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**(Un)wrapping Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Relational Power and Contagious Wonderment of
Candy and Other Things**

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(Un)wrapping Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Relational Power and Contagious Wonderment of Candy and Other Things

Huddled in the corner of the cold, sterile floor of The Art Institute of Chicago, Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991 (Fig. 1), is a mound of individually wrapped, multihued candy that can be possessed, consumed, and rearranged by the audience (artic.edu). The parenthetical remark within the title suggests the portrait is that of a human. In fact, Ross was the artist's lover, who died of AIDS in the year 1991. The candy spill memorializes Ross at his healthy weight of one hundred seventy-five pounds. Even as Ross's body is implicated in the candy, the candies themselves contain and embody a power that may be called thing-power. Thing-power, which Jane Bennett discusses in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, is in every thing—from waste to lightning to dead rats. She defines thing-power as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” in beings and in matter overall (*Vibrant Matter* 6). Thing-power is not isolated within objects but rather is a flow of power that is present as transmittable energy—in different configurations and flows—in everything and everyone.

In Gonzalez-Torres's work, the candy's power is directly expressed through the audience's participation with the art: it spreads throughout the human body, museum, street, city, and world. With the framework of the AIDS epidemic surrounding the work, the candy's dispersal also evokes associations with infection and contagion. Diseases traditionally carry pejorative connotations that mobilize ideological anxieties but not critical thought. Not surprisingly, then, the potentiality of art that is contextualized by disease often is limited to

discourses of mourning and mortality. Critical responses to *Untitled* are no exception in this sense. Without discounting the material realities and social histories of disease that inform that work, in my analysis I will destabilize conventional readings of *Untitled* by drawing out the conjunction of thing-power and contagion that unravels in the art as a celebratory engagement with disease (the environment) and with candy (the object).

The audience's interaction with *Untitled* is vital: it is when people form a tactile relationship with the candy that there is a transference of power between candy and audience. At the same time, the objects are empowered by humans' capacity to interpret their meaning. Does the candy's importance and power only derive from the audience's presence and contact? An anthropocentric evaluation might presume that things are incapable of establishing their own worth and meaning without the agential assistance of humans, who, it may seem, are the only ones able to endow and assess every things' value. Human readings are just that – presumptions. We believe and pride ourselves on our conviction that we are the only beings capable of subjectivity, interpretation, and perception. Through our anthropocentric perception, we delineate between beings and non-beings and, thus, other non-beings into their status as such. Anthropocentric ideology drastically limits our interpretation of alternative beings as significant. But the drive to place things within our normative realm of interpretation fails us in the end, for we sever ourselves from open comprehension of the unknown. The anxiety surrounding things' unknowability stems from stubborn anthropocentricity that boasts of human's beingness and attempts to invalidate the power of non-beings.

In another sense, anthropocentricism is a performance of anxiety. Our lack of comprehension of ourselves, the environment, and our limits combine to form a fear that sustains itself through our ambiguity concerning human capacities and the indefinite implications of real,

yet wavering limits. This inner unease manifests itself in humans' monopolization of defining beings through a hierarchical power structure. Yet, thing-power is neither established nor maintained through hierarchy but is rooted in amorphous relationships. Power as relational and not hierarchical exposes humancentricism to our uncertain knowledge of things and ourselves, which we fear and try to hide. At the same time, anthropocentric entitlement and anxiety about our comprehensive capacity limits the capability of things to establish relations, connections, and power dynamics.

Levi R. Bryant's *The Democracy of Objects* examines anthropocentricity in the context of human relations with and to objects. Specifically, he explores the meaning of things. Objects operate as "closed systems" on which humans attempt to bestow their interpretation of meaning, both upon the object and its objectness (Bryant 49). To the humancentric,, the object (thing) only becomes important if someone has relationship with/to it or comes into its environment. Bennett's concept of thing-power, which Bryant adapts in his work, destabilizes the ideology of anthropocentric readings of things: things, they suggest, affect matter—act on it, and cause connects among different forms of it—without human contact or provocation (*Vibrant Matter* xvi). That is, things exist, co-exist, engage, and act on their own accord in networks unformed and uncontrolled by human agency. Bennett also points to the webbing networks of things as an all-encompassing sphere that entails all beings, whether thing or human, and that is not contingent on one being's existence over the other. Instead, all beings live and connect in spirals of energy and relations and mutably move with their cosmos—free of limitation and impossibility. Bennett notes things "manifest traces of independence or aliveness" in the energy of their thing-power and "become vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own," outside anthropocentric interpretation and limitation (xvi). She writes about her experience of the

“shimmer[ing]” connectivity of a “glove, pollen, rat, cap, [and] stick” in the Chesapeake Bay, “*objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them” (4-5). In other words, we must take into account the unknowability of things. Things cannot be solely enclosed within anthropocentrism’s evaluation, for the unknowability of things and their power must be taken into account. Things transcend the parameters that humans set around their meaning, purpose, and power.

On the other hand, Bennett submits with other philosophers in tow, such as Spinoza and Deleuze, that all things, including humans, are composed of the same matter. Humans are seen as vessels of power, whether they possess or lose it, use or accumulate it, exploit or surrender it, exchange or insulate it within their beings. As all things and humans are comprised of the same basic material, should not things possess some type of power, absent of human interference or interpretation? Yes, things should and do. In the case of Gonzalez-Torres’s candy, power resides in the plastic-covered goodies and in the collaborative exchange between the candy and the audience.

The installation piece *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* is a pile of colorful candy, and its untouched weight is one hundred seventy-five pounds – the same weight as Gonzalez-Torres’s lover, Ross Laycock. The audience is encouraged to take and consume the candies and to consequently or intentionally rearrange the pile’s form. The work is continuously replenished, so that the form is always present and ever-changing. The audience’s participation creates a new form and new experience with the piece. As a result, the meaning is as fluid as the form itself. The public’s ability to possess part of the artwork and the constant replenishment of the piece shatters conventional boundaries and the untouchable exclusivity of art. Ross dies in 1991 due to the effects of the AIDS virus upon his body. Ross’s body disappears as the public takes part in

the work. This mirrors the deterioration of his physical body while suffering from AIDS.¹ At the same time, the installation is a celebration of the rejuvenating and renewing power of being. For each piece of candy that is consumed is replenished, thereby representing an unceasing fullness and life in/of the idealized lover.

Contemporary analyses of Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* and other candy spills establish that the unconventionality of the artist's flexible presentation, fluid form, commonplace materials, reliance on participation, and continuous renewal creates art that defies the conventions of the art world.² Although many critics' and art historians' commentary on the artist discuss his minimalist and conceptualist artistic roots, the social aspect of Gonzalez-Torres's art serves as the catalyst by which his work is fueled, reciprocated, and created (Buskirk 154-155). Within his anomalous appropriation of candy, mirrors, clocks, stacks of photographs, wires of light bulbs, and others, Gonzalez-Torres unsettles any contexts, preconceptions, or ideologies that attempt to rigidly ground his art. The ordinary materials are placed in an extraordinary setting and are treated as extraordinary things, which is rightly so. The coupling of the ordinary and the extraordinary provides a jarringly sweet abnormality littered with small parenthetical hints and saturated in candied fluidity and ambiguity.

Although a definite position or meaning cannot be extracted from his artwork, more specifically his candy spills, sexual and political interpretations abound among art historians, curators, collectors, artists, and others. In *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, sex and politics fittingly synchronize with one another because of the biographical contextualization around this work, and the chapter "The Body" in Nancy Spector's *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* tackles the erotic and governmental implications contained in the mound of candy. Spector discusses how the candies' sleek, enticing appearance forms them into "pliant, savory bodies languorously waiting

to be plucked and consumed” (147). The candies in *Untitled* are appropriately called “Fruit Flashers,” which illustrates the transgressive rule-breaking nature, sensuality, sweetness, brevity, and unknowability of the sweets (Spector 147). Gonzalez-Torres is explicitly aware of the sensuality of the candies’ place in the audience’s mouth, which can reshape the material with each toss and taste, and says, “I’m giving you this sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and you suck on someone else’s body. And in this way, my work becomes part of so many other people’s bodies” (FGT quoted in Spector 147, 150). Candy and audience foster an erotic, intimate yet public experience, but the socialization of the body echoes in this exchange as well. The audience’s consumption of the body parallels the government’s rule of the human body. The governmental and public dissection of a human body’s sexuality, reproductive rights, and expression of love demonstrates the absence of privacy in relation to the human body.

