Reorienting Intimacies: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's First Canadian Solo Exhibition
A Conversation with Rui Mateus Amaral

Laura M. Coby

"All bodies are vulnerable to the affect of others," writes José Esteban Muñoz (2020) in *The Sense of Brown* (51). The work of queer, contemporary artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres facilitates affectual encounters that privilege relational connections. His minimalist sculptural objects carry affect with them that may transfer onto the spectator. This is not to say these transmissions of feeling are received or interpreted monolithically by all who encounter them. Instead, Gonzalez-Torres offers affective constructs as an analytic for the spectator to relate to the works and the world around them. Perhaps the spectator might find kinship with the affective structures embedded in the work, or they might feel a solidarity between the current political moment's alignment with the feelings Gonzalez-Torres's pieces evoke. The possibilities of feeling are variable and endless. Gonzalez-Torres's works often straddle the line between public and private emotions. Specifically, he interrogates: What happens when typically private feelings of desire or mourning are made public? What does it mean to expose the most profound and intimate parts of oneself to another, and what might we risk, conjure, or attain in such an exchange? With widespread global lockdowns in our recent collective memory, we know what it is like to be isolated from one another and what it might mean for shared touch or breath to be forbidden. As we enter new phases of pandemic life, we might (re)consider what intimacy can look like. In this piece, I turn to *Summer/Winter*, the first solo exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's work in Canada, curated by Rui Mateus Amaral, to explore Gonzalez-Torres's artworks as affectual objects that counter current systemic injustices with divergent ways of thinking, feeling, sensing, and relating.

Summer/Winter engages with mortality in a way that addresses life and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic and the AIDS epidemic, as well as creating space to contemplate broader ideas of intimacy, grief, pleasure, and longing. Amaral, adjunct curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto, presented *Summer/Winter* in twofold, creating a state of constant tension and transition. From March 10 to May 30, 2022, the works took on the form of *Summer*, but as the cool spring melted into summer heat, the works shifted into *Winter*, transforming the gallery space by altering several of the artworks' formations. Carefully attending to mass loss, death, and grief, this timely exhibition imagines how to persevere and find alternative means of connection and survival. Speaking to physical and emotional care work, *Summer/Winter* considers how we relate to one another and dwells in the hope of possibility and beauty. By looking to Gonzalez-Torres's work, we might adopt a Muñozian "critical methodology" of hope as a "backward glance that enacts a future vision" (Muñoz 2009, 4). In attending to the past, we might better understand and critique the present with the hope of enacting kinder, more pleasurable, communal futures.

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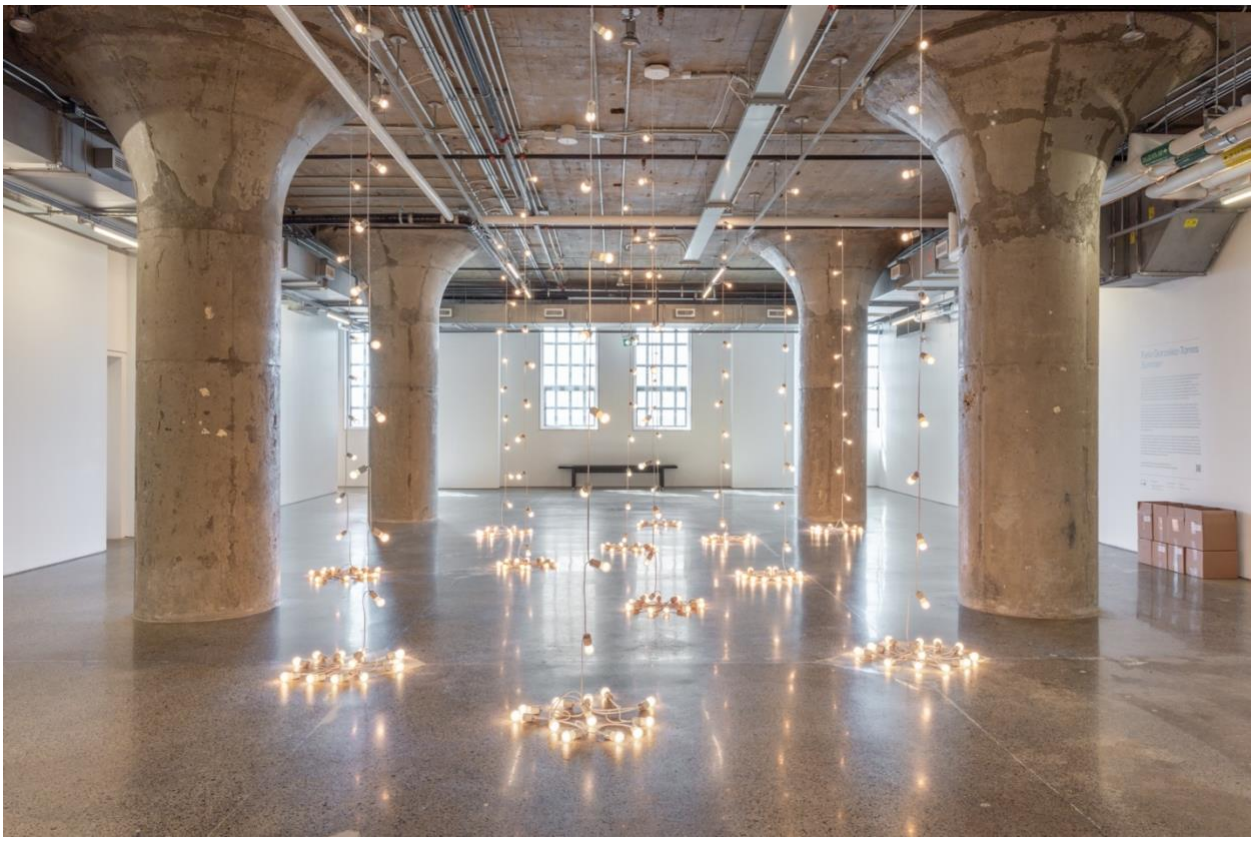


Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (North)*, 1993, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

