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## **Innovations in a pile of candy: Rethinking portraiture through Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Portraits of Ross**

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INNOVATIONS IN A PILE OF CANDY:

RETHINKING PORTRAITURE THROUGH FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES' PORTRAITS OF ROSS

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## List of Contents

• Introduction .....	1
• The Historical Framework: Traditional Portraiture from the Renaissance.....	9
- What Is a portrait? .....	9
- The Limits of the Research.....	11
- The Ancient Roots.....	12
- The Rebirth of Portraiture.....	14
- Likeness in the Renaissance.....	16
- High Renaissance and the <i>Mona Lisa</i> .....	18
- Revolutions in 19th- and 20th-century Portraiture.....	19
• Issues on Materiality: Between Likeness and Fluidity.....	23
- Materials and Materiality.....	24
- Conceptual Ideas.....	26
- The Fluidity of the Portraits.....	29
- Likeness and Recognition.....	32
• Audience Engagement: Ephemeral Presence and Oral Participation.....	36
- Active Participation.....	37
- The Meanings of Orality.....	39
- Ephemerality and Inexhaustibility.....	43
• Conclusion.....	48
• List of Illustrations.....	54
• Illustration Credits.....	59
• Bibliography.....	60
• List of Sites.....	65

## Introduction

This thesis project examines how Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Cuba 1957 – Miami 1996) redefined the attributes of portraiture through his innovative *Candy Works*, focusing primarily on the artworks “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991), and “*Untitled*” (*Ross*) (1991).<sup>1</sup> The American artist, distinguished for his minimalistic and conceptual style, challenged traditional conventions by transforming portraits of his partner, Ross Laycock, into symbols of active participation, intimacy and loss. The objective of this thesis is to facilitate a profound understanding of the innovations brought to the genre of portraiture, encompassing the organic materiality of the objects utilised, their ephemerality and the dichotomy of presence and absence in the artworks, emblemized by the relationship with the public.

Between 1990 and 1993, Gonzalez-Torres created a series of artworks known as *candy works*, otherwise called *candy spills*, comprising twenty different sculptures entirely composed of edible sweets.<sup>2</sup> These artworks differ from one another in terms of the message they convey, the variety of the sweets, and the ideal weight of each sculpture. However, they are unified by a fundamental concept, which will be further elaborated in the thesis. Namely, a slowly decaying process, provoked by the audience, who is invited to engage with the artworks by taking away and consuming the candies.<sup>3</sup> A direct consequence of this active involvement of the public is the inherently ephemeral nature of the works, which requires continuous replenishment during their display.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, of the twenty artworks in the series, the two that have been selected as case studies for this project are “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991) [Fig.1] and “*Untitled*” (*Ross*) (1991) [Fig.2], which are openly dedicated to the artist’s late partner,

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<sup>1</sup> The original and authentic spelling of the artist’s name is Félix González-Torres, however due to the English translation it is often reported as Felix Gonzalez-Torres. A concern encountered by Mosquera, who curator of New Museum in New York (“Remember my Name” in *Artforum* 34, no. 9, May 1996). The anglicised form without marks, used in this thesis, was chosen to maintain homogeneity and to conform to the format adopted by the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> “Candy Works” in Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. It is worth mentioning that among the twenty artworks one of them it is not composed of sweets but fortune cookies. The rest of them variates between candies, lollipops and chocolates.

<sup>3</sup> “*Untitled*” (portrait of Ross in L.A.), in Art Institute of Chicago.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Ross Laycock (1959-1991). The two *candy works*, appear to be visually similar, they are both constituted of multicoloured wrapped confectionary; however, they are not connected in any way to a representation of Laycock's physical features. Additionally, the portraits were originally displayed in the form of piles, situated in a corner of the exhibiting room, between two walls. The configuration of the artworks' display is not confined to their original shape; rather, Gonzalez-Torres permitted the owners of the *candy works* to arrange the sweets in accordance with their own preferences.<sup>5</sup> [Fig. 3]

