

“The smallest amounts of space that we can call our own”: Bed Works by Robert Rauschenberg and Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Jessica Kirsh

In spite of belonging to separate generations of American culture, artists Robert Rauschenberg and Felix Gonzalez-Torres were equally successful in pushing the boundaries of art-making. Their bodies of work could not be more different as Rauschenberg worked in the midst of high modernism and Gonzalez-Torres was later ascribed to post-modernist genres. Yet despite this gap, the two artists conceptually interceded. A ‘Combine’ painting by Rauschenberg titled *Bed* (1955), currently exhibited at the MOMA, and “Untitled”, 1991, a photo-installation by Gonzales-Torres, displayed at twenty-four different locations around New York City, evidence this intersection. Both works employ the semblance of an empty unmade bed and depict the imprint of a body – thus creating a strong tension between presence and absence. As Rauschenberg and Gonzalez-Torres have both dually noted, the beds were in fact their own, an element which effectively transforms the works into self-portraits. As opposed to conventional portraiture, essentially concerned with faces and/or figures, Rauschenberg and Gonzalez-Torres have successfully re-coded expressions of their private life whilst using memory in creating their art. The unmade bed, “the smallest amounts of space that we can call our own,”¹ transcends into the public sphere, embodying both personal and universal connotations, such as death, fear, loss and/or heartbreak. These autobiographical works take on additional meaning, when considering that both artists were homosexual in orientation. Whereas Rauschenberg never spoke publically about his sexuality, one

interpretation suggests that Gonzalez-Torres dedicated his entire oeuvre to the lover that he lost to AIDS. Despite the fact that four decades separate these artworks and, as such, situate them within different political, academic and artistic contexts, it is the use of a bed that lends *Bed* by Robert Rauschenberg and “Untitled” by Felix Gonzalez-Torres to queer reading. Ultimately, each work’s level of legibility is differentiated by its style, medium and viewing location.

As the title suggests, Rauschenberg’s piece consists of an actual rendition of a vertically hung bed complete with pillows and a quilt, upon which a vast array of paint is presented in such a way as to appear to splattered and dripping. The piece is strikingly simple yet strangely compelling; the overall effect aided and abetted by the materials used, “oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports.” It is in fact, the artist’s brilliant incorporation of his own quilt and pillow into this ‘Combine’ artwork that elicits such a strong, personal connection with its audience. At the time of *Bed*’s creation, Rauschenberg was essentially impoverished: his ten dollars for rent, his food budgeted at fifteen cents, using a bucket as a sink, whilst having his personal hygiene limited to the hospitality of friends.² Having no money for a canvas and having nothing more to paint on, he resorted to taking the quilt off his own bed and stretching it to form a canvas.³ Rauschenberg persistently denied that there was no meaning associated with his artwork, explaining his process simply a random order.⁴ This denial does not strike as surprising, considering that Rauschenberg also adamantly denied himself ‘sharing his bed’ with Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns.⁵ It is evident that the decade during which this artwork was produced was arguably one of the most homophobic in American history.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ “Untitled” was created within the year following the loss of his companion, Ross Laycock, to AIDS.⁶ The soft-focus photograph depicts the bed that they used to share nightly, and as such, left bodily imprints that are evocative of fragility and a haunting absence. As the photograph only shows the top section of the bed, the viewer is compelled to focus on the two indented pillows and the turned down sheets, which suggests that they recently left their bed. Unlike Rauschenberg, Gonzalez-Torres was very open about his relationship: he is quoted having said that the only audience he cared about was Ross; everyone else just came to the work.⁷

Both artists chose to deal with their homosexuality in vastly different metaphorical ways, as evidenced by Gonzalez-Torres’s decision to portray a

double bed, contrasting with Rauschenberg's inclination towards a single. However, Gonzalez-Torres did not hide the intent behind his work, as the implicit homosexual theme is not noticeable to the viewer if unaware of the artist's biography. It is thus evident, that "Untitled" is not explicitly homoerotic; it could just as easily depict a heterosexual romance, familial love, or even strangers having recently shared a bed. Not unlike Rauschenberg, he refrains from expressing or exposing his identifiable self. In addition, both works are evocative of absence – as if identities are being repressed or hidden.⁸ Though the LGBT community had become better distinguished and somewhat more socially acceptable since Rauschenberg's time, it was still highly marginalized and thus made apparent as visual sub-text within their work. During the AIDS crisis in the 1980's, public retained the misconception that only homosexuals and drug-users could become HIV positive.⁹ At the time, political leaders such as George Bush Sr. and Jesse Helms exacerbated these socio-cultural issues, as their positions of power were latent with discriminatory right-winged views. They were therefore capable of censoring any art that they did not adhere to their heteronormative values; one such example being, the Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective. The right-wing leaders further propelled their agenda by passing laws that further denied the rights of homosexual individuals. The aggressive censoring the arts and the domestic sphere, is reminiscent of what also occurred after the American victory in World War II, with the subsequent rise of McCarthyism during the cold war.¹⁰ There was an explicit aim to solidify right-winged power structures, whilst threatening any minority deemed an 'Other'. It is therefore evident that Rauschenberg's art-making fell into the post World War II time frame, making *Bed* and subsequently, "Untitled", both products of desire and despair.