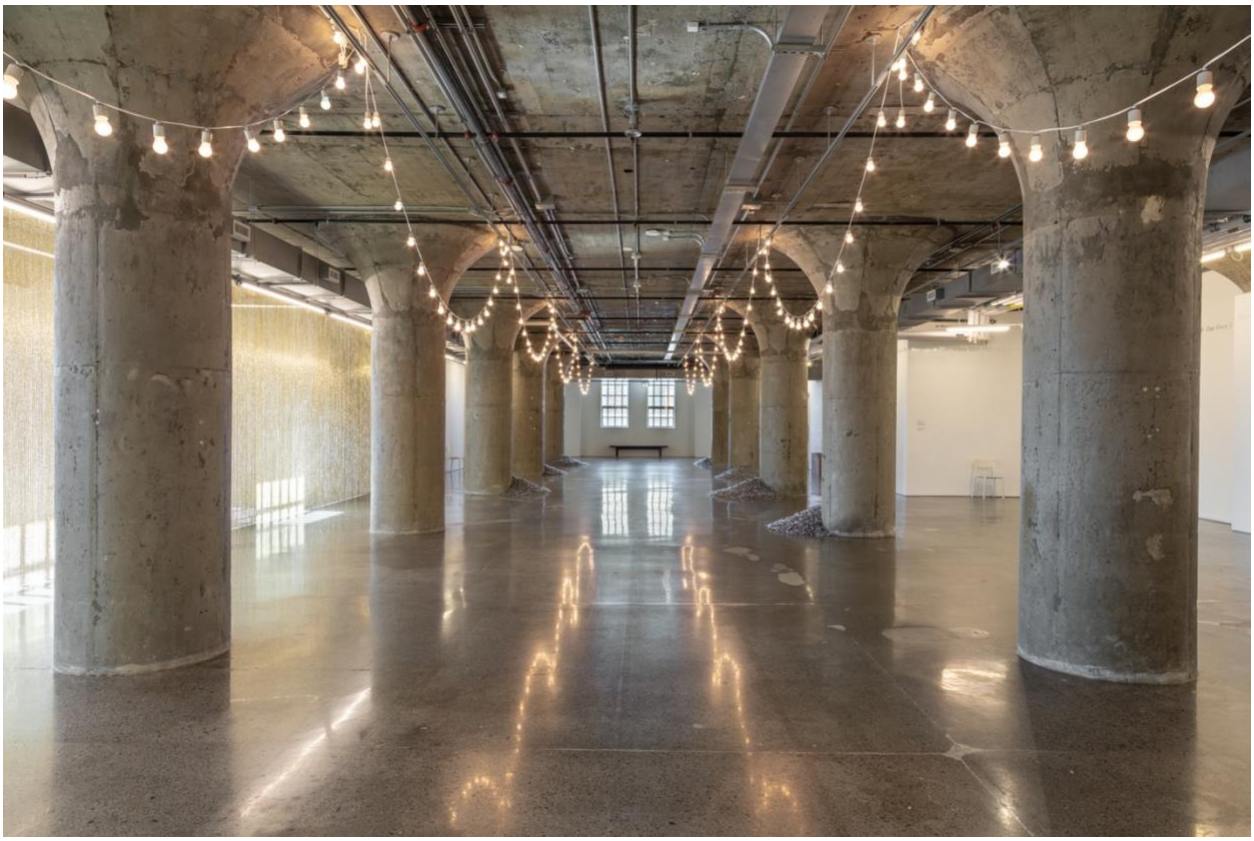
Summer/Winter was staged in the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto (MOCA), an industrial block-like tower situated next to a Nestlé candy factory in the heart of the city. Scaling the industrial south-facing staircase to reach the Gonzalez-Torres exhibition on the third floor, the spectator encounters ambient sound, deep with a soothing buzz and boom. Debashis Sinha's soundscape *in the house's endeepended wide gracious flow* swells as one ascends the steps to *Summer*. This sonic meditation sets the scene for collective imagining alongside internal introspection through its soothing and stimulating sounds. Turning the corner into the exhibition, the first piece the spectator encounters is *"Untitled" (North)*, one of the artist's light strings. Cantina lights dangle from the ceiling in twelve distinct strands. The bulbs emit a warm glow that travels from the top of the light string down to the puddles of light formed on the floor. Their rigging blends into the industrial ceiling; their linearity mirrors the architectural cement columns that frame them. Once the strands reach the ground, the lights splay out into circles, mimicking the spokes of a tire or tentacles of an octopus. The light strings stagger backward, floating into the depth of the room. Showcased along the corridor are a candy pile beyond the lights, a golden curtain to the right, a suggestion of a puzzle, and a textual portrait lining the left and back walls. Directly beyond *"Untitled" (North)*, *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)*, a candy work, lies on the speckled concrete floor. Black rods of hard licorice carpet the floor in an organic, squoval shape. The bare patches and particularly sparse corners come from the spectator's interaction with the piece. Though the candy can be replaced endlessly by the institution, the curator has the choice to replace the pieces or not. Amaral enlisted his colleagues at MOCA to decide how often to replace the licorice. After speaking with visitor experience guides Felicia Daisy and Charren Cheung in July 2022, I learned that for *Summer*, MOCA chose to not replace the candy. The candies sink into the ground—shimmering like broken glass, heavy like a corpse. This candy piece glistens as

the light from the windows, the other pieces, and the above fluorescent fixtures reflect off the cellophane wrappers.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Summer*, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

Beyond *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)*'s mass that covers the ground, *"Untitled,"* the textual portrait from 1989, reflects its silver letters bordering the top of the room. Travelling around the left side and back half of the room, this textual representation of Gonzalez-Torres's life—including monumental events from history and seemingly banal extractions from everyday life—guides the spectator's eye up and around the gallery space. Phrases like "Harry the Dog 1983," "CDC 1981," and "Loverboys 1990" punctuate the space. On either side of *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)*, the viewer is confronted with the remainder of *Summer*'s spoils. On the right side, the magnitude of the curtain *"Untitled" (Golden)* spans across a long threshold in the space. Golden beads fall from the ceiling, spilling onto the space right above the floor. Spectators touch, caress, and walk through the gilded strands like a baptism of light; this movement leaves the curtain undulating like a wave. The glittering gold curtain shrouds a portion of *"Untitled"* lining the ceiling, two simple benches, and gridded windows depicting an idyllic cityscape of Toronto. The natural light dances across the opulent disco ball–shaped beads almost completely masquerading the exhibition on the other side. Opposite *"Untitled" (Golden)*, *"Untitled" (Shield)*, an 7 ½ x 9 ½ inch puzzle wrapped in a plastic bag, is situated on the wall. An image of Ross Laycock, Gonzalez-Torres's partner, is depicted across the assembled puzzle pieces. He clutches a

teddy bear and holds it in front of his face; this pose reveals a bruise on his left arm and ring on his finger. The piece is wrapped in a somewhat dingy plastic bag—all pieces perfectly aligned. Held up by small metal pins, this work's humble, delicate stature acts in contrast to the grandeur of *"Untitled" (Golden)* across the way. While the majority of the pieces are a feat of grand spatiality, even the 8 x 10 inch *"Untitled" (Shield)* brings a large-scale gravity to it. *"Untitled" (Shield)* does not have to fight for attention against the larger pieces: its coloration sits in stark contrast with the vast whiteness of the wall surrounding it, and its affective resonance envelops the spectator in tenderness.