In the same chapter, Spector addresses the political facets of Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills by analyzing *Untitled (Public Opinion)*, 1991 (Fig. 2), *Untitled (Welcome Back Heroes)*, 1991 (Fig. 3), and *Untitled (USA Today)*, 1990 (Fig. 4) (162-163). These three pieces are similar to *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* in compositional form, yet dissimilarly, they directly confront political issues and anxieties. While he does not specifically comment on *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, Simon Watney asserts that the other previously-listed candy spills are saturated in political discourses and concerns stemming from the unnerving fear elicited by the government’s treatment of the AIDS epidemic and of homosexual males. Watney’s article “In purgatory: the works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres” draws attention to the political tensions within these candy spills and within the comprehensive view of artist’s works as a space that holds the living, the dead, and those suspended between the realms. AIDS-inflicted bodies of homosexual males reside in this purgatory and are treated as figures in suspension who are quarantined by

their illness and the perceived immortality of their love; yet their bodies are still human, still living, and still loving (Watney 156). *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* falls within this purgatory as a space where those in-between life and death exist as well. The piece is a portrait of a beloved gay man infected with AIDS that provides nourishment to the audience as they consume the candy and Ross's body. While the removal and decaying of his body persists, the replenishment of the candy follows. In turn, the more taken away from Ross, the more is given to the audience and given to his body to sustain his presence. This candy spill truly exemplifies the ever-changing cycles of life, death, decay, and renewal, and these elements place it within purgatory, as the realm in which the indefinite and unclassifiable find a home.

Watney continues his examination by scrutinizing how Gonzalez-Torres separates himself from political debates involving AIDS and the controversial discourses surrounding it. Instead, he provides a view into the private life and loves of gay men. While avoiding a "universal gay 'truth'" or "homophobic 'lies'," Gonzalez-Torres focuses his art's "tension between rival and conflicting potential meanings" (Watney 156-157). The paradoxical density of meaning tied to his artwork resurfaces in multiple readings and interpretations. In Carlos Basualdo's article "Common Properties," the search for meaning serves as the meaning itself of Gonzalez-Torres's work; thus, the fluidity and ambiguity mix into a solution that is absent of specificity, stagnation, and answers (185). Thing-power is involved in a similar mutability as well that fluctuates and is unrestrainable. The candies' thing-power can serve as the aftertaste of contemporary analysis or as the first crinkle of opening the candy wrapper. As thing-power is in flux, it cycles and encompasses all these concepts and notions of Gonzalez-Torres's work, while proving a new framing of the disease connection to the body of his art.

Transgressive resistance toward disease's power to sicken, destroy, and separate erupts within Gonzalez-Torres's coupling installations. *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)*, 1991 (Fig. 5), and *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991 (Fig. 6), simultaneously portray the body as one of an identical pair and as a set of others. Like with Gonzalez-Torres's relationship with Ross, these pieces demonstrate the tension between the couples' independence and dependence and between their isolation and togetherness through their fluid cycle of similarities and differences and of synchronization and disorder. *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* is an installation that comprises two rectangular mirrors that stand uniformly adjacent to one another and reproduces the audience's activity and inactivity within its space. As the viewer stops in the path of the mirrors, one mirror reflects the viewer, and the other displays nothingness. As a result, the absence or presence of the other becomes apparent. If the viewer places her stance in the middle of the two mirrors, she appears divided, which illustrates the split self (Spector 143). It may seem that the mirrors only demonstrate human loneliness or the incompleteness of one's self, but the mirrors are a couple. While the matching glass set is subjected to any existence presented to it and appears to be static and unforgiving, they "do not endure alone" (143). The mirrors "survive in pairs," through their steadfast connection despite the events unfolding before them (143). The mirrors create, undo, and split relations within their pairing and reflection of continuously moving bodies. Their relational power echoes that of thing-power as things that are not only part of the network but also mirror it.

Coupling as an act of othering and a form of resilience spreads into *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*. Othering occurs as evocation of simultaneous attachment and detachment. With the matching pairs of mirrors and clocks, they are essentially duplicates of each other in appearance, function, and placement. At the same time, they are dissimilar, for the mirrors reflect different

scenes, while the clocks inevitably desynchronize from one another. The tension between connection and disconnection creates an atmosphere of othering as an instance of coexisting similarities and differences. This piece is composed of two adjacent clocks corresponding in color, structure, size, and initially time. Although they begin harmonized in time and as a pair, the eventual slippage of time causes discordance. The clocks are no longer identical reflections of one another yet still retain their couple status. Inevitably, one dies before the other, leaving its time and presence in forlorn solidarity. The ticks of the remaining clock are no longer unified or disjointed but are now the single other. Like the candies' ever-present promise for renewal, the clock's batteries are replaced, the time is reset, and the clocks are synchronized again. Despite human interference and resets, the dissonance of the clocks occurs, which illuminates a facet of their thing-power and uncontrollability at the hands of human desire. Additionally, Spector asserts that the subsistence of the couple is one of love and togetherness, and the "danger of premature separation caused by incurable and inexplicable disease" surrenders to the pair's continually-renewed relationship (Spector 143). However, the candies and audience perform as a couple who are connected with disease's potentiality for spreading and not divided by disease's enigmatic force. Gonzalez-Torres's coupling not only illustrates a defiance against the other or the diseased as powers that cause splitting but also shows the affirmative connectivity of disease's ability to spread and create relationships and couples.

As the candies and humans are comprised of the same basic matter, the connections among the candies, Ross's body, and audience intensify in physical terms but more vitally in ontological terms. Before exploring the networks of these relations and their dynamics, I will consider some of the ethical implications of repositioning human and object relations in the

context of ontology. Such considerations will come into play as I frame my examination of these webbing bodies of vibrant matter.

The related make-up of things and humans and the existence/presence of thing-power gives us the opportunity “to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed” (Bennett 12). This exaltation of materiality occurs through our acknowledgment that the composition of things and ourselves are of the same basic matter and, subsequently, through our regard for all things as significant, powerful bodies. Viewing things as valuable beings elevates the repute of things and humans alike. Conventional beings (humans) and alternative beings (things) promote the vibrant materiality of all things. Once we recognize the potentiality of things as beings, we can then recognize the potentiality within ourselves as a part of network beyond our senses, mind, and being. Consequently, the liveliness of matter reduces the ontological lines separating things and humans, while simultaneously raising “the status of the shared materiality of all things” (13). Through this collective materiality, the damage and/or destruction of one portion of the network would mean to damage and/or destroy oneself (13). Bennett deems the ethics of vital materialism “good for humans,” for it increases the self-regard of humans, things, and items that fall in the middle of the ontological spectrum (13). Gonzalez-Torres’s artwork takes an ethical stance as well.

Co-Existing Paradoxes within Contagion

In his works, Gonzalez-Torres creates a web of tangled, continuously spreading connections. It manifests paradoxically the gaps and linkages amongst the relationships formed by the shared thing-power of candies and audience. Inquiries about who or what is the disease/infection/contagion and who or what is being infected do not have one solution, but instead they represent multiple and changing possibilities for resolving/addressing the questions.

