explanations of da Vinci's inventions and paintings, that demonstrated this phenomenon. There was a section of this exhibition that showcased several replicated images of the *Mona Lisa* (fig.3). It was quite literally a *parade* of printed images, some of the copies were tinted in varying color schemes, others were blown up in size and some shrunk down. This exemplified technology's relationship with unique objects today. The experience of an original painting becomes less real, and more removed from the original; it becomes virtualized. Representation in this exhibition was, as Baudrillard writes, "we get simulated otherness; the real thing has evaporated"<sup>15</sup>, or an *image* of an experience.

In overwhelming a room with explanations of why an image or artwork is the way it is, or in the altogether over-replication of an image, the space to analyze the concept or the presence of the work becomes crowded. In contrast, Gonzalez-Torres utilizes the empty space of an entire room for a sole object. For example, in his work *Untitled (Golden)*, (see fig. 4), viewers are actually able to confront and *walk through* a screen, a tactile shower of gold beaded curtains in order to enter the next room. The way these objects are placed invite the viewer to be included in the represented presence. The exclusion of over-crowdedness or replicated imagery in Gonzalez-Torres exhibitions are what promote the effortlessness in the ability to get the viewer to hone in on the purpose of the object, and the unique experience he created.

When Gonzalez-Torres' work does not require the viewer's touch, it is constantly

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

reminding us of our own presence or temporality. It is a conceptual version of vanitas (see fig. 5), a remembering of mortality. The viewer is still necessary to the experience at the time these works were created, as there was no other way to circulate images other than through paper (flyers, newspapers) or television. That cell phone cameras were yet to exist and be ubiquitous during the late 80s and early 90's allowed conceptual artworks to exist in reality: not be undead,<sup>16</sup> not virtual. New Media Art professor, documentary filmmaker, artist, and writer Hito Steyerl's essay *Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?* describes the internet as being "undead" to mean that it has become real, but while images walk through the screen into reality, they also become abstracted and disfigured through this transition. She argues that the internet has become undead because images have become so fluid and recycled into everyday living space, that "reality itself has become post-produced and scripted, effect(s) [of reality] rendered as after-effect(s)."<sup>13</sup> Beyond television as a source of producing images, the rise of the web provided another network of circulation, allowing *anyone* to be given the authority of the circulator-not only TV studios. These images are aimed at achieving representation, however they are unable to with their added filters or edits, skewing them in a way that pushes them further and further from reaching the reality they are delineating. Once artworks, especially those such as conceptual works or those that require the viewer's presence become represented through image, the true work as well as the artist becomes lost. There is no room for authenticity with the undead internet, with the flux of overused, recirculated images.

As I will show ahead, Ken Okiishi's *gesture/data* represents this change away from

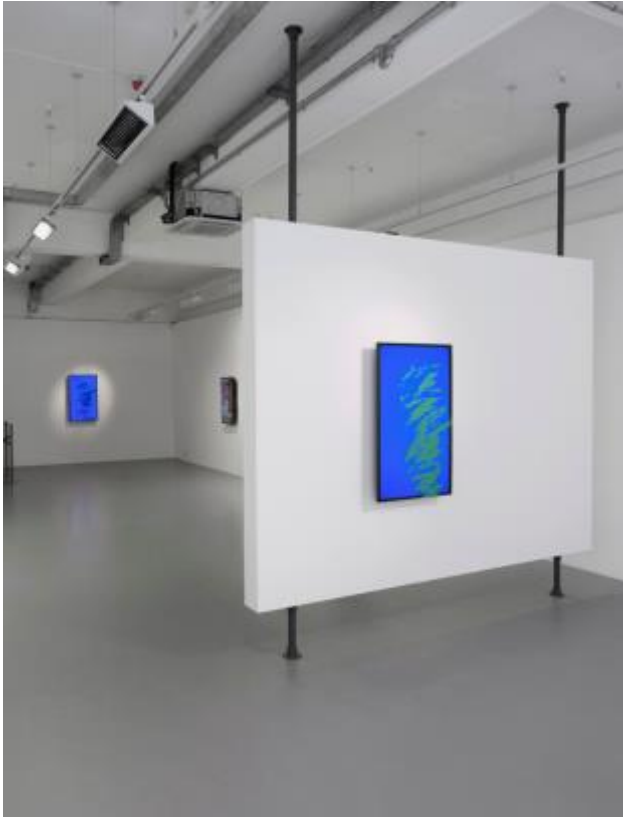
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<sup>16</sup> Steyerl, Hito. *Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?* © 2013 *e-flux* and the author, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

tangibility, as he reminds us that as experience moves *inside* (the screen), it digresses and becomes virtual. Like Gonzalez-Torres, Okiishi experiments with concepts of presence and absence, and the presentation of specific objects in relation to memory. But while Gonzalez-Torres' work *is* the experience, Okiishi's work *represents* experience, and the circulation of images. *gesture/data* exemplifies the viewer's relationship with artwork, reality, and technology.