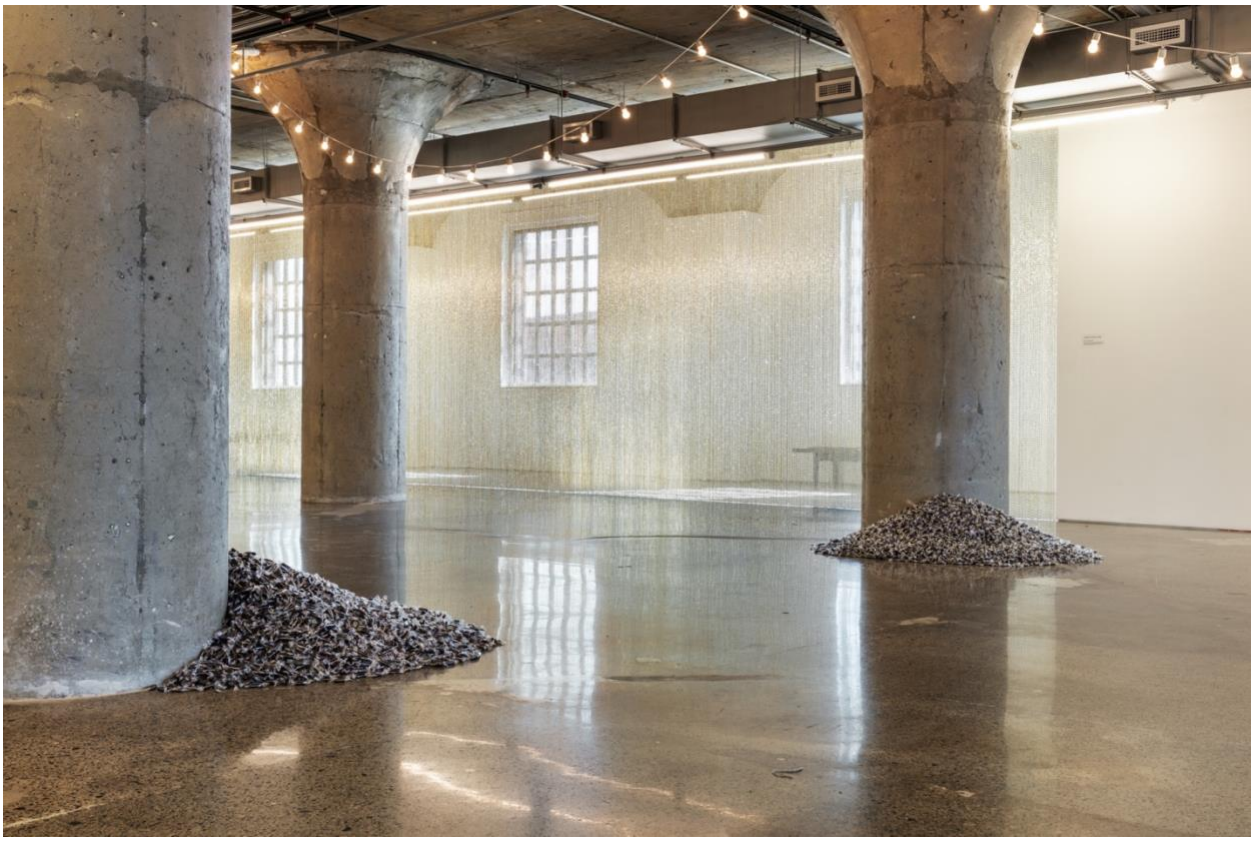
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Winter*, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

As the show shifts from *Summer* into *Winter*, several of the works morph into new shapes, new semantics. Moving from centralized pieces, *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)*, *"Untitled" (North)*, and *"Untitled"* 1989 infiltrate the span of the gallery space. As the exhibition moves forward into a new season, *"Untitled"* 1989 expands temporally by adding dates, events, and moments to its memory and spatially by adding length to its sprawl lining the room. The text that wraps around the exhibition now extends onto the wall by the elevators—prompting a new beginning, an extension from the start, a rewriting, a recollection. The spectator is invited to move with the piece across the room, guiding them to new encounters not only with this diary piece but the updated placements of the other works in *Winter*. The reflection of light off of the pieces seems to make some of the phrases disappear depending on one's distance from them, only coming back into view as the viewer navigates their way to or from the writing. The evolution from *Summer* to *Winter* can, of course, be seen, but it can also be smelled. The room takes on a decidedly more pungent scent of licorice in *Winter* than it did in *Summer*; the candy work is now sitting in numerous hefty mounds lining the bottoms of the industrial pillars of the room. Unlike *Summer*, the museum replaces the black rod

licorice during *Winter*. Where once one could see sparsity of *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)* or visualize the change one was able to make by altering the mass over time, now the multiple piles of candy are replenished regularly, multiplying in abundance. Despite the potential for there to be more pieces of candy during this iteration of the exhibition, the individual piles of candy appear humble compared to the massive licorice carpet in *Summer*. The individual pockets of candy are not the only piece of Gonzalez-Torres's that line the architecture of the room; the shine of *"Untitled" (North)*'s light strings swoops across the industrial columns, forming reverse arches. Where once the spectator had to navigate around or through the lights, they now gather directly underneath their glow. This inviting, celebratory canopy signals some sort of gathering or party. With these pieces dispersed along the sides of the space, *Winter* clears the centre of the room and suggests a runway.

Despite *Winter*'s celebratory composition, arriving to the museum before fellow visitors fill the gallery space leaves the exhibition feeling haunted yet charged with a sense of potentiality, like a party where everyone had to leave too soon. This buzzing sense of emptiness does not indicate finality, nor does it foreclose or limit possibility within the space. Through the recognition that something is missing, the uninhabited space acknowledges the presence of the past, attuning to the vibrations of what was once there and the promise of what is to come: "That the party falls apart, then, is not its negation, but its condition of possibility. It is, paradoxically, its principle of hope" (Chambers-Letson 2018, 239).

Winter's vacant electricity does not signal an end but, instead, a remembrance of past gatherings and an invitation to commune with the works. The lights are still on, and candy is strewn everywhere, lining the pillars and waiting for a private encounter with the spectator. As the day progresses and more people fill the room, the exhibition shifts from the anticipatory feeling of being vacated and is brought to life. This spatial awareness further exemplifies how the spectator's engagement with the work enlivens Gonzalez-Torres's art. Through sensorial encounters with these art objects, the spectator is confronted with the materiality of the pieces—considering not only what they mean but what they are: glass light bulbs strung together with white, plastic cords; silvery vinyl letters and numbers plastered onto the wall; golden plastic beads held together by thin string with bald patches from the wear and tear of shipping or from the constant touching and walking through; a cardboard puzzle wrapped in a plastic bag that is not quite transparent due to years of handling and display; sugary candies made in a factory, each individual piece wrapped in small square of clear plastic. Gonzalez-Torres's use of quotidian objects paired with Amaral's curation of these five artworks invites the spectator to be in conversation with the pieces—to touch, taste, smell, listen, and view in ways that might be contradictory to how they usually do.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Winter*, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

Attending to the caring curation of *Summer/Winter* by Amaral, this piece explores what it means to be in communion within the contexts of these specific artworks. During the span of the exhibition, I had the privilege of meeting with Amaral to get valuable insight on the craft of his curation, tap into his wealth of knowledge about Gonzalez-Torres, and deliberate the interpretive possibilities of *Summer/Winter*. Throughout our conversation, Amaral sheds light on his curatorial practices, delineating the material intricacies and theoretical intentions for the exhibition. We explore the sensorial valences, political implications, and life-affirming choreography of the show as well as interrogate the significance of this being the first solo exhibition of the artist's work in Canada. In theoretical conversation with queer theorists and performance scholars, I contend that Amaral's curation of *Summer/Winter* taps into the breath and breadth of Gonzalez-Torres's practice, negotiating loss and imagining new futures.