Both "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) were created as portraits, and they are intended to evoke Ross' presence, to do so, Gonzalez-Torres recreated his body weight in candies, giving to ordinary objects the responsibility of embodying the sitter.<sup>6</sup> The original Ross' candy portraits – the ones created personally by the artist – weighted, at the moment of the installation 175 lb, approximately 79,4 kg. The artist, however, has not imposed the weight as a mandatory requirement for following displays, and the overall dimensions of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) may vary according to the owner's discretion.<sup>7</sup>

Among the other eighteen *candy works* by Gonzalez-Torres, two more are listed as portraits: "Untitled" (Portrait of Dad) (1991) [Fig. 4] and "Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient) (1992) [Fig.5] and are constituted according to the same characteristics already seen for "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross).<sup>8</sup> Despite the candies being different in colour (originally cream for Dad's portrait and blue for Marcel's portrait) they consist of piles of sweet that aim at incarnating the person they are depicting.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of the evident similarity between the four artworks mentioned, and consequently aware that much of the innovations brought by Gonzalez-Torres can also be demonstrated through "Untitled" (Portrait of Dad) and "Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient), the focus of this thesis is strictly toward Ross' portraits. The primary reason for this selection is that, in order to provide a comprehensive overview of Gonzalez-Torres' innovations, it was necessary to select works that were symbolically significant. The artist's romantic relationship with Laycock, in addition to the valuable

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<sup>5</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, "Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works".

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the world"

<sup>7</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, "Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works".

<sup>8</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation Official Website.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

theme of AIDS – which is evident in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) – offers a layer of analysis that the candy portraits of Dad and Marcel Brient do not. Furthermore, in order to more effectively emphasise the topic of presence and absence in Gonzalez-Torres’ artistic oeuvre, the decision to use portraits that emotionally symbolises loss, was deemed more suitable. In contrast with the story of the French collector Brient who, in 1992, the year his candy portrait was created, was alive.

This thesis project aims to provide a respond at the following research question: How did Félix González-Torres redefine the genre of portraiture through artistic and conceptual innovations, as exemplified in “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) and “Untitled” (*Ross*)?

A substantial corpus has been published on the subject of Gonzalez-Torres and his oeuvre. A notable primary source appears to be *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (2006), a collection of essays assembled by American artist and curator Julie Ault in a comprehensive volume.<sup>10</sup> The publication explores the artistic techniques and ideology of Gonzalez-Torres and includes a series of transcripts from interviews and lectures that directly question the artist’s methodology. The mentioned volume constitutes an essential starting point in the analysis of Gonzalez-Torres’ conceptual and minimalistic art, and although not referring specifically to "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), the *candy works* are analysed under the lens of the viewer participation and the connection with the AIDS epidemic.<sup>11</sup> Ault’s publication is instrumental in the development of this thesis, as it provides an analysis of Gonzalez-Torres’ artworks, questioning the manner in which these artworks present themselves to the public, and their meanings.

A second noteworthy volume that contributes significantly to the analysis of Gonzalez-Torres' art, is *Felix González-Torres* (1995), edited by American museum curator Nancy Spector, to coincide with the artist's solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum.<sup>12</sup> The catalogue provides critical and interpretative essays on Gonzalez-Torres' style and oeuvre, which are essential for understanding the artist's methodology. The

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<sup>10</sup> Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*.

<sup>11</sup> Fuchs, “The authorized viewer” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 105-115.

<sup>12</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*.

publication comprises an analysis of a broad selection of Gonzalez-Torres' artworks, including his portraits; however, the study is not confined to his *candy works*. Spector's original study of portraits focuses specifically on the depiction of the body in Gonzalez-Torres, in her study, she examines the body through various categories, including sexuality, politics and abstraction. This provides an interpretation of the human figure in Gonzalez-Torres' art and its symbolism.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned volumes, which provide a more comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of Gonzalez-Torres' artworks, further publications are required for the purpose of conducting more specific studies. A valuable source is provided by art historian Fiona Johnstone, with the publication of *AIDS & Representation* (2023), which includes a dedicated chapter on the experience of Gonzalez-Torres with the topic of HIV. Johnstone's volume seeks to provide a reinterpretation of Gonzalez-Torres' portraiture, and more specifically self-portraiture, from the perspective of the AIDS epidemic and the narrative of the disease by analysing a selection of different artworks.<sup>14</sup> The concept of time is central to the publication, and is addressed in the dichotomy between absence and presence, and through the lens of the subjectivity of the romantic relationship between Laycock and Gonzalez-Torres that shaped the latter's art.<sup>15</sup> The publication proves to be essential in the formulation of the present thesis, because it provides a scrupulous analysis of Gonzalez-Torres' portraits, that although not concerning specifically "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) provides an effective starting point for my argument.

