

VIRUS, IMPOSTER, INFILTRATOR

**RECENT WORK BY
MAXIMILIAN SCHUBERT,
WITH A VISITATION BY
FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES**

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More than almost any artist of his generation—the neo-conceptual, AIDS-ravaged generation of the 1980s and 1990s—Felix Gonzalez-Torres thought about how art moved through the world.

His candies are free to leave museums in pockets, melt on tongues, metabolize in blood-streams. The sheets from his paper stacks can go home in viewers' hands to be framed, or rolled up and saved, or ritually burned, or made love upon, or placed beneath the kitty litter. His light strings appear in various guises in public collections, chameleon-like, casting amiable light on their art neighbors or hanging unassumingly in out-of-the-way places like stairways, corners, elevator lobbies.

In a conversation with Robert Storr, first published in 1995, the year before Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS-related causes, he talked about the dexterity necessary to infiltrate dominant culture so that one's work stands a chance of effecting change within it: "There's a great quote by the director of the Christian Coalition, who said that he wanted to be a spy. 'I want to be invisible,' he said, 'I do guerilla warfare, I paint my face and travel at night. You don't know until election night.' This is good! This is brilliant! ... I want to be a spy, too." Like the best spies, Gonzalez-Torres employed the tools of his subjects. In fact, like the most effective doubleagents he even nurtured their loves, paradoxically, Schrödinger's-cat-style. "Labels are very useful, when you want to be in control," he once said. "Actually, more than anything I think the work is about form. I'm a sucker for formalism ..."

The artist Maximilian Schubert (born 1983) first encountered Gonzalez-Torres's work as a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, where some of the greatest hits were frequently on display in a single room. "Seeing someone take away a poster or eat the candy at that moment felt like a brilliant bit of illicit permission in the museum context, an almost revolutionary generosity," Schubert says. "It felt then—as it does now—that he was making work that had particular and uncommon values, values that said something about what mattered in life (and in death) and what it meant to be human."

Like many artists in New York, Schubert works in windowless studios deep within a Brooklyn warehouse building. Friends and fellow artists sometimes drop by, sometimes curators and dealers, but as he says, "Practically speaking, I work alone, and only alone." Over the last several years, working on a series of pieces that function as something like sculptures of paintings—polyurethane casts made painstakingly from fabric-covered stretchers and painted a trompe-l'oeil grisaille, resulting in a disembodied affect, a kind of fossilization of painting—Schubert thought about artists whose presence he felt with him in the studio, not in body but in spirit, as tutelary deities. He recalled a statement that Philip Guston once made, relating a piece of wisdom originally imparted by John Cage: "When you start working, everybody is in your studio—the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all your own ideas—all are there," Guston said. "But as you continue painting,

they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you're lucky, even you leave."

Few artists are ever so lucky. Schubert would play a game in his mind: As the visitors filed out one by one, who would be last to leave? Gonzalez-Torres always seemed to be the one still sitting there. And so, as he prepared for an upcoming show of new work at Off Paradise, Schubert and Natacha Polaert, the space's founder, reached out to the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation to see if the foundation might help arrange a loan of a work to accompany the exhibition. The foundation contacted a private collector about the idea and an agreement was made to lend "Untitled" (March 5th) #2 from 1991—one of the first works Gonzalez-Torres made using lightbulbs, in this case a pair, one potentially standing in for himself and one for Ross Laycock, his lover, who had died of AIDS that year (March 5 was Laycock's birthday.) But the loan came with a twist, one wholly in keeping with Gonzalez-Torres's ethos. The work would be loaned to be installed only in Schubert's studio as he finished the pieces for the show, a nonpublic public loan, furthering Gonzalez-Torres's complex, longstanding interest in the interplay between public and private. The artist's presence would inhere in the show itself as a kind of spiritual tincture, an energy in the realm of the interstitial (... we live/In the interstices, between a vacant stare and the ceiling, John Ashbery wrote in "Say It To Keep It From Happening.") In the weeks leading up to the exhibition, "Untitled" (March 5th) #2 was brought to Schubert's studio, lightbulbs were purchased, and the work was hung and plugged in, illuminating a corner between two cast-painting pieces, shining on two other recent bodies of work—a series titled Stations, sculptures made of propane tanks attached to bent aluminum tubing punctured at various intervals, allowing small flames to burn, slowly expending the fuel; and Two, a series of cast silver pieces modeled from two overlapping plain clay slabs, recording the impression of fingerprints and the artist's hand.

As part of the show, Schubert also began making a book to document his work in the studio, though he decided to restrict that documentation to everything except proper images of the art works themselves—to "the meetings, the errands, the ladder leaning against the wall, the box fan, the ironing of the linen, the floor, the snow sifted on the cars outside, the empty corner where the Felix work would hang, the corner with the work in it, the corner empty again—everything that involves and surrounds the work you're seeing, the things you don't usually see."

Emilie Keldie, director of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, said the book, as an additional, liminal art space, helped seal the idea for the loan. "While a private installation of the artwork may seem unconventional," she said, "the foundation suggested this loan structure both as a way of gesturing towards strategies in Gonzalez-Torres's practice that signal the arbitrary and permeable delineations of public and private spheres and also as a response to the character of the book."

Schubert and the photographer Kevin Brady took color pictures of the Gonzalez-Torres installation but the rest primarily with an old Yashica T4 point-and-shoot camera loaded with 3200-speed black-and-white film, a highly sensitive format often used to take night-time pictures of the stars and that, when brought into a fluorescent-lighted studio, produces grainy, remote images that seem as if transmitted by fax from a surveillance camera on the dark side of the moon.

“The book, being entirely about process, not a document but a kind of remembering of everything that goes into a show, is in line with the “Untitled” (March 5th) #2 work, which is always unfolding, always in process and comes out of the space of remembering,” Schubert says. “It also has a strangeness to it—this incredible piece that any museum would be happy to have being with me in my studio while I create the work. The book is an effort to share this experience.”

It is also, of course, a fellow-traveler’s furtherance of the mission Gonzalez-Torres set out for his own work before his death, to keep it unpredictably on the move, in the world and in context, its meaning never circumscribed by his own history or by the weight of interpretation. In a 1994 conversation with Joseph Kosuth, he described the idea as a strategic feint, a maneuver that remains urgently relevant in a political landscape whose threats Gonzalez-Torres foresaw as clearly if he were still alive today confronting them: “At this point I do not want to be outside the structure of power, I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative to what: To power? No. I want to have power. It’s effective in terms of change. I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are, in other words, replicating themselves; because that’s the way the culture works. So if I function as a virus, an imposter, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself ...”