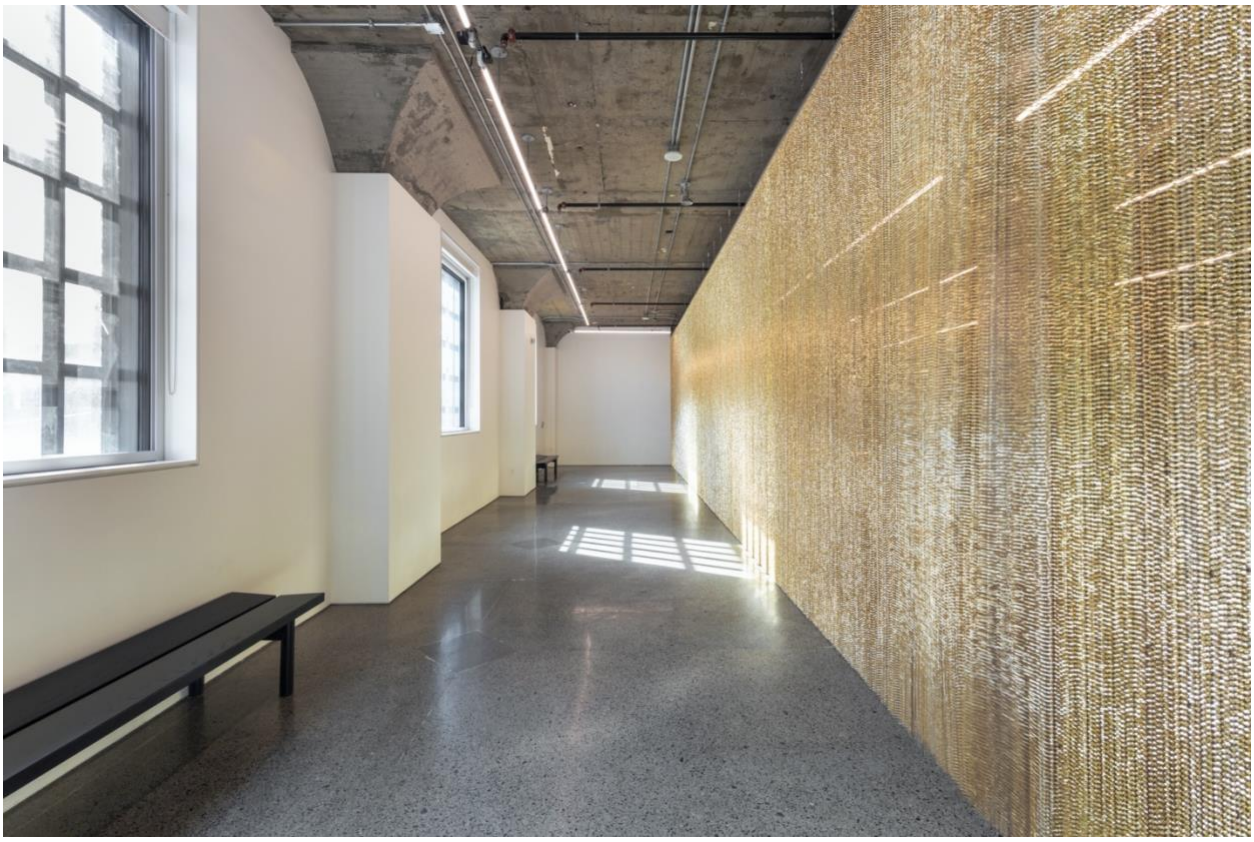
Curatorial Choreography: Negotiating the Object & the Body

While there are several entrances to the exhibition, Amaral expertly draws the body through and around the pieces in a way that, regardless of the viewer's starting point, they will encounter each of the works intimately. All the pieces are arranged in a manner that feels undeniable; they command presence and attention in their placement. Negotiating spatial and psychological flow between the works plays a large role in how Amaral maps out spectatorial movement. In our conversations, Amaral revealed some of the process behind his practice, noting that his "first response to everything is purely physical." Having engaged with many types of artistic endeavours in his life, Amaral brings the physicality of his extended training in dance to his curation: "Much like a

choreographer or a theatre director, you're setting up a path or an arc for the viewer with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Points of crescendo, rise and fall." Amaral sets the spectator up for a sort of improvisational dance across the space in which the spectator has agency over how they choose to engage with the works. In *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, Danielle Goldman (2013) defines this type of movement as "a vital technology of the self—an ongoing, critical, physical, and anticipatory readiness that, while grounded in the individual, is necessary for a vibrant sociality and vital civil society" (22). Across his exhibitions, Amaral meets the work at a place of critical individual and communal engagement, creating visually and emotionally striking displays that usher in a visceral reaction. While individual experience inevitably varies from person to person, Amaral's curation of his shows demands an affectual response from the spectator through their spatial orientation.

Often including minimalist and deceivingly ordinary objects in his shows, Amaral extracts the beautiful, devastating, and transcendent from these pieces—demonstrating how objects have a life and breath of their own. This drive to engage deeply with objects intensified while Amaral was pursuing a career in dance and simultaneously working in merchandising: "I had become super interested in window display and shop presentation, the strategies used to produce desire and tell a story." Throughout Amaral's curation, there is a distinct sense of how objects interact with one another and produce an effect on the viewer. Not only do these carefully compiled art objects communicate with each other, but their proximity to one another compels the spectator to move their body and open their minds in diverse ways. In *Formless Formation: Vignettes for the End of this World*, Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis (2021) imagine how disparate objects, bodies, and entities might band together in an act of anticolonial resistance to create something generative: "To orchestrate is to score the rearrangement, planning with the elements of the world to produce a desired effect that will land us in the *future of the future* still imagined" (70). By entertaining all the varied perceptions one might have of the show, Amaral crafts an experience that generously offers guidance but does not dictate a strict interpretation, allowing the spectator to bring themselves and their personal experience into the world of the show and dwell in the generative hope of possible futures.

In "Between Intervention and Utopia: Dance Politics," Randy Martin (2011) contemplates the socialist politics of possibility embedded into dance. He offers, "Yet dance also makes its own politics, crafts its own pathways and agency in the world, moves us toward what we imagine to be possible and desirable" (Martin 2011, 29). Martin entertains the utopic potentiality of dance and how the corporeal body and social body intermingle. In dance, bodies are in immediate conversation with one another, taking up space and navigating around others with care, a set of sequences agreed upon by the choreographer and the dancers. Dancers can consent or defy the movement set out for them. In *Summer/Winter*, Amaral creates a constant conversation between the artwork and the spectator where there is not one strict choreography but multiple avenues of engaging, refusing, gathering, and sequestering. By twisting and turning around Gonzalez-Torres's works, spectators attune themselves to the artist's tempo. This performance varies from person to person based upon their attunement with the artist's affective alignment and the choreography of those around them. This commingling of the senses, psyche, and space allows for communal and individual movement through the work and its meanings. Through this relational exchange between objects and objects, objects and space, and objects and spectators, Amaral's curation of Gonzalez-Torres's spatial presence performs a type of world-making that exists within and goes beyond the walls of the gallery space.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Golden)*, 1995, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

Laura M. Coby. I was recently thinking about your piece in *Artforum* that I read. You're such a beautiful writer. As you would describe the events of the London Frieze, I felt, as a reader, that I was right there with you in these buzzing crowds—moving from venue to venue, trying to catch a cab, seeing RuPaul. Your writing has such a keen sensibility of movement that can also be seen in your curation. As you've said, constructing art shows requires the curator to think about how the spectator moves through a space. When thinking about the exhibition here at MOCA, how have you imagined the spectator moving through the pieces?

Rui Mateus Amaral. Sequencing is critical to me. There's a reason why you jump from one artwork to another. What comes before and after it is intentional—this sense of "order" is designed to produce new feelings, insights, and questions. Admittedly, it's also activated to emphasize aspects of the artworks I see as moving, intellectually stimulating, and resonant at a particular time and place. I can't get away from the idea that exhibition-making is a form of communication. There is always a desired path I have for the viewer, but it's loose enough that the public can come to their own judgments. I trust the viewer after all. I mean, if you've made it to an exhibition, chances are you're open to what it has to offer. I want to meet the viewer there.

LMC. You guide the viewer through without the expectation they'll stick to a certain path, if there even is one "ideal" path. You leave room in the spectatorship for improv and exploration, harmony and discontinuity in the way the works are experienced. You're meeting the viewer at this place of openness.