Similarly, the issue of the active participation of the audience with Gonzalez-Torres' *candy works*, has been addressed on more than one occasion; emblematic the publication by the gallerist Andrea Rosen: "'Untitled' (The neverending portrait)", for the *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue raisonné* (1997).<sup>16</sup> Rosen's research sheds light on Gonzalez-Torres' *candy works*, providing an attentive examination of the features of the artworks from the ambiguity and subjectivity of their meaning, to the topic of memory and loss. Additionally, Rosen searches for the meaning of the *candy spills* in their

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<sup>13</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 139-178.

<sup>14</sup> Johnstone, Fiona. *AIDS and Representation*, 147-179.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Rosen, "Untitled" (The neverending portrait), in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue raisonné*, 43-59.

encounters with the audience, analysing the functions of the candies and the extension of the viewers participation, which generates a cycle of destruction and restoration necessary for the fulfilment of the artworks' purpose.<sup>17</sup> The publication thus provides insights from a variety of perspectives, allowing me to examine the characteristics of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) as artistic creations.

Lastly, a publication that proves to be fundamental in the comprehension of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), is *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art (2022)* by Professor Sherri Irvin, specialized in the field of philosophy of art.<sup>18</sup> Irvin's study explores the concept of immateriality, addressing the issue through the custom rules that artists employ to shape their works, open rules that concern materiality, display and creation. Irvin uses the specific case of "*Untitled*" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) to guide the discussion in different directions. Gonzalez-Torres' renowned portrait is analysed from the perspectives of active participation, engagement, and display, as well as from a more philosophical standpoints concerning memory, loss, and the AIDS epidemic.<sup>19</sup> Irvin's analysis is therefore essential in many aspects, as she herself refers to various topics covered in this thesis.

In general, the publications mentioned above serve as a status quaestionis, and starting point to help me guide the analysis in regards of Gonzalez-Torres' artistic and conceptual innovations in portraiture. Despite the fact that portraiture constitutes a fundamental theme in Gonzalez-Torres' body of works, it remains a relatively unexplored subject. Portraiture is mainly addressed in relation to Gonzalez-Torres' *word portraits*, a series of works that are structured on the basis of totally different techniques, and which use language as a means of representation.<sup>20</sup> Concurrently, the thematic focus of the *candy works* is predominantly analysed in terms of participation, politics and affectivity. In contrast, the present thesis is an examination of the genre of portraiture in the context of the *candy works*, to underscore the artist's reinterpretations in the creation of portraits, which serve to reformulate portraits' identity and establish connections to familiar topic, including resemblance, recognition, materiality,

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<sup>17</sup> Rosen, "Untitled" (The neverending portrait), in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue raisonné*, 43-59.

<sup>18</sup> Irvin. *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "portraits" in Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation official Website.

ephemerality, and active participation. This study is of significance in facilitating understanding of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross). Furthermore, it explores new ways of conceptualising portraiture in general, thus contributing to a specific conceptual and theoretical analysis.