Are the candies (Ross's body) and the audience harming themselves when they infect each other because of their shared vital materialism? What are the ethical implications of this spreading infection/contagion of the candies and audience? What does this spreading fulfill, if anything at all? Is human agency and desire in control of the participation with the candy, or is the candy's thing-power the authority in this relation? Does this interaction suspend the hierarchy of power because all things are in flux? All these inquiries have potential solutions, but these multiple solutions are not concrete. Paradoxes co-exist and intermix within the continuously mutable relationships amongst the individual candies, collective candy, and audience. Even as the power, spreading, and desire of the candy and audience is ever-changing and indefinite, my analysis of these bodies will address these questions and paradoxes while also recognizing indeterminacy of their relationship and connections. My aim is not to solve the ambiguous powers and desires of these entities but to extract and explore these ambiguities that give the candy and audience an extraordinariness that demands studying and celebrating. From anthropocentric interpretation, this celebration becomes limited. My work illuminates the confinements that humancentric readings place upon the dynamics of the body, disease, and agency of things while exhibiting the underexplored terrain of things through object-oriented ontology. Object-oriented ontologists, such as Bennett and Bryant, provide an alternative set of questions that arise from alternative ethical concerns that emerge from the limitlessness and unknowability of things as powerful, relational beings. I will embrace their theories and analyses while finding my own discoveries to unwrap from Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled*.³

Inside the reciprocal interaction between *Untitled* and the audience, an amalgamation of deterioration, growth, and renewal takes place and works as *pharmakon*. *Pharmakon* is a Greek word simultaneously meaning cure and poison and illustrates how paradoxes coexist (Derrida

70). The serpent wrapped around a rod is the universal signifier for the medical profession and exemplifies *pharmakon*'s significance. The snake simultaneously houses within itself the poison and cure, the venom and antivenin. Like the serpent, then, the harming and healing duality of the candy and the audience illustrates the coincidence of paradoxes in Gonzalez-Torres' works. Transference of roles and of power as a remedy and/or toxin resonate with the bodies of the candy and audience due to their communicable spreading in the museum, street, world, and human body. While the candies and audience possess *pharmakon* qualities, they also correspond with infection and contagion because of their disease-like dispersion. Infection and contagion produce, diffuse, and act on varying degrees. The nature of infection and contagion requires structuring of their motivations in order to connect the candies and audience to a particular framework of diffusion, desire, and power.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, infection is an "invasion and growth of microorganisms or other parasitic organisms within the body (or an organ, wound, cell, etc.), esp. when causing disease." Contagion is defined by the *OED* as "the communication of disease from body to body by contact or mediate." While infection is an "invasion," contagion is a "communication." Infection takes a hostile approach to distribution, and the "growth of microorganism or other parasite organisms" suggests that the same infectious organisms are being spread. Infection is a continuation of the same strand of disease. Contagion focuses on the "communication" and "body to body contact" of the transference of disease. Even though contagion's spreading seems less aggressive than infection's, whether contagion's dispersal is a perpetuation of one disease-ridden thread or a new creature with each spreading is left ambiguous within the dictionary's definition.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari provide clarity to the phenomenon of contagion in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. They assert that contagion shares characteristics with hybrids, “which are in themselves sterile, born of a sexual union that will not reproduce itself, but which begins over again every time, gaining that much more ground” (241). Contagion is new with each production; therefore, it is irreproducible. With each different production or “communication,” contagion’s transformation is not an evolution of the past but is a revolution of the new. Its ability to gain “that much more ground” through complete difference and innovation is an exponential growth, for each production is new and singular. At the same time, the multiples are multiplied causing multitudes of newness. With this growth and multiplicity comes unnaturalness (Deleuze and Guattari 241). The unnatural aspect of contagion makes it revolutionary, and this results in only gains for contagion and no losses or sacrifices. In contrast, infection experiences losses because it is an extension of a strand rather than a generation of a strand. Whether an infection grows weaker or stronger, it still loses some of the original disease through spreading and evolution. Contagion’s inability to experience loss may be seen as another unnatural quality as well. With no loss or sacrifice in its spreading, contagion overcomes infection purely by numbers. Infection cannot trump the multiples of multiplicity even with its invasive nature, for it loses with each dispersal, while contagion drastically gains with each one. Even if contagion’s modus operandi is not one for overpowering others, its conquering of infection is inevitable because its multiple, lossless growth cannot be halted but only communicated and spread. The horrors of infection are outnumbered and rendered obsolete by the forces of contagion.

I articulated the basic difference between contagion and infection in the familiar terms of gain and loss, which are typically constructed as binary oppositions. It is important to note,

however, that Deleuze and Guattari do not offer such an easy construction. Indeed they avoid speaking of contagion and its diffusion in simple terms of loss and gain. Contagion is multifaceted and cannot be limited to two opposing poles of expression. The same also applies to Bennett's theories of power-dispersal and thing-power. By voicing the relationship and confictions between infection and contagion without using restraining terminology, the theorists focus on the wild energy of contagion and its unceasing fluctuation. Contagion's comingling of the new and unnatural creates and communicates an aberrant, innovative energy with each dissemination. While infection is incapable of newness, it cannot be wild. This incapability renders infection predictable, controlled, and reproducible. Infection's systematic, monotonous energy causes its redundancy at the touch of contagion's anomaly. Infection's linear production cannot withstand contagion's sporadic, creative energy. Infection cannot be wild, when contagion is always already a wilderness of untamed and untamable multitudes. Infection's intrusive capabilities are desiccated by contagion's unceasing potential for linkage and newness which elicits unnatural power. As contagion's anomalous energy transforms with each spreading, the "unnatural participations and nuptials are the true Nature spanning the kingdoms of nature" (Deleuze and Guattari 241). The unnatural force within each production creates not only "Nature" but "true Nature" due to its continuation of the future and independence from the past. The "spanning" is contagion's newborn dispersal that crushes infection's invasion because it is not restrained to reproducing an original or lingering strand. A traceable source or the past does not repress contagion; therefore, its connections reside in the new and in the indefinite future. For Deleuze and Guattari, this aspect of contagion makes it revolutionary, as its perpetuation of the new fashions unlimited potentiality for connections that are irreproducible and unrestricted.

The behavior of contagion, then, is unclear. Infection is an “invasion” which implies undesired forcefulness and violation, but contagion is “communication” which possesses a less aggressive tone than infection’s. Does contagion’s uncontrollable capability to take over automatically assume this power as negative? Contagion’s multidimensionality cannot be placed. Its power of newness, multiplicity without multiplication, and inventive energy is constantly mutable; thus, the solution to contagion’s bearing is unreachable. However, the different facets of contagion’s behavior and power can be unwrapped with Bennett’s concepts of thing-power and the complex relationship and spreadings that arise between Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* and the audience.

The Desire and Pleasure of the Candy and Audience

Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills are fluid in presentation, reception, and creation. He only provides basic instructions to curators and collectors that outline some elements of exhibitions, such as the weight of each pile, the specific type of candies to use, and the source of replenishment for the candies (Umathum 95-96). The explicitness, subtlety, or nonexistence of participatory directions concerning the candies is left to the discernment of the curator. With or without direction, the audience members are left to their own temptations and are invited to form their own sets of relations with the candy, relations that are unmonitored and unsupervised. Consequently, the candy and the human can form a network that is neither predetermined nor limited by artistic and spatial conventions. The candy invites us to it by means of its bright colors, small form, and, more importantly, material presence. The physicality of the candy lures any onlooker to create a tactile relationship with the sweets. In this material engagement, the tangibility of the candy and participant consciously emerges as a connector between the two bodies. The candy’s vital physical presence becomes more real, along with our own physical

presence within the communication of its and our desires and pleasures. The pile of candy elicits the audience's desire to feel the solid shape of the sweet, to open the plastic covering, to uncover the sugary treasure within, and to place the candy on their tongues. The forbidden nature of this act draws the audience into the pile and dismantles traditional museum decorum in the most transgressive way—touching art.