RMA. You're meeting them there because they've made the journey and paid the price of admission. You're also meeting them in the twenty-first century, where people are a click away from instantly discovering more about an artist and artwork. So, one must think, is this exhibition producing new information? And when it comes to text panels in the show, how much is enough? Where do we handhold, and where do we let go? Part of the beauty of art is that it precludes language. The mystery of art should be preserved.

Sorry, that's a long way of saying I try to accomplish a lot in my exhibitions, and each one is an opportunity to work out what we've just discussed. I'm grateful that MOCA's artistic and executive director trusted me. They were open to having no wall-based descriptions, just one opening thought. I tend to keep my exhibitions precise and visually spare, consolidating supporting literature to one source so the artworks can exist on their own spatial terms. They were also open to me contradicting myself by producing a free "guidebook" with expanded descriptions of the artworks that viewers could take with them. I try to give the viewer multiple ways to experience the show. One could not read anything, and the experience could still be meaningful. Or they can take the book with them and move studiously from artwork to artwork. They might take a quick spin at the exhibition and have a completely different experience while reading the booklet weeks later. I enjoy those different experiences myself and try to extend this to the viewer—the possibility of having all or two or one or none of them.

LMC. It's evident that you've heavily considered sequencing, not just with regard to the artworks themselves but also within the accompanying literature. How might the accompanying guidebook have its own sort of ordering, and how might these varied ways of experiencing spectatorial compositions expand the works themselves? When you're thinking about the sequencing of the works in a guidebook or traditional text, how do you imagine the spatiality of works on the page?

RMA. The first thing I ever curated was a publication. I had no money to put a show together myself, but I had money to put together this humble publication. It was called "Proposal for a Magazine." There are three works by Felix in it. He has always been part of my thoughts, among other figures. The publication opens with "*Untitled" (Passport)*, and halfway through is "*Untitled"* 1989/1990, which reads "somewhere better than this place" on one poster and "nowhere better than this place" on the other. The project closes with a two-page spread: on the left side is an image of Felix's two-clocks *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers*), and on the right, documentation of the performance *Relation in Time*, by a couple, Marina Abramović and Ulay, who sit back-to-back for sixteen hours, their hair bound together in a single twist. To compare these artworks is why I love the book format. By being a two-page spread, the book (at least in a traditional sense) affords the kind of affect these two images produce by sitting next to one another. Also, turning the page is not unlike turning a corner in architecture and encountering a new sightline or relationship.

I tend to sequence exhibitions similarly—the result is always a confluence of the work's physical, historical, and conceptual depths, as well as the architecture, light and my intuition about how these all hold together in a way that is authentic and compelling.

Shifting Seasons: The Intimacy of Sensorial Engagement

Gonzalez-Torres's work is entrenched in the complexity of intimacy in pandemic times, as his own life and artistry were deeply affected by the AIDS crisis. I do not intend to conflate the COVID-19

and AIDS epidemics but to instead allow Felix's practice to help us negotiate loss and attune our senses to the power of aesthetic relational exchange. In *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*, Eliza Steinbock (2019) considers "shimmering" as a quality of affectual oscillation between internal and external worlds. Shimmering disrupts epistemological binaries and boundaries and allows for alternative ways of knowing that privilege the personal. Gonzalez-Torres's works blur lines between "subject/object, thinking/feeling, and sight/touch," making a case for their interconnectedness (Steinbock 2019, 9). Through multisensorial encounters, spectators are given the opportunity to unlearn strict notions of how to engage—encouraging them to think alongside feeling, look but also touch, and reckon with how intertwined the shifting subject and object are. In *Summer/Winter*, the spectator moves alongside and beyond the visual to consider otherwise forms of sensory engagement. In this transitory period, a time of global political unrest, how do we turn to otherwise forms of intimacy, and what might this alternative engagement afford?

In *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Ashon T. Crawley (2017) establishes the otherwise as an epistemology and a practice: "Otherwise possibilities exist alongside that which we can detect with our finite sensual capacities" (2). By inhabiting otherwise possibilities, one might tap into alternative modes of existence and strategies for how to navigate "current configurations of power and inequity" (Crawley 2017, 3). As Gonzalez-Torres's works are meant to be touched, taken, smelled, listened to, and consumed by the spectator, one must consider how the materiality of his aesthetic and affectual knowledges serve as a guiding light in the current political moment. Gonzalez-Torres offers multiple ways of engaging with his works: based upon the spectator's encounter with the work, the pieces can take on different meanings. Each brush with the senses might spark something new within the spectator and allow them to unearth the multiplicitous layers of the work as they relate to the self and the world in which they live. In most traditional gallery spaces, the museum goer is urged to keep distance from the artwork; the spectator must navigate their body in ways that are permissible to the institution. Gonzalez-Torres invites the spectator to call these protocols into question by crossing these institutional boundaries with his own works, including specific instructions to allow guests to touch, taste, and take a portion of his work. *Summer/Winter* complicates the sensorial nature of Gonzalez-Torres's works through the added layer of Toronto lifting mandatory face mask mandates in the summer of 2022, for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began. This exhibition urges its viewers to listen to their intuition and the bodies around them as they encounter these pieces. How might the effects the pandemic continues to have on our world influence how we interact with artwork and each other, and how might we care for one another? With works that engage so deeply with the sensorial, spectators might reflect upon how intimacy has changed and what new ways of sharing physical and emotional closeness have arisen out of this period of isolation. To be immersed in the senses is to engage in an otherwise plane of thinking, feeling, and relationality.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)*, 1991, detail view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

LMC. I'm so fascinated by the tension that might lie within the works. For example, what might it mean by having *"Untitled" (North)* and *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)* in the same sightline or having both *Summer* and *Winter* as iterations of the exhibition. When I was visiting here in May, I also noticed a theme or maybe a tension between light and dark in the show. I'm thinking about how *"Untitled" (Golden)* refracts natural light and has its own metallic glimmer or how *"Untitled" (North)* harnesses electricity and emits light itself. Even *"Untitled"* 1989 has a reflective sheen to it. Then, you pair that luminosity with *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)* and *"Untitled" (Shield)*. While these pieces have a sparkling quality due to their plastic wrap, they are the two pieces that aren't inherently metallic or luminescent—*"Untitled" (Public Opinion)*'s onyx-like candy base and *"Untitled" (Shield)*'s matte finish, where even the beige background appears a bit more dull in contrast with the stark white museum walls. Perhaps, in contrast with the other pieces, these two pieces are a bit darker in hue and maybe even in affective tonality.

RMA. They're a bit more sombre.

LMC. Exactly, so then, how might you find these variances in hue or emotional tonality working together or potentially in tension with each other in the show?

RMA. Something I couldn't anticipate about the exhibition, and therefore did not explore in the guidebook, is its shimmering qualities. Although I decided to manifest *"Untitled"* 1989 with a "brushed silver metallic" vinyl, until I saw it installed, I couldn't foresee its capacity to be arguably the most physical work in the space. To observe the work in its entirety, one must look up and

move along the perimeter of the space. That's the paradox of anything that shines: it draws you to and from it. No one sightline is entirely satisfying either. You must travel the space and negotiate the embracing and harsh qualities drawn from the artworks.