PART II – OKIISHI AND TECHNOLOGY



Ken Okiishi, *gesture/data*, 2013-14



Ken Okiishi, *gesture/data (feedback)*, 2015

*“Looking at them for a long time... That could be enough—  
that looking and thinking and having that experience.”*

-Ken Okiishi

Ken Okiishi (born 1978) is a contemporary American artist whose works often explore the digital realm, including data streams and memory foundation. His work *gesture/data* (2013-2015) utilized home recordings, ads, and sitcoms from the 1990s to create a series of glitched clips that play underneath a screen painted over with vibrant gestures resembling movements associated with technology (tapping, swiping, etc.). Okiishi explores the *real*, our actual experience with the artwork in front of us while simultaneously being confronted with the *virtual*, with a feigned, moving memory. His work is an example of producing an *effect* of a human presence whilst being absent, also without including the viewer's own participation or touch in the way Gonzalez-Torres' work *needs* in order to become whole. Okiishi forms a social commentary with *gesture/data*, on our relationship with technology and its effect on our experience with artwork. The scribbles of paint atop the screens are our fingers-as viewers-blurring and emphasizing the lack of ability to experience the work through the screen. It is untouchable and intangible.

Is looking enough, in comparison to physically being or interacting with? In a world where technology is ever-present, Okiishi's work symbolizes a common relationship people hold with most artwork nowadays, that is, generally viewing it through a screen. Whether that be online, through a phone, or a picture of a picture, the experience of art has altered immensely since the 1980s and early 90s.

Okiishi's play with presence and absence is seen through a palpable substance (paint)

atop a virtual world (a television screen). Okiishi presents us with the technological age, through parades of images, and the overwhelming reality of the (over) circulation of images. For him, the internet is a medium. Steyerl explains that Okiishi's work shows us how, "images become unplugged and unhinged and start crowding off-screen space. They invade cities, transforming spaces into sites, and reality into reality."<sup>17</sup> This invasion of images and of circulation of artworks forms an absolute artificiality, separate from what is real and transforms the experience of reality to a representation of reality. While people are so connected to and dependent on this spectacle, they are only further distancing themselves from the actual.

The virtual world has crossed the screen and become integrated into our lives. This integration helps us to understand the arrangement of Okiishi's work *gesture/data*. Steyerl explains, "...the internet is now more potent than ever...it has not only sparked but fully captured the imagination, attention and productivity of more people than any other point before...it's all over!"<sup>18</sup> The abundance of television screens overwhelms us with their distracting, fluorescent flashing; lined up together all in one room, Okiishi is demonstrating the concept Steyerl so clearly analyzes: along with the internet, the digital world *is* all over. Despite the buzzing of electrical energy and movement, the pull is in the same way ads and technology pull. Disconnecting us from our tangible reality, from others right in front of us, from real-life interactions. It surrounds us and becomes a part of our daily fabric.

The spectacle Okiishi's work represents is, "in its [the spectacle's] generality, a concrete

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<sup>17</sup> Steyerl, Hito. *Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?* © 2013 e-flux and the author, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.”<sup>19</sup> This relates directly to the concept of Steyerl’s “undead” internet, or the “movement of non-life” and becomes an empty parade of images that encapsulates everyday life. The viewer’s experience now--more often than not--is a reproduced and circulated image, the viewer is no longer a participant or in the presence of the artwork, rather a messenger *continuing* the cycle of postproduction. Steyerl’s observations on this continue, “Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other. They are not equivalents however, but deficient, excessive, and uneven in relation to each other.”<sup>20</sup> Steyerl and Debord both underscore the idea that the images we are viewing (within general conditions in contemporary culture) are two separate worlds, they can coexist, however they cannot ever become equivalent. The moving images of the commodities behind *gesture/data*’s screens are not the tangible well-known objects Gonzalez-Torres presents us with. The expanse of time between these two artists showcase art and the artist’s transformation from man-made technique or use of physical objects into *purely* visual technique.