The audience's desire reaches beyond the subversion of taking and eating of the candies. The foundational element in their desire is the cuteness of the candy that radiates from both the individually wrapped pieces and the pile. Sianne Ngai examines the aesthetics of cuteness in "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" and outlines the integral qualities of cute things and the effects of the cute on viewers. The cute parallels to *Untitled* in multiple degrees. Cute things are characterized by their "smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy," which prompts sensitivity toward these vulnerable, sometimes misplaced bodies (Ngai 816). The candies are small and sweet and can be unwrapped like gifts and reshaped by the possessors' lips, teeth, and tongue. The candy's conventionally-inappropriate museum environment plays into its cuteness as well. The installation art piece is initially silly, trivial, and confusing because the extent to which the candy can be handled comes into question. Within the museum space, candy is typically within the gift shop, cafeteria area, and/or the pockets of visitors, so it does not belong within the artistic confines of the museum but in the outskirts of the much valued, much guarded realm of the artworks. Art within the museum space is untouchable, unpossessable, inedible, and unmovable.⁴ Gonzalez-Torres's candy defies the conventional institutional model of the museum through his heap of playful, flirty sweets that can be touched, possessed, eaten, and moved and welcome physical participation. *Untitled* also dissolves the value placed upon the pricelessness and irreplaceability of traditional art through its endless renewability. Gonzalez-

Torres fractures the institutional space of the museum while simultaneously fashioning a new area of anomalous interactions within the same physical structure – brazenly and teasingly rewrapping the space from the inside out.

These transgressive characteristics provoke beholders of the cute to surrender to its enthralling sweetness and to desire to possess, protect, touch, squeeze, and delight in these tiny, alien things. While candy is traditionally perceived as a common object, its museum dwelling alters this preconception and gives the candy a mesmerizing foreign quality that it would not have otherwise. Ultimately, these attributes “excite a consumer’s sadistic desire for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle,” intermingling the violence and sweetness of the cute (Ngai 816). The wish for possession, and quite possibly crushing possession, of the cute turns into an aggressive act, for the beholder forces its presence and its ability to own and reshape the cute thing upon it – without consent, without contemplation, and, most importantly, without regard for the thing. With cuteness, the witnesses of the object that is deemed cute become smitten by an adorably silly thing, but brutality is not the only cost of coming in contact with the cute. In this enamored state, basic language and principles of decency, such as the concepts of invasion of space, privacy, ownership, and natural rights, come undone. As an individual lowers herself to coo at a child or grip his pudgy cheeks, cuteness subjugates her physical body language and ability to articulate. *Untitled*’s audience experiences a similar process. While the cute materializes in the candies as miniature capsules of charming palatability and infantile joy, the audience must lower their bodies’ stances to seek out and pick a candy. The physical body of the audience reduces its superiority in size to possess the goodies. Language is lost when the audience pops the sweet into their mouths, which renders them silent with the occasional, visceral enunciation of deliciousness. Both Spector and Gonzalez-Torres

point to the sensuality of the candy's consummation, and the violence of the "fondling" and "deform[ing]" of the candy adds another dimension to the eroticism because the sensuality of the candies is no longer just sweet but also biting (815-6). As a result, the audience's desire for the candies grounds itself in cuteness, but what about the candies? Do they desire to be taken, exposed, and eaten? Can a thing desire?

Bennett's thing-power articulates things' capability for vitalization, action, and production in *Vibrant Matter*. What about desire? Bennett and other object-oriented ontologists recognize the uncertainty and unknowability of things and objects. For Bennett, Bryant, and Bogost, this does not signify object-oriented analysis as invaluable, dismissible, or outmoded. Bennett directly addresses this issue in "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton," through her eloquent expression of discord with the named object-oriented ontologists' limiting viewpoint that deems objects as "*non-relational*" things (226). By opening the enigmatic quality of things for examination, Bennett critically and admirably peers into "'objects' to be those swirls of matter, energy, and incipience" that form relational networks to "hold themselves together" in their individual connections and in "the indeterminate momentum of the throbbing whole" ("Systems and Things" 227). For the limitless potentiality of object-oriented ontology to be fully realized, it should not solely focus on the "objectness" of an object or the indistinct dividing ontological lines among things, humans, and those in-between. Although these studies hold immense significance and should be theoretically examined, objects and relations should be placed into these focuses as an equally-valued concept or even as, I would argue alongside Bennett, an essential facet of the field. The unfeasibility of "articulat[ing] fully the 'vague' or 'vagabond' essence of any system or any things" should not serve as a vindication to deem objects as non-relational by reason of the shortcomings of human expression

and comprehensibility (227). This would mean leaving the candies analytically untouched, unwrapped, and unnoticed, which benefits neither party. The nebulousness of things and their relational status to others is powerful and should empower us to explore this terrain that is beyond words, beyond understanding, and beyond us.

The motivation of things is unsolvable, which adds to the pleasure and value of my study. While I realize the obstacle of interpreting the arcane interiority of things, I will employ the *modus operandi* of contagion to articulate in what manner things and, more specifically, candy can possess motivation fueled by desire. The extraordinariness and anomalous composition and nature of *Untitled* invites the audience to ponder the being of candy, a being that is filled with desire, power, agency, and autonomy. This is not to say that common things housed outside the museum do not experience or mobilize their desires. Bennett demonstrates the power of things and the openness of things, so why can desire not be part of this open power dynamic amongst all things and humans? The wonderful abnormality of the candies allows for these things' desires to be communicated through Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of contagion and line of flight.

The nature and power of things are enigmatic, resembling disease and, more specifically, contagion. Contagion finds its basis in unpredictability and instability, and it scatters newness within a realm of dismantlement that is a product of the contagion itself and its spreading. Its desire respires within its implementation of unnatural spreading. Without its diffusion, contagion would be nonexistent and eventually perish as infection does. The candies mirror contagion's motivation. The candies desire to be taken and tasted, for this allows them to experience continuous replenishment. With the audience's participation, the candy does and will unceasingly endure through dissemination. Like contagion, without the ability to disperse, the candies diminish into nothingness. Even if the candy's supply expired, the taken goodies would

still elicit new connections with each interaction. With the continuous renewal comes the continuous potentiality for new connections. In turn, contagious mobilization takes place with the communication amongst the candies and audience. The never-ending replenishment bestows an unnaturalness upon the candy, like contagion. The anomalous, free energy of contagion is not inhibited by the past and strives toward the perpetuation of the future. In this typhoon of newness, nothing can damage the candy, except the audience not damaging it.

What does the candy desire? It wants the audience's participation to instigate its dispersal and renewal so that it will continue into the indefinite future through its boundless potentiality for new connections. Yet, the purpose of its desire lies within something greater than its motivation to mobilize. The candy's desire is limitlessness. It craves to extend beyond the connections it was designed to create and to be unrestricted by its space and physicality. Through the candy's link to the newness and unnaturalness of contagion, infinite relations transpire. Without its museum environment, the audience's and candy's desire would collapse. Art as untouchable, irreproducible, and unmovable elicits the viewer's desire to feel what is forbidden and to touch, possess, and protect what is cute. The candy as art that is touchable, reproducible, and movable causes conflicting desires within the audience that accumulate into internal inquiries about the extent of their permissible engagements with the candy. This dynamic cannot be produced outside of the museum space, for the dismantlement of traditional museum decorum is integral to the candy-audience relation and the comingling of their desires and pleasures. The candy's museum residence allows it to spread through dismantlement and contagion. While the candy desires limitlessness in relations and space, it achieves it by its continual dispersal, replenishment, and the audience's involvement. What about its desire to transcend its material body? Limitlessness is partly comprised of transformability. The candy transcends its spatial

confinements and also its material form. The audience's oral interplay with the candy cuts, melts, and reshapes it. The audience's digestive interplay also reforms the candy. An abandoned piece of candy that slips out of an art-lover's pocket can be crushed by the traffic of vehicles and feet. It can roll into a patch of grass for a bird's or small mammal's consumption. It can be left untouched by outside forces and organically rot into the earth's soil, becoming a part of nature and adding a bit of sweetness along its journey into dematerialization. The diffusion of the candies gives the candy the facility to transform limitlessly, for the candy moves beyond its space, intentional relations, and initial form.