Playing light against dark was conscious on my part, for sure. Sometimes that's possible to do both between artworks and within a single artwork. For example, *"Untitled" (North)* can be shown with the lights completely off or on. It's hard to replace the light bulbs, especially in *Winter*, because the strings are suspended from the ceiling. It's stipulated that once a light bulb burns out, it should be replaced immediately with another. Our procedure here at the museum is, if a light bulb burns out, we turn the piece off entirely while it's being changed. Some people have experienced *"Untitled" (North)* with the lights completely off, which alters the work**.** One colleague noticed that it feels more like a sculpture and less like light strings. When it was unlit, people began asking the visitor experience team, "What is the sculpture made of? Is it cast?" The instant the light strings seemed to "no longer function" as people know them too, they were confounded. It's as if, because they're not on, they aren't "real" or something. Funny what that switch does. Literally, ha!

LMC. That stipulation about fully turning off the light strings is fascinating! It makes total sense that this would be the maintenance practice for the piece, but it also becomes a curatorial practice that gives a whole other life to this piece in the exhibition. Especially in *Winter*, I'm prompted to consider what would it mean to have the lights off at a celebration: Is it too early for guests to arrive? Has the gathering ended? Was it a choice, or were the lights turned off by someone else? The shift between *Summer* and *Winter* in titling and rearrangement, of course, brings new life and interpretations, too.

RMA. Even with the candy, the team had noticed that people are taking more now that it's in separate piles than when it was a single large formation. I feel it's because *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)* in *Summer* was so public. I had essentially composed an arena of candy—a very public arena where people were aware of each other's actions, whether you chose to take candy or not. How much were you going to pick? Were you going to eat the candy right there? Were you going to put it in your pocket? Were you going to gift it to someone else? I wanted to produce the opposite in *Winter* and offer a more intimate experience with the candy, which is why some of the piles are tucked behind a column and why there are multiple piles. This idea of abundance, for me, feels more exemplified. You encounter an outpour of material. You come off the elevators, and they're offering themselves to you. Go on, take me, take from me. And people did as a result. In this composition, the candies shift in weight more clearly. Because it's a pile, taking from one area causes a ripple effect: what's above trickles down.

LMC. Totally. The candy work so clearly exemplifies ideas of public/private in the exhibition. It seems to me that *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)* unsettles what partaking in the public opinion means in many socio-political contexts. I've been playing around in my head with all these different ways of engaging: of refusing to partake in public opinion, of taking and removing from the public opinion and not consuming, of consuming and ingesting. I think, especially with *Winter,* it says so much about what people do and say in public versus private. I'm thinking about what you were saying about the change between this public arena of candy to these more private, intimate moments. The evolution of this piece prompts a lot of questions about collective thought and how it affects us. Who is "the public"—and *whose public* are they—and when do people feel inclined to engage in the popular public opinion, you know?

RMA. Although I find the candy feels more prevalent in this iteration, it's also a very individual matter. But yeah, I'm still learning from the work and figuring it out.

LMC. In thinking about "*Untitled" (Public Opinion)*, Felix's work engages with the spectator through both affect and the senses, and I think what lingers after that kind of intimate exchange follows the spectator into their everyday lives. Do you think the spectator's relationship with the work changes based on the level of interaction they have with the work, whether that means just looking at it, walking through it, tasting it, touching it? How might their experience vary based upon how open, reserved, or intentional they are while interacting with the work? What might this collectivity of engaging with the senses mean during a global pandemic, where isolation has been the state of being for so many for so long, especially in a place like Toronto which is finally opening up after about two years of a sort of quarantine?

RMA. There was certainly a dialogue around some of the works and pandemic protocols, but ensuring the integrity of the artwork remained a priority. The freedom to choose, to cross, or take is already embedded in the work, so we agreed to emphasize that choice while also making sanitizing solutions accessible but visually discreet. These conversations, while productive, turned out to be somewhat irrelevant. *"Untitled" (Golden)* became a phenomenon on Instagram, and people, learning that they could take a piece of art home with them, encouraged others to experience *"Untitled" (Public Opinion*) for themselves. That's the thing about Felix's work: the possibility.

Observing members of the public experience the work for the first time was so energizing. You could see the concept of art shift in their minds: "Oh, I can move through art! I can take and taste it! With *"Untitled" (Golden)*, the beaded curtain spans almost sixty feet across the space, which means that multiple people can experience it simultaneously. From the perspective of an observer, I've witnessed a very melancholy interaction with the work on one end and a purely high-energy and mind-blown approach on the other. Both ways are valid and in keeping with Felix's intentions. The spectrum of engagement as the work continues to be exhibited and written about is boundless.

LMC. That's beautiful. To me, *"Untitled" (Golden)* speaks to that spectrum by offering this sort of hope, pleasure, and beauty amid deeply felt loss. I feel like, as someone crosses that threshold, they undergo a sort of transformation, whatever that may look like for them. It feels like passing through to another side or *the* other side, whatever that other side might be. I'm also interested in how what side of the curtain a person is on literally alters their point of view, as one side is more opaque than the other due to the natural light. As you said in your curatorial booklet, it offers a sort of visual filter for the spectator. In thinking about the stipulation that the beadworks must be placed in a threshold that is commonly walked through, I appreciate the choice to place *"Untitled" (Golden)* on the side of the gallery space, setting it apart in a way. It offers, even in the staging with the benches behind the curtain, a moment of solitude for the viewer.

RMA. Right, I also love the intimacy of that. By not placing it in the centre of the space or in a doorway where people don't have a choice but to walk through it, you have a different realm of possibility.

Once you cross "*Untitled" (Golden)*, you enter a spacious corridor or lookout. There you meet the natural light and the city. You can peer out the windows and see all the construction around the museum. The neighbourhood is transforming. Toronto is fast-changing. You might disappear behind the curtain. Based on the shifting light, someone on the other side may not realize you're

there. There are two benches by the windows, that side of the curtain evokes solitude and respite. The rest of the entries in *"Untitled"* 1989 can also be seen from this point.

When you look at the curtain from this proximity, you clock the beads' different qualities—some are in excellent shape, and others have chipped, faded, or broken off entirely, leaving a gap. That's why it was essential for me that *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)* and *"Untitled" (Golden)* share a sightline. Is all that glitters gold? Does gold mean the same thing to everyone? A sense of illusion comes forward. Not only because of the light or the way it might abstract what's on each side, but architecturally it creates the illusion of a boundary in the space, and until you learn you can pass through it, it might appear as a barrier.

LMC. The last time we spoke, I think you said that someone had entered up the stairwell behind the curtain, turned around, and exited because they thought they weren't allowed to come in that way.

RMA. Two people apparently did this when they entered the exhibition from the north stairwell, which is another way of entering the show, though less common. From that entry point, the first work in the exhibition is *"Untitled" (Golden)*, but when they saw it, they thought, "Oh, we must have gone through the back way of the show." So, they headed back down that stairwell to the south and entered the show there. They could have crossed, but the scale and placement of that work created the image of a boundary. Gold can also be alienating because of its associations with the sacred, wealth, prestige, and awards. It can deter people who feel unworthy, feel gold is reserved for a particular class, or don't have access. I didn't want to shy away from all the possible meanings of gold in this exhibition.