Arguably, looking at the screens could be an experience within itself. Perhaps *gesture/data* is simply reminding us of the societal issue of the technological age, that the experience of artwork is still available but it has been interrupted and has become saturated with the spectacle of both commodities and images. The emergence of New Media Art ties the time periods of Gonzalez-Torres’ work and Okiishi’s together, as they both are considered to fall

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<sup>19</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

<sup>20</sup> Steyerl, Hito. *Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?* © 2013 *e-flux* and the author, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

under this category. New Media works focus on viewer's relationships with technology (i.e. virtual art, internet...etc.). Gonzalez-Torres works fit into this realm only due to its concern with then-new forms of engagement. Regardless, the presence of the virtual world and its relationship with artwork has had drastic effects on the technique and the way artworks are produced. In conjunction with technology, where does the labeling of "fine arts" lie? Is technology suppressing the necessity of the physical presence or experience of work if all we need or accept as art is duplicated (virtual) images?

Art Historians Howard Singerman and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh have both discussed the concept of "deskilling"<sup>21</sup> and the role it plays in the conversation of the changing in the production of art with technology. Originally an economic term referring to shifts in the American labor market, in art discourse deskilling represents the "persistent effort to eliminate... forms of manual virtuosity from artistic production"<sup>22</sup>. Gonzalez-Torres' work represents a variation on Duchamp's "readymade," --ordinary manufactured objects that signal an interest away from aesthetic, or 'retinal' pleasure-- whilst the broadcasting of images and art as a part of the virtual (internet) represents even more of the negation of the manual or craftsmanship. Again, the argument here is not that this change is wholly negative, it is a reflection and acknowledgement of the loss of the manual aspect of artwork, and how that affects our perception of it. Singerman discusses what he believes to be the root of this: the educational systems desire to disregard the manual, handmade-ness of art and to focus on the visual aspect of

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<sup>21</sup> Connor, Celeste. Op-ed: *Reskill Now!* <http://www.artpractical.com/column/reskill-now/>, © 2009-2017 Art Practical.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

art. The belief Singerman discusses that, “sharpening the power to observe” is more productive than necessarily blossoming ideas into fruition.<sup>23</sup> Deskilling supports the idea that vision is “the present”, it is “forward-looking”, and instead of continuing to teach hands-on techniques (drawing, painting) the academic model should move away from this “antiquity”. While both Gonzalez-Torres and Okiishi represent aspects of manual practices, they also represent the opposite end of the argument, many of Gonzalez-Torres’ and Okiishi’s works focus on the visual aspects of art. Okiishi more so, however, as technology is *gesture/data*’s main platform. Being virtual, it requires the viewer to simply “observe” the work as a screen for viewing, its emphasis on visual observation.

Visual observation versus physical interaction are the main contrasts between the creation and representation of experience. Gonzalez-Torres’ work explores *real* time, we are in the moment with the physical object, we are able to feel its being, its presence. *gesture/data* portrays temporality, a time past that is still able to appear alive in the present. Okiishi is not the only artist that exemplifies this idea of time, and its ability to only provide visual observation, this is a generational exploration. Similar to Okiishi’s work in this way, is Alix Pearlstein’s *Moves in the Field* (2011-12) installation. In this work, video clips are spread around a white-walled gallery space, depicting nine actors’ actions and interactions with one another as well as with the camera. The actors are silent, the only sounds are their shuffling around, the echoes of the room and its outside noises. The camera follows the gaze of the actors as they make direct eye contact with the lens, as if they are looking right out at the viewer, completely aware of the camera’s

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<sup>23</sup> Singerman, Howard. *Art Subjects*. The Regents of the University of California, 1999. (pp 71-73)

presence and of each other.

Pearlstein's actors perform everyday actions, though given there is no *real* sense of their physical space or time, their actions create an overwhelming eeriness, a sense of both the viewer (visual observer) and the actors as being watched. In the installation still (fig. 6 in images), an actress runs towards the viewer, then stops and looks directly outwards. We are once again separated by screen, a separation and reminder of real time, reality and tangible experience, versus virtual, perennial time. These clips, though an encapsulating and inclusive experience for the viewer, remain solely visual observations. They take place in a time and space no longer available for us to become a part of within the moment, or to ever actually become physically a part of. Like Okiishi's *gesture/data, Moves in the Field* is an example of the barrier technology creates, the spectacle's inclusiveness with a catch, viewers together physically but separated mentally.