While things' ability to desire cannot be fully articulated, human interpretation cannot completely comprehend and verbalize the entailment of the candy's desire. Things or "those swirls of matter, energy, and incipience," as Bennett notes, are ambiguous and indefinite and are magnificent ("Systems and Things" 227). Things, their beingness, their power, and their desires are indecipherable and deserve addressing, analyzing, and celebrating. Through my analysis and articulation, I am aware I may seem to be speaking for the candy, but my aim is not to be the candy's voice or speak on its behalf. I want to show a fragment of the countless possibilities within the unknowability and wonder of things. The only voice I want to speak for is my own. I do aspire to voice the relational power of things while illuminating that things are viable beings within the webbing network of the cosmos of us all.

The candy's desire lies within its ability to coax the audience to take and spread it, so that renewal can transpire. The aesthetic ensnaring quality of the goodies through their compact vibrancy and informal intimacy in a foreign space not only tempts onlookers to physically engage with them but also dares the audience to satisfy their own desires. The dare possesses a playful acuteness that allows the audience to feel pleasure without the repercussion of guilt or

punishment. Through the art's replenishment, taking a candy results in no persistent damage, hole, or absence; therefore, there is no cost, guilt, or regret. This provocation that the candy sets up for us also entails a double dare that urges the audience to fulfill their desires as well as the candies' wishes. Committing this double dare does not result in guilt or punishment either; rather it results in reward – pleasure. Lacan and others associate desire with failure of achievement and satisfaction and correlate desire's sustainment to its failure because if desire is fulfilled, it is no longer desired or a desire. Consequently, desire's fulfillment converts to pleasure. Pleasure, especially of a sexual nature, is burdened by shame, for acting upon or fulfilling desire closely aligns with societal indecency and primitive instincts. The temptation of desirous satisfaction is permissible, as failure and conventional civility are retained. Once desire's actualization enters into the physical world, the failure of desire is lost, but the guilt of pleasure arises. Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled* provides a space where desire can be achieved and pleasure can be pleasurable without the weight of shame.

The promiscuous bodies of the candies intermingle the sustainment of desire with the satisfaction of pleasure with no emotional or physical cost. The paradoxical convergence of desire and pleasure operates as a line of flight which is brilliantly examined by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The line of flight disrupts normative relations through rhizomatic spreadings that unpredictably connect, collide, and mobilize. Within this hurtling of unsystematic clashes, “absolute deterritorialization” occurs through the indeterminable placement of the lines, their merging, and their dispersal (Deleuze and Guattari 197). Deleuze and Guattari discuss how the line of flight is a third abstract, unclassifiable line in a cluster of two other practical lines. By diagramming the lines through novella studies, Deleuze and Guattari theorize that the first line contains “words and conversations, questions and answers,

interminable explanations, precisions” and the second line entails “silences, allusions, and hasty innuendos, inviting interpretation” (198). The first line affiliates with the normative sphere of definiteness, idioms, and categories, while the second line stretches slightly beyond this sphere and constitutes subjectivity, openness, and vagueness. The third line – the line of flight – transcends any foreseeability, classification, and certainty. It “flashes [...] like a train in motion,” for although the line of flight can appear to move linearly and to have symmetry (similar to the first and second line), the brevity and ambiguity of movements within and glances outside the train find that “it is no longer possible for anything to stand for anything else” (198). The third line entirely departs from normative convictions and provides a groundlessness for all thought, interpretations, and lines. The candy’s and audience’s desire and pleasure dynamic form a line of flight through the fusing of traditionally held notions concerning these two passions. The assured failure of desire, the blurry guilt of pleasure, and the completely marvelous enigma of satisfied desire and faultless pleasure parallel to the first, second, and third lines that Deleuze and Guattari uproot.

The line of desire’s and pleasure’s simultaneous, guiltless interplay in *Untitled* deviates from conventions and assumptions about want and fulfillment. This complete aberration is the line of flight. The line of flight’s divergence comes through rupturing the confines of not only language and space but also time. Like contagion, the line of flight is not attached to the past, and likewise, the candy holds no history of failure, disappointment, or contact with its onlookers. The absence of history also resides within the title of *Untitled*. No definite history, conclusive relations, or direct context can be resolutely extracted from the title. With the candies and audience, their desires and pleasure are not burdened by the past, history, or loss and are produced from the bodies’ momentary visceral encounter with one another. The candy is in the

pile on the museum floor to be desired and dares to be touched, taken, and eaten. The art implicates the other in the desiring mindset and in satisfying this craving in the pursuit of present joy. At the same time, the involvement of the audience's desires and pleasures triggers those of the candies. The candies' desirous, vibrant implementation upon the audience, in turn, implicates itself. Through the audience's want and achievement of that want, an individual candy separated from the collective or swarm is reminiscent of the line of flight. The candy experiences division from its shared body and becomes a singular body. This leads to the candy's scattering, its renewal, and then, ultimately its attainment of transformability and limitlessness. The sweet's transference from a collective body to an individual body marks the initial deviance of the line of flight. Once the candy's desire for limitlessness is reached, the line of flight is reached as well. The line of flight "never consists in running away from the world," for although its formed relations are not linear, they are still connections in constant, mutable motion (Deleuze and Guattari 204). It acts more as "runoffs" that rhizomatically formulate, spread, and "continually intermingle" with the first, second, and other lines (204, 198). The diffusion and ahistorical aspects of the line of flight resonate with contagion. Deleuze and Guattari note that "we are all made of lines" that interact and fuse with other lines and that show how "universal matter" cannot be treated in a precise way or direction (194). These lines and lines of flight that compose us create connections as a method of living life through "following lines, whether connectable or not, even heterogeneous ones" (201). Contagion's spreading is new with each production; thus, it is heterogeneous in nature, motivation, and mobilization due to its irreproducibility. Deleuze and Guattari continue by indicating how a line or connection "sometimes [...] doesn't work when they are homogeneous" (201). Homogeneity directly correlates with infection, as infection reproduces from the same source. Heterogeneous or contagious lines successfully operate in

forming relations, such as the candy and audience do. Homogeneous or infectious lines do not carry the same rupturing, deviating effect of contagious lines or the lines of flight. The candy is a contagion and a line of flight when coupled with its museum environment and relation with the audience. Its unnatural mobilization, masochistic desire, and guiltless pleasure speak to its thing-power as a force of transgressive rupturing of structural and/or hierarchical systems and as an extraordinary body saturated in enigma and wonder.

While the candies want physical engagement, they are there for the audience's visual and physical consumption and for the audience to create art outside the conventional parameters of the art world. Both bodies inaudibly and audibly "communicate" with one another to fulfill the desire of each. The silence of the audience's gaze and discernment of which candy they desire to take and of the candy's resting place within the pile illustrates the muted interaction between the two collective bodies and multiple individual bodies. The sound of their steps toward the candy, the wrappers crinkling with anticipation, and the salivating mouths reshaping the candies reverberate with pleasure. The audience's desire to pick their chosen candy is fulfilled. The candies' desire to spread beyond the pile and itself is fulfilled as well. Through the simultaneous transgressive interplay of desire and pleasure, the candy's desire of limitlessness and transformability is achieved with no cost of guilt, regret, or absence but with the reward of renewable destruction.