Although both Rauschenberg and Felix Gonzalez-Torres produced art in very rich art historical periods, they did not, however, choose to conform to one singular movement. Rauschenberg's contemporaries consisted primarily of Abstract Expressionists (i.e. Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline): a male-dominated movement which sought artistic autonomy through autographical brushstrokes. Before Rauschenberg met Johns, his work was very 'empty', as he 'erased' drawings by De Kooning, built Minimalist box sculptures, and created a Black series and White series of paintings.¹¹ He subsequently began to experiment with multiplicity, via comic strip collages and 'Combines', in which he mixed "form, texture, tone and media with non-art"¹² to create a "littered tundra of commemorative decay."¹³ Although *Bed*, his first Combine painting, em-

employs an abstract technique, Rauschenberg continues to “denigrate the authorial ‘I’ in favour of the spectatorial ‘You’” by negating the hand of the artist and utilizing found objects.¹⁴ The paint does not stand alone; its juxtaposition with the image of a bed invites many differing interpretations, ranging from violent acts such as rape or murder (due to red being the dominant color), to childhood nightmares. Stylistically, it appears to embody qualities of both Pop and Neo-Dadaism. It is visually evident that his resistance to being perceived as a product of his time, whether intentional or not, further exaggerates his status as outsider, ‘Other’, or queer.

Postmodern artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, has equally failed to fit into any particular stylistic sub-genre. His work has been called Minimalist, yet Conceptual, which is problematic given that these styles are arguably polar-opposites. It is widely believed that the Conceptual art movement was born as a solution to Minimalism, in effort to call an end to modernism’s reductivist tendencies.¹⁵ This is apparent as Gonzalez-Torres’s work requires active participation from his audience (e.g. taking pieces of candy from his installations) which frustrates the Minimalist goals of an object’s autonomy.¹⁶ In sharp contrast, the auratic and referential aesthetic of his photographs distance him from Conceptual Art or Jeff Wall’s photojournalist style. This has caused problems when attempting to categorize Gonzalez-Torres’s work, like Rauschenberg. Just as photography’s ability to capture reality led painting into abstraction, photography’s ability to act as an accessible tool for capturing everyday life has also signalled the de-skilling of artists.¹⁷ Rauschenberg and Gonzales-Torres’s decision to embody the role of producer, rather than that of the shaman, is reflected by their integration of objects and images from the everyday. Thus transforming their viewers from contemplative individuals into collective masses, they exemplify a concept introduced by Walter Benjamin. This action evidently positions their artwork in opposition to bourgeois culture.¹⁸

Bed and “Untitled” were executed in two completely different mediums, which in turn demands two separate ways of looking at them. Whilst incorporating several sculptural elements such as a wood frame and material objects, *Bed* stands in contrast with conventional paintings of the time. This is evidenced by Rauschenberg’s use of a quilt, an item historically associated with folk culture and feminine craft, which consequently places him outside modernist discourse. Clement Greenberg, a famous American modern art critic and Abstract Expressionist expert/enthusiast, wrote in his essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,”

that the avant-garde (in this case, abstract and non-objective art) was beginning to be threatened by a new art form: labeled as kitsch. Greenberg explained the popularity of this inexpensive form of commercial art and literature by saying that “when enough time has elapsed, the new is looted for new ‘twists’ which are then watered down and served up as kitsch.”¹⁹ Rauschenberg chose to follow in the path of kitsch, resisting Greenberg’s ideologies which insisted that paintings should, first and foremost, focus on the artist’s handling of paint as a medium. Furthermore, the quilt’s association to the feminine causes the artwork to disrupt gender binaries. In the nineteenth century, only a few women could write yet all of them possessed the knowledge of sewing regardless of age, race or social status.²⁰ Quilting was seen as both an individual and collective past time, always serving to document the social and emotional lives of the women who made them. By partially concealing the quilt under the guise of abstract painting (which, as previously mentioned, was a blatant modernist symbol of masculinity) Rauschenberg was attempting to cover up its femininity, like a masquerade – blurring the division between previously established gender roles. However, as he himself readily admitted, “no matter how much paint I put on it, it just wouldn’t seem like anything else but a quilt to me.”²¹