Pearlstein's clips play on this idea of the spectacle of image and separateness even more so with the relationship between the actors' gaze, and the gaze of the camera. The camera mimics the human manner of observation,<sup>24</sup> so much so that the viewer begins to feel as though they are in conversation with the actor's gaze. The viewer ultimately forms a "trust that the camera is capturing what we are *supposed to see*, even when the camera's point of view is completely disorienting in terms of space and depth..."<sup>25</sup> The viewers of this installation may all

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<sup>24</sup>Tan, Lumi. *Real Time, Screen Time. Abstract Video, The Moving Image in Contemporary Art*. Edited by Gabrielle Jennings. The Regents of the University of California, 2015. (pp. 163-175)

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

share the same space, however are separate in their individual experiences with virtual eye contact. We can only get so close, just close enough to touch, yet are only able to grasp the ambience, excluding any physicality. Pearlstein's work differs from the experience formed by Okiishi's in its production of movement. *Moves in the Field* investigates spatial boundaries while Okiishi is relaying our interaction with technology onto screens with the neon brush strokes resembling our tapping and scrolling, our want to break the spatial boundary Pearlstein exemplifies. Pearlstein's work is important to discuss in conversation with Okiishi's works, because it represents the spectacle's overall relationship between the screen and the viewer. The actors in Pearlstein's clips that are within the screen are making direct eye contact with the audience. They are the middle ground between Gonzalez-Torres' work and Okiishi's, they are the virtual *being* whose purpose is to interact with the viewer rather than an object. However, their gaze is not present, it is not in *real time* with the audience's.

As discussed briefly above, a major transition in relation to technology's influence or impact on the experience of art, is commercialism and Debord's concept of the commodity as a spectacle. The artwork simultaneously becomes the spectacle while being a product of it as well. *Gesture/data* promotes this idea, and as explained by Debordian ideas, forms separateness, a drastic directional change from the purposes of what was called Relational Aesthetic artworks in the 80s-90s. As curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, stated, in *Esthétique Relationelle* (1998), relational aesthetics is the social interactions created between the viewer(s) and a work of art, which he believes in turn, holds the true meaning of art. Gonzalez-Torres's works represent this particularly when viewers become participants, and with this relationship a social



interaction, or togetherness is formed. Conceptual and Installation artwork are the two currents of contemporary art that Relational Aesthetics is built upon. Bourriaud suggests that through, “little gestures-” such as the invitation to unwrap and eat a piece of candy, “the relational fabric [of society] may be restitched...”<sup>26</sup> Gonzalez-Torres’ work does just that.

Okiishi’s screens are also a commodity themselves. Many of them portray advertisements of commercialized objects. For example, one of the television screens show a glitched Quaker Oats ad (fig.7). Though the relationship or connection between human touch and the spectacle or virtual world is apparent, the basis of the artwork is a television. Being a product of the spectacle, it is a commodity: and the images it produces are a representation of consumerism (the Quaker Oats ad in the screen above, 90s sitcoms, other advertisements...etc.). With the rise and popularity of the internet, artworks have begun to *broadcast* the spectacle rather than solely be a product of it. *Gesture/data* presents this in an obstructed form of broken down images, a virtual world of well-known commodities that are stretched out, discolored and unclear.

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<sup>26</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Esthétique Relationelle*. Les Presses Du Reel; edition (2001), originally published 1998.

## Conclusion

Gonzalez-Torres' work embodies a variety of themes, political, socioeconomic, love, loss, identity, grieving, presence, and mortality. Most importantly, his work literally engages any viewer that encounters it. His works do not represent "just looking", and are not simply objects of matter, but the viewer's looking is invested with all the themes listed above. As Gonzalez-Torres said, "every time a viewer comes into the room these objects become something else,"<sup>27</sup> they form relationships with these objects, metaphysical at times, though the viewer must be inside the room, confronting the represented presence of the object in order to feel with it, to connect with it, and to learn from it.

Perhaps Gonzalez-Torres' intense personal connection to his work is what heightens the importance of the experience of the work itself, and the importance of artwork altogether. The viewer immediately empathizes with the dizzying auras of grief, love, loss, life, and political struggle encapsulated within the object in front of them. Whether that be tasting one of Ross' candies, or viewing Gonzalez-Torres' ticking lifeline in *Perfect Lovers*, synchronized with his partner. Knowing the history of their deaths and struggle with HIV/AIDS or not, each object encourages an individual reflection, solely through their own physicality, being present with the

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<sup>27</sup>Rollins, Tim. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Interview*. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Ault, Julie. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Dap-distributed Art, 2016. (pp 68-76).

viewer *without* barriers.