Locating a True North: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's Aesthetics of Reorientation

My first visit to experience *Summer* at MOCA was just two days after a mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, where nineteen children and two adults were killed. When I visited *Winter*, it was mere days after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, which stripped roughly half of the United States' population of their bodily autonomy. When dealing with such violence, vitriol, and life-threatening hatred encroaching from all directions, engaging with public opinion becomes a dire situation. How, then, might we change public opinion by consuming it? What might it mean to ingest and metabolize public opinion? What if we were to refuse it and engage otherwise? With Gonzalez-Torres's art, the private becomes public, and just as the personal is always political, the spectator must reckon with the notions of mass loss that run throughout the artist's work and our current political sphere. Regarding one of the artist's works, *"Untitled" (1991)*—a billboard depicting a photograph of an unmade bed with white sheets, head imprints carved into the pillows, devoid of bodies—José Esteban Muñoz (1999) suggests that the spectator cannot identify with the images shown as there are no figures present to identify with. However, he offers, "What is evoked is a 'structure of feeling' that cuts through certain Latino and queer communities but is no way exclusive to *any* identitarian group" (170). Further, the artist's work disidentifies with certain identificatory conventions that work to define and confine minoritarian aesthetic practices. By bringing private, intimate loss into the public sphere, viewers are affronted with the emotional charge of grief.

Reorienting the spectator outside of cultural norms and traditional institutional perimeters, Gonzalez-Torres breaks down arbitrary boundaries between the spectator by literally closing in on the space between the viewer and his work. Amaral embraces the public sensorial engagement with

the pieces by having *"Untitled (Public Opinion)" and "Untitled" (North)* centre stage in *Summer*. While the other three pieces are undeniable in their effect, having this *particular* candy work and light string piece spread across the middle of the room draws out the semantic links between these pieces. In thinking of Canada's northward orientation, the museum goer must reckon with the socio-political implications of this pairing. By situating these particular works in Toronto, Amaral meets the spectator where they are geographically in order to open up resonances that dwell between the work and the viewer. In *Winter*, he crafts more intimate moments for the spectator. He moves *"Untitled (Public Opinion)" and "Untitled" (North)* along the sides of the space—offering the viewer more room within the gallery to experience the works a bit more privately and perhaps providing even more of an opportunity for personal reflection within the exhibition space. In *Summer/Winter*, some of the objects appear banal in their singularity—a light bulb, a piece of candy, a string of beads. However, when put on display and multiplied en masse, they become defamiliarized and take on new emotional resonances. By inviting the spectator to engage intimately and publicly with the works, the spectator enlists their senses to help them navigate this act of meaning-making and relearning. This reorientation prompts the viewer to examine what the world might look like if we were to recontextualize the care we take when interacting with it, with each other.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Golden)*, 1995, detail view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

LMC. In these pieces that blur the public and the private, communal and individual feeling, I wonder what belongs just to Felix and what belongs to the spectator, and as a curator, in organizing and curating the show, what might you want from the spectator for Felix?

RMA. During a workshop with the visitor experience team, I expressed that the most important thing we can do for the viewer is to empower them to come to their own understanding. Provide them with enough information (whatever that means at that moment) but keep it open-ended. Also, do not be afraid of discrepancies because there are several! I can access visitor feedback in our end-of-day reports, and I've read multiple times now that visitors have noted or complained that the wall label for *"Untitled"* 1989 says "paint on wall," but the piece is obviously vinyl. Firstly, who has time to complain about this? Kidding! I love that people have picked up on this detail. Contractually, we're obligated to both. On the one hand, we can make certain decisions about the work, like its materiality, which we did. On the other hand, we are also responsible for reproducing the wall label as it appears in a loan agreement, and we did that too. I'm into this because it enforces that not one, but two choices have been made: to manifest the work one way and not to alter the wall label accordingly. Another discrepancy: in the text for the show, licorice is spelled by American and Canadian standards. They're spelled differently, but we're talking about the same thing. All those contradictions are either built-in, or I made space for them to be part of the work because it's essential to question the storyteller too.

Viewers might also come across the word "watercolour" in "*Untitled"* 1989; it's spelled the Canadian way with an "ou" instead of an "o." The choices I made are particular to being here in Canada. The writing for the exhibition contains several nuances like the ones I mentioned. That's how, Felix might say, you create new information. The viewer/reader decides what is right and wrong or that two things can be accurate simultaneously.

LMC. Yet again, we're seeing the possibility and openness of the artist's work. I appreciate the curatorial choice of having some of the writing use the Canadian spelling of the words, especially because this is the first solo exhibition of his works in Canada, which is huge. As someone who is Toronto-based, I want to ask you why you think it's important that this show is here, in Toronto, right now?

RMA. When everything felt like it had stopped, I reflected on how art was generated under challenging circumstances. My thoughts brought me to the art of the 1960s and '70s: actions, performances, paintings, and drawings produced by instruction. I was thinking a lot about artists in South America or Eastern Europe who, under severe social restrictions, found ways to exhibit art abroad. They turned to mail and telegrams to broadcast their ideas. In doing that research, I was reminded of Felix, an artist whose works are shaped by the interpretation of instructions and suggested ideals. Even within his terms, there's space for interpretation. It might say "black licorice," but does that mean hard or soft? Which brand? What hue of black? You have to determine what course to take. Each time an artwork is manifested, you're presenting it for the first time. It's not the same candy as elsewhere or the same site or composition. The socio-political climate is different. Everything is new.

The Toronto connection I see as expanding Felix's biography. Some people understand that he was in a long-distance relationship with Ross in Toronto, had an apartment here, and spent summers in parts of Canada. Several people don't know that, especially in Toronto. Not that any of this holds up the work, but it locates Felix somewhere other than Cuba, Puerto Rico, Madrid, New York, and Miami, where he is so often associated. As such, it expands the reference points for his work, and that's positive and surprising to some.

I wouldn't have been able to do the show had I not had access to *"Untitled" (North)* or *"Untitled" (Toronto). Summer/Winter* was initially conceived with the local public in mind, acknowledging the pandemic conditions that pressed each of us to decide where to isolate and with whom to ride this out. No one was sure when travel would resume and if this show would only be experienced by people who live here. Is there somewhere or nowhere better than this place? I wondered. By including *"Untitled" (North)* and placing *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)* just after it, I could pose that question more succinctly. And what is north anyway? A place, a people, a direction, a myth, a belief, a brand, and a state of mind. "We the north" and the "true north strong and free" came to my thoughts, as well as all the people who migrate north for something better. What about that promise of the north? It's a delicate and complex thing. *"Untitled" (North)* was positioned at the south end of the gallery intentionally. As I conceptualized the exhibition, I was aware of directions, geographies, and their cultural significance. The artist Joaquin Torres Garcia's notion that the "North is Our South" when speaking from a perspective on Latin American art was a reference point.

Admittedly, I wanted to experiment with sentimentality. I suspected *"Untitled" (North)* or *"Untitled" (Toronto)* would never mean what they mean here, somewhere else. Sentimentality is part of the risk in Felix's work, I think. Within his era's art historical and socio-political conditions, he risked imbuing his work—the candies, posters, and portraits—with personal weights, names, dates, and events. At the same time, those works were conceived to be taken and rearranged constantly, giving his sentiments away.

LMC. I think one of the things I appreciate most about your work is your willingness to risk sentimentality, eschewing isolated presentations of the pieces and entertaining how the works communicate with each other and where geographically, socio-politically, and affectually they locate themselves. Place feels inextricable to Felix's works, especially in the exhibition you've so carefully crafted. Not only is space playing a role in locating Felix within his biography, it locates the spectator within his biographical cartography. Even within the spatiality of the show—how some works precede and succeed one another, how they situate themselves in the cardinal directions of the city—these works make an argument for their place here. You're really giving the spectator the space to entertain all these different emotional and intellectual valences and come to their own questions or conclusions.