Felix Gonzalez-Torres uses photography as a means of unifying artistic and socio-political spheres. Like Rauschenberg, his artwork succeeds in transcending two-dimensionality to three-dimensionality. Whereas Rauschenberg blurs the line between painting and sculpture, “Untitled” is transformed from an endlessly-reproducible photograph to a temporary art installation displayed on a billboard. Gonzales-Torres plays with the fact that photographs are no longer ‘unique’ (in that they can be re-printed or re-photocopied) by displaying the photograph in twenty-four different locations. However, each venue gives the photograph a different aura, a phenomenon associated with an original photograph as explained by Walter Benjamin.²² In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, the feelings of death, loss and memory are further exaggerated when “Untitled” is examined in conjunction with Barthes’ theories, as outlined in his book *Camera Lucida*. Barthes explains that, when taking a photograph, one is figuratively and literally ‘shooting’ the subject.²³ The photographic action was most likely very therapeutic for the grief felt by Gonzalez-Torres over Ross’ death. As opposed to assembling physical objects to create a bed, Gonzalez-Torres utilizes his photograph of a bed as the found object, which speaks about our generation as a product of the digital/commercial age. However, as a billboard could be mistaken for an advertisement, there is no

logo, brand name or text within the art work. Gonzalez-Torres appears to be playing with the notion of commodity culture as white sheets are equally considered objects of mass production. However, each sheet holds a unique imprint deriving from the recent contact it had with a human body.

Each work's location and interaction with space greatly affects the manner in which it is perceived by the viewer. The institutionalized context of *Bed* in one of the world's most prestigious museums (the MOMA in New York City) is likely to attract a very different audience in comparison to that of "Untitled", which was originally displayed in both the Andrea Rosen gallery as a digital print, as well as on various commercial billboards around the city. From a Foucauldian perspective, buildings are instruments for purveying power.²⁴ Art institutions, particularly the MOMA, perfectly illustrate the concept that built spaces function as an "apparatus for fashioning ranks and roles of people in society".²⁵ Located in the heart of Manhattan, the MOMA has long held a major influence over the avant-garde. Given its location, not to mention high admission fee, it is not surprising that it tends to cater to a more privileged audience. Despite this work's juxtaposition with many other legendary artists, it still manages to maintain a decidedly urban feel, and reflects the message that high art can be achieved through materials that are otherwise deemed crude. Although both works exhibit a subject that would normally be confined to the private sphere, Gonzalez-Torres goes beyond those boundaries: his work is made accessible to an even larger viewership – the viewers of the commercial advertising. It is evident that the work is situated outside the bounded discourse of the modern gallery, permitting visibility to the non-elite. Furthermore, he defies the concept of the exhibition as fixed by entering residential, industrial and commercial zones.²⁶ The photograph becomes lost in a sea of advertisements and architecture. As such, he appears to be investigating the authority of the artist as well as the power of the visual image. It can also be suggested that he is commenting on the public scrutiny over private behaviour – a sensitive subject from the perspective of an HIV-positive man, fighting to speak in an oppressive society. In the 1986 case *Bowers vs. Hardwick*, the Supreme Court determined that the zone of privacy "does not encompass a private individual's right to engage in certain sexual acts."²⁷ As a result, no area exists which one can call his/her own. Born in Cuba and living a portion of his life in Puerto Rico, Gonzalez-Torres is still evaluating whether or not New York City is a place he can truly call 'home'.

The artworks' size and orientation strongly affects their presence within the space. *Bed* stands at over six feet tall and "Untitled" is larger-than-life. The monumental size of both works, cry out for attention and demand to be heard. Having both undergone a change of axis: *Bed* is transformed from a conventionally horizontal piece of furniture to an upright canvas, whilst hovering over the viewer it effectively eliminates its original function as a mere piece of furniture. "Untitled" subverts the traditional orientation of advertisements from vertical to landscape. These changes indicate different or 'queer' ways of looking at an already identifiable image, refuting dominant pre-conceived notions while extrapolating visceral reactions from viewers. This was an important factor for both Rauschenberg and Gonzales-Torres given that they both anticipated a certain amount of participation from their audience. In Rauschenberg's case, he worried that someone would try to climb into his *Bed* – perhaps mirroring his anxiety of being 'outed'.²⁸ In regard to Gonzalez-Torres, his entire body of work required the participation of an audience, leading some critics to believe that "Untitled" was created not only as a memorial for his lover but also a symbol for AIDS.²⁹ When his billboards were commissioned and displayed around the city, many believed it to be an attempt to spread AIDS awareness, however the peaceful subtlety and hopeful demeanour conveyed in the photograph both belies and contradict this assumption. Gonzales-Torres's work stands in sharp contrast to other contemporary activist work, be it the aggressive, over-sexualized tactics of ACT UP or the dreadful documentary photographs of AIDS victims.