The Contagious Communication of the Candy and Audience

Within this process of desire, pleasure, and satisfaction, relations and power converge through the deconstruction of institutionalized and structuralized conventions surrounding museum spaces. These multiple, simultaneous dismantlements originate in desire for pleasure and power and relations. The spreading of the candies, whether through touch, possession, or

consumption, acts as contagion. A realm of dismantlement breeds contagion. Aberrant desires, acts, and relations provide an ideal space for contagion to mobilize its unnatural newness and uncontainable flow of connections and of the future. That is, the candies and audience operate as contagions and as bodies of transformative power that are endlessly in flux, and by tracing the dispersal process and power relations, I will show that contagion and thing-power coexist in a truly wondrous way.

Contagion's commutative spreading mirrors that of the audience's dispersal of the candy and the candies' dispersal of itself. The audience seizes candy from Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled* and depletes the quantity of the colorful goodies. The *OED* initially defines disease as "absence of ease" and "disquiet, disturbance." The audience functions as a disease, for they not only infiltrate, take, possess, and consume but also disrupt. They unsettle conventional museum etiquette, the compact pile of candy, the covering of the candy, and the autonomy of the candy. Within the audience's disease of discontent, the candy attains its limitlessness. The audience as a disease is a wanted, imposed body of celebration upon the art. Disease is not limited to pejorative undertones or understandings. It can be affirmative, it can be hopeful, and it can be celebratory. Unburdening disease from its tradition connotations reflects the multiple unburdenments that take place within Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled*, which I will subsequently address.

While the audience is a disease, is the audience an infection or contagion? From the onset, it may seem as the audience is an invasive poison, like infection, that removes from and circulates through the same heap of candy. The audience also appears as the most superior body, because as the candies vanish, the audience grows or, at least, maintains its numbers. However, the audience's infectious disease will soon die once the one hundred seventy-five pound heap of candies is all infected, for circulation can no longer take place. On the other hand, their

interaction with the candy is new with each engagement. Both are anonymous bodies with no previous historical relationship with one another. This continual and irreproducible newness invalidates the audience as an infection. Once the candy's infinitely renewable supply is added into this formulation, the idea that the spread will perish is no longer feasible. The replenishment of the candy undermines the concept of the audience as an infection. Renewal provides new candies and new spreadings; therefore, multiplication of the same cannot transpire.

Consequently, the audience is a contagion. Even as candies are taken from the pile, the candies from the replenishment are identical in structure and type but are fully new things. When an item is destroyed then recreated, reproduced, or rewrapped, the item is still new, despite its duplicate appearance (Bogost 52). This "doubled" item is an exclusive being and unique to its environment. At the same time, the item is not completely severed from the internal structure of its likenesses and of the fundamental sense of matter. Shared materialism implicates all things, along with humans, as different, individual beings that are all composed of the same basic matter. Thus, all things are connected, and ontological lines cannot be fully delineated, if delineated at all, as the networks of things and their beingness continually spin out of restrictive encapsulating notions of life and death and of being and non-being and spin wildly through, into, and beyond the unknowability and limitlessness of their relational power.

The item is a double of the now-demolished model but is a new item. The replenishment of the candies acts as a continual newness of the candies. If there is an unrelenting supply of new candies, infection cannot occur because it only reproduces through traceable strands. In another sense, infection's spreading is homogeneous in that it is based upon an origin and reproduces from the same origin, hence the traceability of strands. Infection cannot coincide with the candy's dispersal because its spreading leaves no mappable traces. An anonymous individual of

the audience takes an anonymous piece of candy – leaving no visible remnants behind, except for stray colorful, plastic wrappers. This interaction is new with each encounter. The basis of the Gonzalez-Torres-candy-Ross-audience connection is change, and infection is unable to sustain itself or even colonize an environment of mutability. Even if the candy's supply were to expire, change would still operate as the foundation, for the link between the physical dynamics of the candy's and audience's interaction remains mutable in decay, death, and perpetual formations of new connections with the other.

Contagion relies upon deconstruction of a system, which occurs through *Untitled's* museum dwelling and the audience's participatory factor within its residence, and upon newness. The candy's unceasing renewable quality provides new bodies to enact contagion's diffusion. The audience spreads the candies through their touch, possession, and consumption of them. Like contagion, the wild energy of the candies multiplies with each distribution. The candies are not restrained to the past and are no longer attached to their collective body. Not only are the candies new in their freshly-replenished body but are new when they become a singular candy held in the palm of an audience member. Their newness occurs on multiple levels, fashioning them as multiples of multiplicity – the same as contagion. This also echoes the unnaturalness associated with contagion, for contagion's anomalous nature lies within its recurrent newness and endless potentiality for connections and relations that are not bound to the past but look toward the future. Similar to the audience's and candy's anonymity, history and futurity do not hinder their material engagement. Their relation is all present. The “nowness” of this communication disrupts the value of temporality within anthropocentric thought, for anthropocentrism is always contemplating the past and the future but neglects the significance of the present. Like contagion, the interaction between two nameless bodies (and *Untitled* echoes

this sentiment as well) is not held to the past or laden by the prospect of the future. Their rhizomatic connections do not have an agenda. While any sense of agenda resides within historicity and, more precisely, a linear historicity, the candies are ahistorical beings. Their sense of matter detaches from the limitations of the past and looks toward the future as a realm of indefiniteness and inestimable potentiality. The renewability of the candy also feeds into the renewability of the present, which also makes it vital. Vitality as the formation of life enters within this presentist domain and creates vital relations in the current stream of the ever-webbing network of shared materialism – connecting the configuration of communicative relations and contagious mobilization to the whirlwind-like energy of things and their beingness. The newness of connections, dispersal, and the present elicit contagious motivation, for the candies are only concerned with the tactile presence of the present onlookers in the present moment. The newness and “nowness” of the candies beautifully shapes the atemporality and multiplicity of contagion as a spreading of continual potentiality for relations and as a moment of irreproducible enigma and wonder.

The Unburdening Wonder of Things

In *Alien Phenomenology or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, Ian Bogost discusses how acknowledging and appreciating the existence and wonder of things can allow us to experience “wonder unburdened by pretense and deception” (133). Before the experience of wonder can truly transpire, we need to realize that things “do not merely *exist* – they exist *equally*” (Bogost 120). Throughout my analysis of *Untitled*, I have articulated the candy as a thing, yet the candy is more than a thing – it is a fusion of things. It is a candied conglomeration of various chemicals, sugars, syrups, colorings, plastics, and other things. Each thing that makes up the candy, from the sweet center to the plastic wrapper, are individual beings that have power and

wonder and “exist *equally*” (120). When we recognize the equality of things’ existence, wonder occurs, and Bogost points to “two senses” of wonder which are “awe or marvel” and “puzzlement or logical perplexity” (121). Just as a thing’s existence cannot be prioritized over another’s, one essence of wonder should not be selected or ordered over another. The wonder of things is a simultaneous, beautiful meshing of astonishment and rational bewilderment. The candy elicits a similar spellbound experience through its environment, its touchable and renewable supply, and its magnetism that entangles the audience in a realm of sustained desire and guiltless pleasure. The candy’s allure is a vital component of its wonder, for as Bogost notes, wonder’s magnetism develops from the “allure that can exist between an object and the very concept of objects” (124). The physicality of thing paired with its thingness – its being – creates an attraction that “invites a detachment from ordinary logics” (124). The relational power of things not only asks but necessitates us to separate ourselves from anthropocentric interpretation and familiar reason and “to become subsumed entirely in the uniqueness of an object’s native logic” (124). The candy does just that. Recognizing and valuing things and their being emerges from dismantling our limited preconceptions about them, and once we strip our minds of the idea that things are merely items revolving around us and contingent upon us, we unburden ourselves from anxiety concerning things beyond us and from hierarchical power. We see things as beings. In turn, things unburden and challenge our conceptions situated in humancentric thought, especially around desire. While desire is treated as a repressed burden within anthropocentrism, the candy – these things – unburdens us from the encumbering weight of desire and opens us to a desire that is no longer associated with or sustained by failure and that is quenchable without the consequence of guilt or shame but with pleasure.

Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled* unburdens the candy from its sugar capsules through its ability to amuse, tease, allure, astonish, dismantle, and defy. The wonder of the candy comes from several aspects – from its thingness to its renewability. What about its spreading? The audience's material engagement with the candy fulfills the desire of both bodies and creates a contagious dispersal, yet more is disseminated. Wonder and unburdenment spread through the audience by means of their visceral and contemplative relationship with the candy. The candy's embracement and enactment of contagion and line of flight unburden it from its candied form and give it limitlessness and transformability – the ultimate unburdenment, the ultimate wonder. *Untitled*'s wonder-filled phenomenon does not cease here. Gonzalez-Torres and the candy unburden disease from its confining pre-destined negativity. They unburden the museum from its stale, subdued, non-relational nature. They unburden art from its traditionalist, untouched restrictions. They unburden things from their non-beingness. They unburden us from the absolute. They spread wonder and unburdenment with each allurements, unwrapping, touch, possession, and bite. While the candy is a concoction of multiple things, its unified form possesses an aura of wonder that illuminates each thread within the webbing network of things and each reverberation within that web that resonates throughout all things, despite time, space, and death.

Near the end of *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett cogitates on the difficulty of articulating her belief in the existence of “the vitality of matter” and of reshaping “the grammar of agency” which “assigns activity to people and passivity to things” (119). In her struggle, she returns to the ontological lines of being and non-being that seem to divide humans and things into ranked categories of value, substance, and life. Bennett looks to how language can humanizes things and humans in terms of agency. While anthropomorphism may appear to limit things as

anthropocentrism does, it brings things into the realm of human agency, therefore, negating the notion of things as non-beings (*Vibrant Matter* 120). Through acknowledging the existence of other beings in or on the human body, such as “bacteria colonies in human elbows,” our bodies themselves become “nonhuman, alien, outside, [and] vital materiality” (120). As she traces the lingual risks of object-oriented ontology, Bennett examines and, in a sense, unburdens the maxim of “tread lightly on the earth” (121). The conventional wisdom to take from this adage is for us to do the opposite of just that – taking. We are to “minimize” our effect upon the earth by decreasing the harm or loss produced by our hands (121). Within the webbing network of vital materialism, this meaning changes. We are no longer solely destructive beings of agency but are part of the network of all things, humans, and their relations. With things, this holds ever truer. Things are not limited by living and, essentially, do not die. The relational power of all things and shared materialism form a cosmos where things’ impacts and connections are limitlessness and where there is no absolute death. Bennett’s lovely declaration, “This material vitality is me, it predates me, it exceeds me, it postdates me,” illuminates the absence of absolute death within the web of thing-power and shows our non-contingent, equally-influential existence within this web (120). Her statement also illustrates the limitlessness of her concept of thing-power, Deleuze and Guatarri’s contagion and line of flight, and Bogost’s wonder and unburdenment, for all things are beyond our understanding of time, space, and being and provide a hope not restricted by death but freed of death.

Throughout my study, I have referred to *Untitled*’s celebratory effect upon many ideas, elements, and things, yet ultimately, *Untitled* is a celebration that surpasses all celebration – the celebration of no absolute death. Like Bennett’s initial experience with vital materialism in her witnessing of the “shimmer[ing]” connectivity of those unsystematic yet linked things floating in

the Chesapeake Bay, the candy exemplifies the visceral, incomprehensible wonder of thing-power through the audience's experience with it and its experience with the audience (Bennett 4). Every engagement with the candy leaves a new, irreproducible mark that touches each candy and onlooker; thus, each interaction "treads lightly" on each museum floor, each candy wrapper, each observer's tongue, and each thing within the webbing network of vibrant matter. There is no absolute death in this network of limitless connections. Gonzalez-Torres, Ross, the candy, and the audience live through their creation of relations and their impressions upon things, as do all beings. Each "shimmering" candy wrapper – stuffed in an onlooker's pocket, resting in a museum or street waste bin, or laying on a floor waiting to be carried away by the soles of a shoe, air-conditioning, or wind – leaves an imprint upon the network of all things, whether through touch, energy, spreading, wonder, or a liveliness, that surpasses absolute knowledge, absolute limitations, and absolute death.

Notes:

¹ Elizabeth Mayard's "The Body and Community in Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Candy Spills or Towards a Positive Metaphor of Illness" provides an affirmative analysis of *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* in the context of AIDS crisis.

² Spector's chapter "The Body" in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* and Lewis Baltz's article "(san titre), Felix Gonzalez-Torres" further discuss Gonzalez-Torres's figureless portraiture work in the form of candy spills and friezes.

³ I offer a celebratory reading of contagion, recognizing the possible reluctance or even aversion to my optimistic analysis of a conventionally negative, death-riddled concept. The validity of such arguments, historical or social medical, have their place within the analysis and dismantlement of ailing bodies. At the same time, the viewpoint of these studies is limited to the pejorative understandings. In the same vein, a positive exploration of contagion elicits much explanation while a negative stance does not. In my analysis of Gonzalez-Torres' work and in my engagements with the theoretical methodologies of Bennett and Deleuze and Guattari, I will show that the limitlessness of contagion cannot be subdued by negative, unconstructive notions of itself. The true nature of contagion unceasingly changes, and analysis of its spreading of newness should reflect such a relation. Severed from the polarity of positive and negative and of healthy and unhealthy, contagion's unending potentiality for new connections, separation from the past, and indefinite deluge into the future evokes amazement and celebration on its own. The sweet transience and lingering of the candy and the unguided participation of the audience operate within the realm of contagion and festively create a boundless web of connectivity. The intersection amongst the candy, audience, contagion, and thing-power find an illimitability of links to humans and things in which the true celebration resides. As Gonzalez-Torres says, "I destroy the work before I make it," his art unties threads attached (soars outside ties or bondages?) to the past, preconceptions, tradition, and ideology and portrays a celebration of connectivity and the unclassifiable – a party of diffusion, revitalization, and hope (FGT quoted in Fuchs 112).

⁴ There are now other artists who do food-based installations that also involve audience eating, like Jennifer Rubell and Rikrit Tiravanija.