In thinking about this emotional, conceptual, and physical arc you've created for the viewer, I'm interested in why you've chosen these specific five works together?

RMA. I wanted to present the breadth of Felix's practice and produce a gorgeous exhibition. I felt this arrangement of artworks had a particular dynamism, aesthetically and conceptually. They were counterpoints to one another. The puzzle, *"Untitled" (Shield)*, appears to be the most fragile and humble work in the exhibition. Still, it's the closest to being monumental because its pieces remain intact, and it's preserved as a single image. The other works, though larger in scale, are in constant flux.

LMC. I think that says a lot about ephemerality and permanence of Felix's work. There's a distinct tension when considering something like a puzzle piece that's meant to be touched or played with, but instead, it's one of the few things you can't touch in the show. It's also a work that seems to be a little more reserved when it comes to how a curator can interpret or display it. There's a sort of refusal amid invitation.

In further thinking about the sensorial engagement of the works, *"Untitled"* 1989 is another type of portrait that denies touch because the spectator is unable to alter that piece, because, well, who could reach it?

RMA. Exactly. But while the viewer may not be able to interact with *"Untitled"* 1989, the work has transformed. It's passed through many people, particularly in this iteration. This portrait reflects the architecture and decisions made by myself and Uros Jelic, the exhibition designer. There were as many conceptual considerations as there were practical ones. I wonder, after so many previous iterations and the manifestations to come, whose portrait is this?

LMC. Right! His work is so generous in its reproducibility, replenishment, and rearrangement. The possibilities of how one chooses to display his works allow for innumerable experiences, not just visually but semantically, too. While his works are conceptual and often appear quite sleek, he engages deeply with ideas of abundance.

RMA. Absolutely. Felix's work is maximal. I say minimal, but by minimal, I also mean maximal.

Speculative Endings: The Life-Affirming Power of Being-With and Quotidian Relationality

Though the weight of loss runs throughout Gonzalez-Torres's work, the artist invites us to rethink strict perimeters of what constitutes life. One becomes more aware of the precarity of life in the face of death and also the potentiality for pleasure, vibrancy, and desire—all of which can act as survival strategies. Transitory in *"Untitled" (Golden)*'s composition, the beaded curtain leaves space in between the glittering strings to allow for a blurry perception of what is on the other side. Energy and affect might slip through and around the strings, allowing for multiple engagement with either side of the curtain. Because of its porous and malleable composition, the piece invites movement. The slightest brush of the shoulder or brisk passing-by will alter the state of the piece, putting stationary strands into motion. This curation of the piece, off to the side of the gallery space with benches for contemplation, beckons a moment of solitude for the viewer. Perhaps, in these moments, the spectator will be prompted to remember those they have lost or intimately feel the possibility of what it means to be alive. What might it mean for another museum visitor to sit down on the bench next to them, and how can we dwell in those deeply charged emotional moments together? *"Untitled" (Shield)* also invites a similar quiet contemplation of how we take care of one another. In the image printed onto the puzzle pieces, Ross Laycock holds up a teddy bear to shield his face. In Amaral's curatorial note for the piece (2022), he notes that Gonzalez-Torres collected "figurines, plush animals, trinkets" that filled the artist and Laycock's Toronto home. Thinking in material terms, one might question how a stuffed bear would provide any sort of protection as a shield. Here, Laycock safeguards himself with gentleness that comes through orienting oneself toward love and acts of care and intimacy.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Shield)*, 1990, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkensheid.

LMC. Something you said during our first meeting really stuck with me: that death and grief can be life-affirming. Not only do I understand that personally, but that's so touching with regard to Felix's work. How might the phrase that death and grief can be life-affirming help us negotiate the presence of such deep loss in his work?

RMA. I'm not sure you can know what happiness or sadness is, truly, if you haven't experienced both. To understand something, I do believe it must be contrasted with something else. Eventually, the loss of someone reinforces that they were alive. By contending with their death, you're also called to meditate on their life. And what will you do with what remains of yours? There's still time and decisions to be made. You go on. Perhaps that's where "endless supply" comes in in Felix's work. There is always more. This civilization won't go on forever, but whatever comes after it will emerge from its death.

LMC. I'm also thinking about the power that the artist has to transform a sort of energy. Loss is obviously deeply charged, but it's a limited, white, Western Christian point of view to think that energy simply leaves when the physical form does, right? Seeing life transformed through Felix's

work and giving it that new life and new breath brings out the beauty of these relationships and the transformative power of loss.

RMA. Yeah, in thinking about the idea of afterlife, of reincarnation, of transformation of energies like you said, there are so many cultural references in there, but what it comes down to is meaning making and trying to grapple with the reality that one minute we're here and the next we're not. In my notes I believe I referred to this as, "In one moment everything can be taken away. In another, everything can be restored."

LMC. Yeah. Phew.

RMA. Heavy and light stuff.

LMC. I have one last question, but it's kind of a speculative one.

RMA. Good. You should always end in speculation.

LMC. Maybe it's a bit wistful, but if you could encounter Felix for one day, what would you want to ask him?

RMA. Hmm… I'd like to go out dancing with him. You can learn a lot when you're not speaking, taking part in a different kind of experience. This might be because I imagine he'd somehow turn my questions, the ones about his work anyway, on me, hah! But of course, if we had a full day, I'd like to go for a walk, have lunch, do very pedestrian, everyday things to learn more about how he sees the world and how it could be improved.

LMC. That's beautiful. I think the quotidian or the mundane is perhaps the most intimate form of sociality. Seeing how someone moves throughout the world and moving through it alongside them, even for just a moment, is sacred in a way. I feel like Felix's work lends itself to the utopic beauty of the mundane, in all its simplicity and complexity. Joshua Chambers-Letson talks in their book about how people who deeply encounter Felix's work seem to get a sense of him and feel a personal connection, despite likely having never gotten the chance to meet him. They write about how so many who feel this closeness with his work call him—

LMC & RMA, in unison. Felix.

In *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, Chambers-Letson (2018) shares that "the name 'Felix' has become something of a queer of color commons" (123) where "from time to time, we stitch ourselves loosely together and gather under a name like 'Felix,' where we 'make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough'" (125). The shared affects that Gonzalez-Torres's works inspire help us reckon with the incommensurable, the unimaginable, and the inarticulable. Queer of color commons do not suggest essentialized experience or existence but, instead, shared affectual resonances and ways of navigating the oppressive present. Queer of color commons incite acts of "being-with" or "being-in-common"—moments of togetherness and survival in the face of loss, grief, and isolation (Muñoz 2020, 2). Drawing upon communal feeling, one might imagine how to exist and form new modes of being, new forms of togetherness. Through Amaral's curation of *Summer/Winter*, he prompts us to reorient ourselves to the abundant possibility within the artist's work, and perhaps, to reorient ourselves toward one another. *Summer/Winter* calls

our attention to the present and asks us to take stock of who is around us—both inside of the exhibition and outside—and who no longer is. Alongside the changing landscapes of our personal lives, we might also consider the instability of the political spheres in which we live and even the ever-evolving physical landscapes of our cities, towns, and countries. In its uncertainty and disarray, this state of flux offers a catalyst for reimagining what we owe one another. By grounding ourselves in the present, we might envision what new forms of socialities are possible on the horizon. As a means of grieving and collective imagining, *Summer/Winter* creates moments of queer futurity through the affective and sensorial exchange that enlivens the work, inspiring alternative avenues of engaging with the everyday, with each other.

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