This thesis project is to be divided into three chapters, the first one entitled, "The Historical Framework: Traditional Portraiture from the Renaissance", focuses on the creation of an historical background for the following discussion. Since the aim of this thesis is to identify and analyse Gonzalez-Torres' artistic innovations, it was necessary to establish a basis for comparison. For this reason, the first chapter aims to outline the development of portraiture during the Renaissance period and its main identifying characteristics at that time. Through the analysis of symbolic works from the period such as *The Arnolfini portrait* (1434) and *The Mona Lisa* (1503-1519), I have outlined the parameters within which the research will take place. Essential source in the first part of the thesis, to help shape the discussion, is the publication by art historian Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: facing the subject*, (1997).<sup>21</sup> This publication employs a chronological analysis, commencing with the Italian Renaissance and emphasising the fundamental characteristics of the genre. The delineation of social ideologies that have shaped its distinctive features and principles is a pivotal aspect of the analysis. Moreover, an interpretation of likeness in portraits within the time frame, provides an historical background that addresses the subjects of identity, authority and dualism in classic portraiture.<sup>22</sup>

The second chapter entitled, "Issues on Materiality: Between Likeness and Fluidity", focuses on the comprehension of the concept of materiality in "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross). An analysis of Gonzalez-Torres' materials is conducted, for the purpose of investigating the intrinsic functions of sweets, and understand how the interactions between the candies themselves, the surrounding space and the audience give rise to new interpretations of portraits. The materiality of Ross's candy portraits, however, is not limited to being interpreted as an object, but the discussion expands into an understanding of the resulting fluidity that the organic works

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<sup>21</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: facing the subject*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 2-18.

entail. The incorporation of Ross into the confectionary is also addressed, as is the recognition of the subject in the art object. The primary source that supports the creation of chapter two is the aforementioned study conducted by Irvin, with the publications of *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* (2022) and “Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Sculpture” (2020).<sup>23</sup> Irvin analyses in depth the materiality as a concept, providing essential background, and specifically researching the art of Gonzalez-Torres, to understand how the sweets in the *candy works* function in the creation of artworks that are not fixed in time or in shape.<sup>24</sup> Her theory provides structured and reliable interpretations of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), allowing me to identify which of Gonzalez-Torres' innovations are inherent to the works from a physical point of view.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, the third and final chapter of this thesis entitled, “Audience Engagement: Ephemeral Presence and Oral Consumption”, explores the topic of innovations in Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) from the perspective of the audience, emphasising active participation. As previously stated, this topic is one of the most frequently discussed features associated with the artist's oeuvre. However, the objective of this chapter is to analyse how the relationship between Ross' candy portraits and the viewers shapes the identity of the artworks and their meaning. The subject of active participation is therefore addressed from the perspective of fluidity, ephemerality, and inexhaustibility; in order to understand the consequences of the slow consumption and the consequential restoration "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) undergo during their displays. Furthermore, the chapter provides an analysis of the meanings conveyed by the audience's oral ingestion of parts of the artworks, to understand how the communitarian process of consumption influences the understanding of the portraits themselves. In order to do so the previously discussed theory proposed by Professor Irvin is utilised, as well as a series of different interpretations provided by curators. For

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<sup>23</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, and Irvin “Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Sculpture”.

<sup>24</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

<sup>25</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*.

instance, Nancy Spector who compares the action to a sexual performance, or Jonathan Katz, who connected the orality with religion and AIDS.

## The Historical Framework: Traditional Portraiture from the Renaissance

### What Is a portrait?

In order to comprehend the innovations that Felix Gonzalez-Torres has introduced to the artistic genre of portraiture, it is necessary to define what is referred to as 'portraits' and what their distinguishing characteristics are. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (2010), a portrait is defined as: "An image – painted or sculptured - which ostensibly provides a likeness of the sitter but also shows some level of engagement between the artist and the personality of the person depicted, often attempting to characterize them as an individual".<sup>1</sup> British-American art historian Shearer West, in her highly acknowledged *Portraiture* (2004), made an attempt to examine the history of portraiture, and in her definition clarified: "While a portrait can be concerned with likeness as contained in a person's physical features, it can also represent the subject's social position or 'inner life', such as their character or virtues".<sup>2</sup>

The word *portrait* originates from the Old French *portret*, substantivized from the past participle verb *peindre*, signifying 'to paint' or 'to depict', indicating the representation of a person through painting, drawing, engraving or other techniques.<sup>3</sup> The term, however, can also be etymologically connected with likeness and resemblance. Indeed, the Italian translation of portrait *ritratto* is derived from the Latin *retrahere*, which denotes the action of making a copy, and reproducing a faithful image of something.<sup>4</sup> The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384BCE-322BCE) proposed the concept of *mimesis* in connection with art in his influential treatise *Poetics* (c. 335BCE), a term derived from the Greek and meaning 'imitation'.<sup>5</sup> While the philosopher's primary focus is on the literature genre of tragedies, he posits that the identification of the subject is facilitated by likeness. Aristotle theorized that art is *mimesis*, an imitation of

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<sup>1</sup> "Portrait" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Age*, Robert E. Bjork. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> West, *Portraiture*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française, portrait.