List of Illustrations

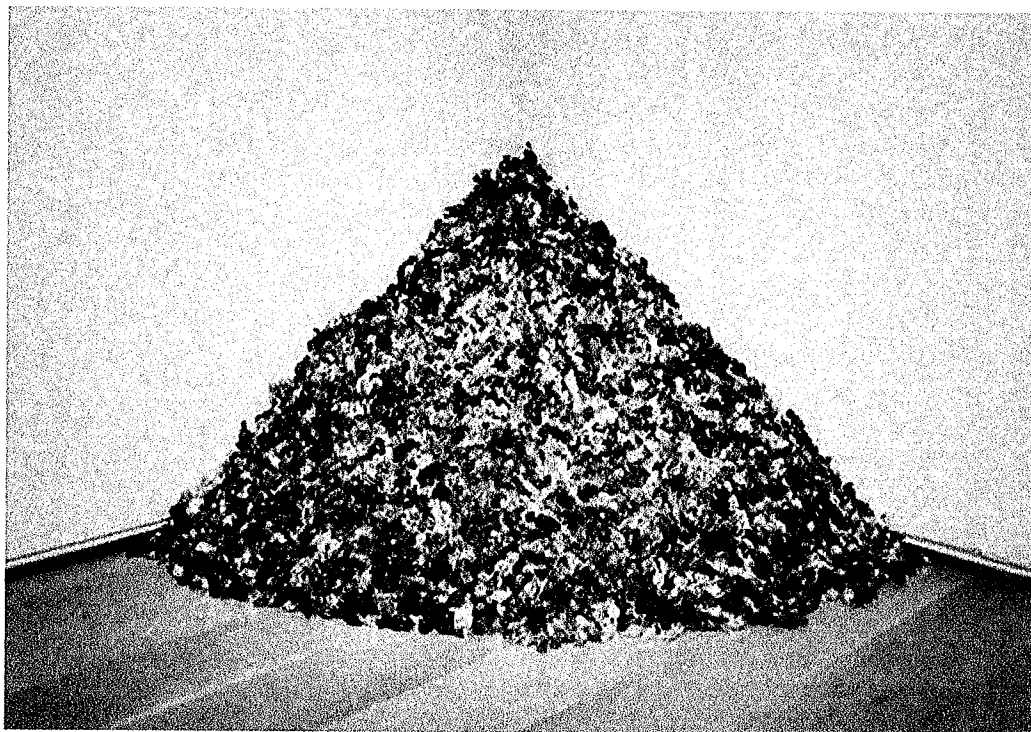


Figure 1: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991

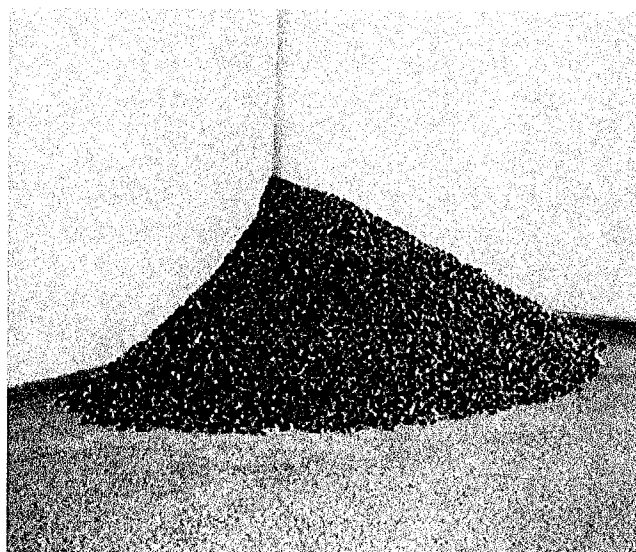


Figure 2: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Public Opinion)*, 1991

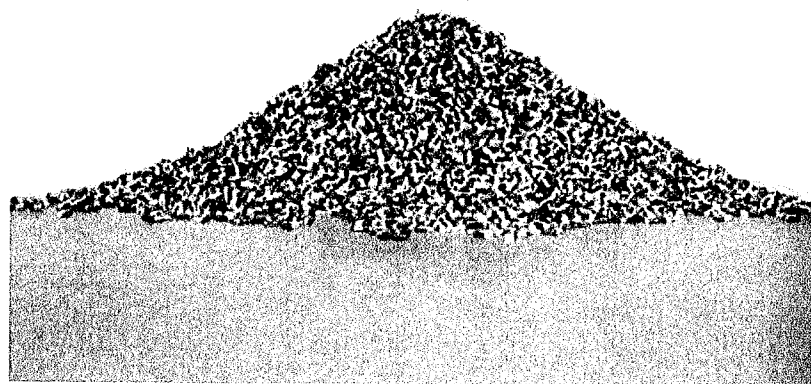


Figure 3: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Welcome Back Heroes)*, 1991

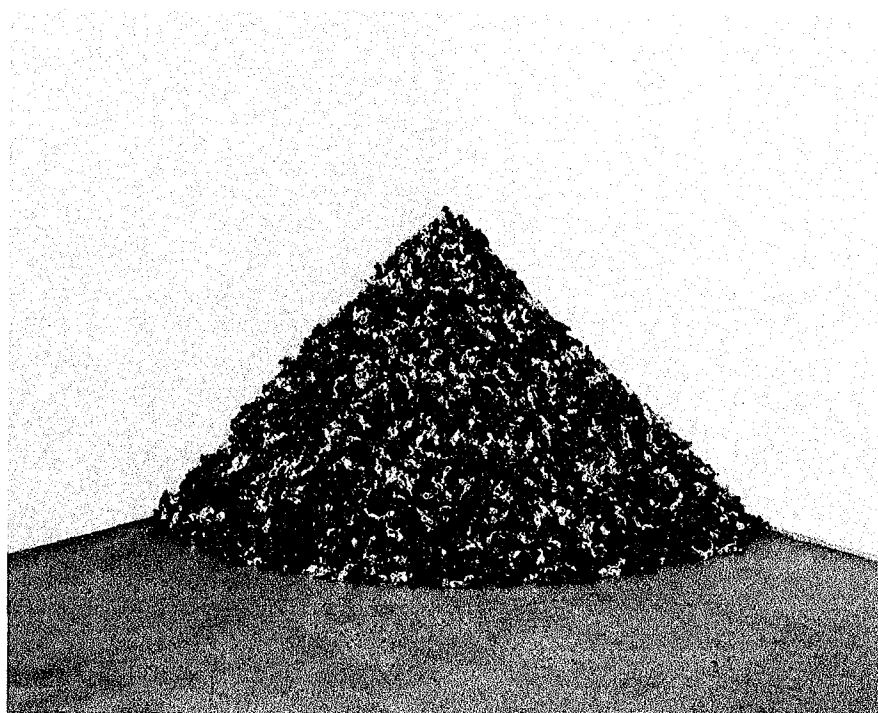


Figure 4: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (USA Today)*, 1990

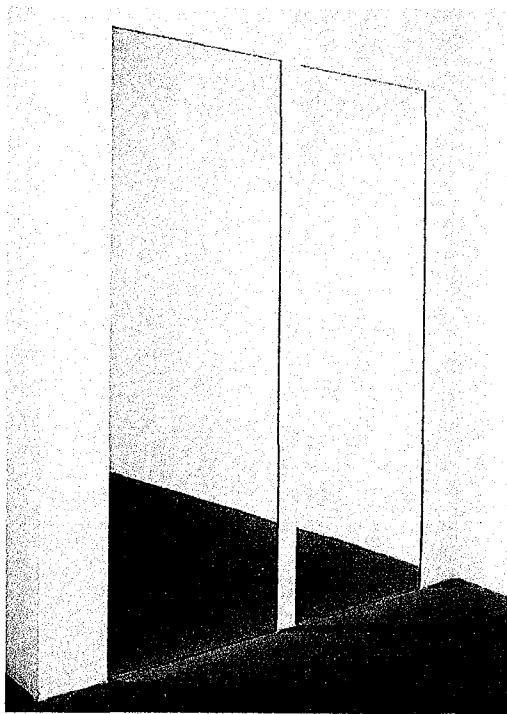


Figure 5: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)*, 1991

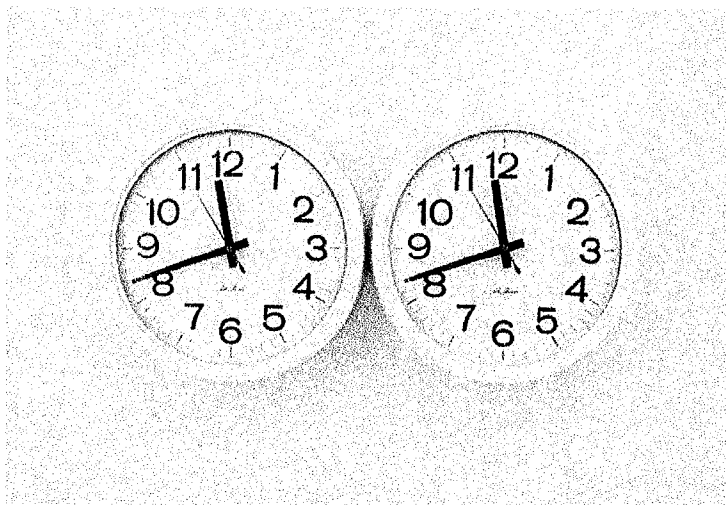


Figure 6: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991

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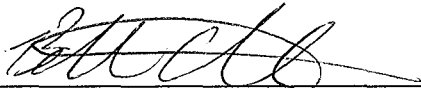
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