The two works by Rauschenberg and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, coupled with the pervading opportunist climate that invited anyone to 'jump in' to the art scene regardless of age, sexuality or gender, foreshadowed the controversial work by Young British Artist Tracy, Emin, titled *My Bed* (1998). For its creation, the artist's own unmade bed was transported to the Tate Gallery in London in 1999, with every detail intact from a time when she was suffering from suicidal depression.³⁰ The installation consisted of sheets stained with bodily secretions, as well as used condoms, bloody underwear and a number of other detritus littered on the surrounding floor. In this art form, known as "confessional art", an artist is driven to share the most intimate details of her life with the public.³¹ Although similar in regard to the underlying concepts of Rauschenberg and Gonzalez-Torres's art, Emin's work contains no nuance. Her bed blatantly expresses her tortured emotions and sexual difference while, at the same time, criticizes society's economy of excess. In an unprecedented act of audience par-

icipation, two performance artists, Cai Yuan and Xi Jianjun, believing that they could improve the work, opted to jump on Emin's bed and have a pillow fight.³² This went on for a good fifteen minutes, accompanied by a cheering crowd, before they were unceremoniously escorted from the gallery by security. This event gave rise to additional interpretations being assigned to the work, from issues of invasion of privacy, sensationalism, and of course, femininity trampled on patriarchy. The bed also became a symbol for homelessness, whilst reinstating the object's many connotations, both personal and universal.

In contrast to Emin's work, Rauschenberg and Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work are rife with nuance: their beds incorporate a system of semiotics, whereby signs, symbols and codes (i.e. details such as splattered paint, wrinkled sheets, quilts and indented pillows) interact with each other to create meaning. The decision to re-code these works, thus preventing direct legibility of the signifier, implies the poststructuralist Foucauldian notion of the 'death of the author.' It is therefore the responsibility of the reader to criticize a text based on its formal aspects. The author does not precede the work nor do his individual characteristics maintain significance; the text becomes a subject to be deconstructed by the reader according to the discourses which vary between cultures. Rauschenberg believed that the meaning belonged to the people,³³ whereas Gonzalez-Torres' body of work all remain untitled: a tool previously used in the numbered paintings of the Abstract Expressionists. It is evident that the viewer is forced to discern his/her own interpretation of the artwork, without the artist's aid.

In the case of *Bed* by Rauschenberg and "Untitled" by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the dichotomous relationship between revealing and concealing, absence and presence, can perhaps be attributed to the repressive contextual environment surrounding queer artists. Another explanation lies with their desire to simultaneously utilize the universal connotations of a bed in order to engage its spectators, whilst keeping elements of their personal life private. Whether 'closeted' or 'open', painted or photographed, institutionalized or publically viewed, these two artworks stand out from their contemporaries for their influential uniqueness and quiet rebelliousness.

Endnotes

1. Anne Umland, "Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, Gottingen: Steidl/publishers, 2006, 243.

2. Rick Barot, "Rauschenberg's Bed," *Yale Review* 96.1 (2008): 67.
3. Jonathan Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," *Queer Cultural Centre*, accessed August 10th 2011, <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html>. Johns and Rauschenberg had a six year relationship.
4. Christopher Ho, "Within and Beyond: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 'Crowd'", *A Journal of Performance and Art* 23.1 (2001), 2.
5. Umland, "Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 241.
6. Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html>.
7. Jonathan Katz, "The Senators were Offended: Homophobia and the Culture Wars", In *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia ones, Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006, 236.
8. Katz, "The Senators were Offended: Homophobia and the Culture Wars", 234.
9. Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html>.
10. Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg*, 63.
11. Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html>.
12. Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg*, 63.
13. Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html>
14. Ibid.
15. Ho, "Within and Beyond: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 'Crowd'", 3. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid, 10.
18. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," In *Art and Theory, 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Pal Wood, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 544.
19. Elaine Hedges, *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press, 1987, 11.
20. Elizabeth Avadon, ed. *An Interview with Robert Raschenberg and Barbara Rose*, New York: Vintage Books, 1987, 62.
21. Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." (1935) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 217-252

22. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1980, 92.
23. John Archer, "Social Theory of Space: Architecture and the Production of the Self, Culture, and Society", *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64.4 (2005): 430.
24. Ibid.
25. Umland, "Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 243
26. Ibid, 245
27. Barot, "Rauschenberg's Bed," 70. Umland, "Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 241.
28. Deborah Cherry, "Tracey Emin's 'My Bed'," The European Graduate School, Accessed August 10 2011, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/tracey-emin/articles/tracey-emins-my-bed/>
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Katz-Pages/KatzLovers.html>.