<sup>4</sup> Dizionario Treccani, "ritratto".

<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, "mimesis (n.), sense 1.b,".

life, and in *Poetics*, he directly references to portraiture writing: “Good portrait painters, who render personal appearance and produce likenesses”.<sup>6</sup>

Much later, during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Renaissance humanist, theorist, architect and writer Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) revived Aristotele’s theory in his book *On Painting* (1450), writing: “In fact, painting certainly has in itself a truly divine power, not only because, as they say of friendship, a painting lets the absent be present, but also because it shows [to] the living, after long centuries, the dead, so that [these] become recognized with the artist’s great admiration and the viewers’ pleasure”.<sup>7</sup> Analysing this quote from Alberti, portraits can be entrusted with the further function of creating an everlasting image of sitters, in addition to the innate role of the work of art of representing the subjects. Based on Alberti’s theory, portraiture is indisputably linked to the imitative concept of *mimesis*, to the extent that it is capable of giving life to an imaginative reality which, by focusing on the likeness of the sitter, constructs a new illusory reality of presence.<sup>8</sup> The Aristotelian theory was further re-elaborated in modern times by the art historian Joanna Woodall, who posits that portraits, as a form of representation, serve as the means by which the absent is made present, through the process of recognition that occurs precisely because of the similarity to the subject that portraits allow.<sup>9</sup>

Portraits, as physical objects representing human beings, have been part of society for thousands of years, since the dawn of humankind, the genre of portraiture has been adopted to depict human subjects. For millennia, individuals have been represented on a variety of media, including coins, sarcophagi, tombstones, busts, and paintings.<sup>10</sup> Woodall opens her volume, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (1997), asserting: “The first image was a portrait”.<sup>11</sup> Referencing the classical myth of Narcissus who fell in love with his own portrait, reflected in a water pond. After that, Woodall observes, the genre of portraiture was expanded with a series of different techniques and purposes, varying between funerary monuments, religious depictions, and paintings.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Aristoteles, Fyfe, Halliwell, *Poetics*, 83.

<sup>7</sup> Alberti, *On Painting*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Keesling, “Introduction” in *Early Greek Portraiture*, 1-4

<sup>11</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

## The Limits of the Research

In the context of this thesis, ‘traditional portraiture’ is understood as portraiture emerging from the Western artistic heritage. It reflects the classical ideals of ancient art and, more specifically, the stylistic and conceptual foundations laid during the European Renaissance. This is contrasted with the experimental tendencies of modernist, avant-garde, and contemporary portraiture. Although the expression was not borrowed in such a literal sense from previous theories, it has been used as ‘traditional portrait theory’ by Laura Feurle, curator of the Leopold Museum, to express the equivalent concept in arguing the fractures of the avant-garde art on traditional paradigm after 1990: “That shook the rather static foundations of traditional portrait theory, which was fundamentally based on the three requirements of referentiality, likeness, and representation”.<sup>13</sup>

In order to address the extremely broad and widely discussed topic of portraiture, aiming at understanding and exploring the technical and conceptual innovations introduced by Gonzalez-Torres, it is necessary to make a few preliminary remarks. As previously stated, the history of portraiture encompasses a time span that extends over several millennia but also covers an extremely wide geographical area. The aim of this chapter is therefore not to provide a complete timeline for historical research, for which academic comprehensive studies already exist.<sup>14</sup> Rather it is to concentrate on significant moments in the Classical Western history of portraiture, to identify the characteristics of the genre. A short digression in Antiquity allows to trace the origins of portraiture, in order to identify the early stages of its creation and the functions that were assigned to it at the time. Furthermore, by limiting the research to significant examples, symbolic categories of portraits are presented, thus allowing a connection to be made in the next stage of the thesis with Gonzalez-Torres’ *candy portraits*. The focus is therefore placed towards the Renaissance period, which is considered to be the moment that marked the beginning of modern portraiture, by

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<sup>13</sup> Feurle, “At the Margins of Portraiture”, 114.