Although images and the circulation of images temporarily provides a form of experience, this experience is not as resonant as the physical ability to touch an artwork, especially if that artwork's intention is for the viewer to learn from the exchange, or contact, and to challenge them intellectually in the present moment in time. While an image provides experience, it is not real, it "catalyzes actions and events," they are now, "nodes of energy and matter, migrating through screens"<sup>28</sup> but they are not able to provide a physical connection of touch in the way Gonzalez-Torres' works, or the way in which aspects of Relational Aesthetics are able to produce. These images surrounding everyday life *are* spectacle, and simulacra, at its fullest extent.

There is no question images have less and less become "renditions of reality" and act more as way to become reality itself, i.e., in place of the actuality. However, they still, are not reality. I argue that they are solely replications of the shared experience between artwork and viewer. They are distractions from actual, tangible significance. *Portrait of Ross, Perfect Lovers*, and *Untitled (Golden)...etc.*, are all examples of the substantive message behind being present with an artwork. No matter what formation of visual observation is under consideration, the image has only shown to be a distraction from the physicality, or relationships built and experienced in a gallery room, face to face, grasping the concept that is held within the makeup,

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<sup>28</sup>Hattam, Victoria and Steyerl, Hito. *The Photographic Universe, Photography and Political Agency?* The New School Lecture Series, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqQ3UTWSmUc>.

and DNA of the artwork.

Can it truly be considered a connection if people are collectively, but still independently looking down at their phones, on separate screens? If a group of viewers are all silently watching the same movie, absorbed by the moving images in front of them, is this experience as real or as palpable, as *actual* objects? The loss of the real lessens the experience's substance, a disconnect forms. Though images may be another form of experience, they are unreal, and undead. Images might, "move through the screen", but viewers are left only to remain stagnant outside the screen, without contact, able to simply observe and think, unable to connect in a way that is currently impossible with the virtual.

Ken Okiishi's exhibition *gesture/data* is a commentary on the relationship we hold with technology today. Viewers are standing in front of screens that reflect their own actions when using technology, while also looking at a reflection and broadcasting of the society of the spectacle,<sup>29</sup> the current state of images and their connection to people's daily lives: as commodities, or popularized and parodied images of reality. As Steyerl describes, actions, or real life, become replicated through images, and those images then formulate actions. They move through the screen into reality while somehow still being a part of the virtual world: they remain untouchable. Though these images create actions and effects in real life, physicality, the actual, is what simulates the authentic, *connected* experience. Connection without distraction, without the obstruction of the spectacle.

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<sup>29</sup>Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

So, have we lost actual experience to mere representation? Artwork today has not lost its ability to embody this concept, this connection or “togetherness”. However, technology’s presence and ironic connecting while disconnecting is only continuing to evolve and engrain itself further into overall culture. Is there a way to keep the connection as shown through Gonzalez-Torres’ work, without the overwhelming presence of the spectacle, or the overflow of images? Is the only current, accepted direction to create a connection without it being real, or with barriers? The internet is a necessity to function in today’s world, but the connection does not have to be lost, it does not have to, as Debord said, “merely appear” or be sunken beneath a waterfall of images.

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Images

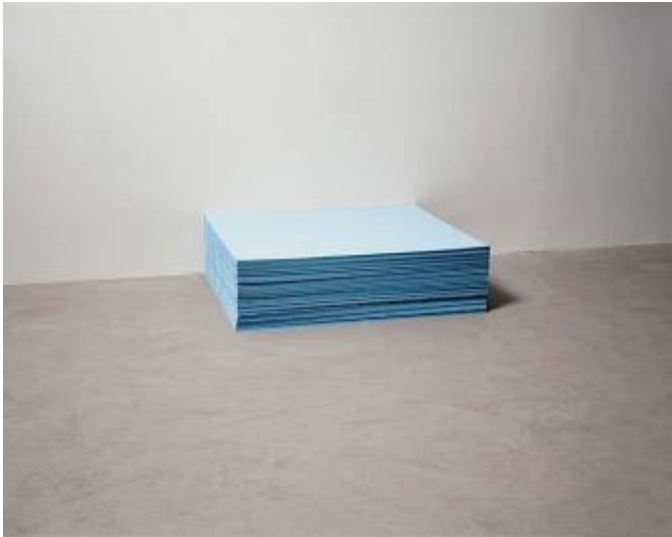


Fig. 2 *Loverboy*, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1991



Fig. 5 *Untitled, (It's Just a Matter of Time)*, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1992



Fig. 3



Fig. 4 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Golden)*, 1995





Fig. 6 Alix Pearlstein, *Moves in the Field*, 2012. Installation Still.



Fig. 7

*gesture/data*, Ken Okiishi, 2015