<sup>14</sup> The already mentioned *Portraiture* by West (2004) offers a chronologically analysis of the genre of portraiture; similarly, Beyer's comprehensive *Portraits: A History*, (2003) covers a span of time up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Christiansen, Stefan and Rubin, *The Renaissance Portrait* (2011) focus, more specifically, on early portraiture in Italy.

renowned art historian of the calibre of Shearer West, Lorne Campbell, and Joanna Woodall, who defined the Renaissance as the era of the 'rebirth of portraiture'.<sup>15</sup> The present research extends beyond the delineation of the characteristics of what has been defined as 'traditional portraiture'. It provides an object-focused analysis of significant portraits from the period, including Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503), for the purpose of achieving an in-depth understanding of the topics covered.

## The Ancient Roots

The primitive analysis inevitably originates in ancient civilisations, when the first attempts at depicting unique facial features were made. As proposed by West, in the timeline delineated in *Portraiture* (2004), the art historian traces the origins of identifiable portraits back to ancient Egypt, where the artefacts were utilised with religious functions for pharaohs' funerary monuments.<sup>16</sup> While the details concerning the characteristics of portraiture in Ancient Egypt are not useful for research purposes, it is interesting to note in the wake of the studies conducted by John H. Taylor, curator at the British Museum, that the primary function assigned to these works was connected with the necessity of resemblance. As explained by Taylor, the strong Egyptian rituals connected to the passage in the Afterlife sought to ensure the preservation of the body to allow an identification, for it to serve as a crucial element in the ascendance.<sup>17</sup>

Since that time, portraiture has undergone an extensive and complex evolution. Adopting West's chronological framework and moving from the stylised conventions of Egyptian portraits, one arrives at a pivotal phase in the development of Western portraiture: the classical era, encompassing the artistic traditions of ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>18</sup> This period is widely regarded as the foundation for the more naturalistic Roman portrait, as West asserts, the popularity of statues of notable and easily identifiable individuals increased, and portraits were created with the intention of evoking virtues.<sup>19</sup> Tracing an exhaustive story of Hellenistic and Roman portraiture,

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<sup>15</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> West, "Timeline" in *Portraiture*, 236

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 60-63

<sup>18</sup> West, "Timeline" in *Portraiture*, 236.

<sup>19</sup> West, "What is a Portrait?" in *Portraiture*, 21-23.

however, is neither practicable nor functional in the context of this thesis, therefore the focus is solely centred on the symbolic example of portraits of political figures from the Roman era.

It was during the I century BCE that portraiture assumed political functions, during the Roman Empire the portraits occupied public spaces in the context of political and social representation, this saw figures of authority depicted as symbols of power.<sup>20</sup> The art historian professor Paul Zanker wrote: “Rarely art has been pressed into the service of political power so directly as in the age of Augustus”.<sup>21</sup> However, while the representations were sufficiently similar to allow for recognition of the subject, to the naturalistic likeness of the politician, an idealization was preferred, the aim was to create representations of strong and wise rulers, who incarnated morals and virtues, in order to function as a role model for the citizens.<sup>22</sup>

As it will subsequently discuss, classicism was revived in more modern periods, and in the footsteps of ancient times, for centuries portraits served as a means of political representation; depictions of notable men, including kings, emperors and nobles, were created by the most renowned artists of their period.<sup>23</sup> These artifacts have survived to the present day and offer a valuable insight into the symbolic power of political depiction, which is still considered one of the main functions of traditional portraiture. The Professor and researcher Jeremy Tanner, in “Portraits, Power, and Patronage in the Late Roman Republic” (2000), argues that ancient Roman portrait not only portrayed social relationship, they also shaped and created them, he writes: “Through the elaboration of the core meanings symbolized by portraits in processes of reception”.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the Professor clarified a significant concept, that embodies the political function of portraits: “Public honorific portraits were designed to motivate loyalty”.<sup>25</sup> The concept of public and public space has been thoroughly explored, as Tanner later elucidates in his publication. The civic space occupied by honorific portraits was a matter of significance for the Senate and the People, influenced by the

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<sup>20</sup> Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 128-131.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, V.

<sup>22</sup> West, “What is a Portrait?” in: *Portraiture*, 25-27.

<sup>23</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 2-4.

<sup>24</sup> Tanner, “Portraits, Power, and Patronage in the Late Roman Republic.”, 24.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

collective perception of the honoured and often used to guide citizens towards a perspective of emulation.<sup>26</sup>

Notable examples of the Roman political portraits are the equestrian statues, commonly used in the Ancient Rome, those portraits were adopted to honour the military achievement and the civic accomplishments of the emperors.<sup>27</sup> The only exemplar that has survived to this day, and certainly of immeasurable value for its uniqueness which preserves evidence of a type of portraiture that would otherwise have been lost, is the bronze Equestrian Sculpture of Marcus Aurelius (c.176 CE). [Fig.6] The statue, which public spectacularity was elevated by the fact that it was gilded, was presumably created in the II century AD, depicts the emperor mounted and triumphant and is currently preserved in the Musei Capitolini in Rome.<sup>28</sup> The Roman political portrait soon became symbol of the imperial Rome, and an authoritative emblem of power and leadership.<sup>29</sup>

### The Rebirth of Portraiture

Having left behind the origins of portraits, and the primordial functions they embodied, it is essential to direct the focus toward the ‘traditional portraiture’ previously mentioned. The first transition toward the modern portraiture, and the final form of what we consider in this thesis as ‘traditional’, came with the early modern period, when the classicism was renewed and likeness to the subject was sought again.<sup>30</sup> While on one hand the realistic portrait – what Woodall in *Portraiture* referred as ‘naturalistic portrait’ – became more common, other artists utilised universal attributes for the depiction of the sitters.<sup>31</sup> Especially in Renaissance Italy, portraiture became a medium for representing virtues and the facial features were often modelled to the creation of the default honourable man. As stated by Woodall in her volume: “Iconographically, the full-length, standing figure without physiognomic likeness had previously been associated with

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<sup>26</sup> Tanner, “Portraits, Power, and Patronage in the Late Roman Republic.”, 26-27.

<sup>27</sup> The Oxford companion of western art, “Equestrian statue”.

<sup>28</sup> Statua Equestre di Marco Aurelio, Musei Capitolini.

<sup>29</sup> Tanner, “Portraits, Power, and Patronage in the Late Roman Republic.”, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

genealogical series and universal exemplars: Figures whose transcendent qualities merited emulation. From the mid-fifteenth century, the union of this traditional, 'idealising' format with 'realistic' likeness personalised the articulation of social-spiritual authority."<sup>32</sup> The realistic rendering of the subject thus made it possible to recognise 'genius' in a more personal way, rather than just abstract symbols, while maintaining an aura of idealisation. And again, Woodall continues: "By silently assimilating the real to the ideal, naturalistic court portraiture, enabled a particular human being to personify the majesty of the kingdom or the courage of a military leader".<sup>33</sup> The quote elucidates one of the primary functions of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries portraits, namely, the embodiment of authority and the promotion of emulation. Portraits of intellectuals and emeritus individuals were collected and displayed by nobles and rulers. Collections of naturalistic portraits as well as family portraits, symbolising the nobility of their ancestors were use as ideals to be emulated, for the construction of an authoritative identity based on the legitimisation of personal prestige derived from models of the past.<sup>34</sup>

It is largely recognized by now that, although independent portraits of notable men existed long before the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it was during the Renaissance period that portraiture became a liberated genre, that saw a much larger diffusion among different groups of sitters.<sup>35</sup> Women, middle class families, merchants and artists themselves became the subjects of portraits drawings, depicting not only their physiognomy but the psychology behind them. The interest for human subjects was later examined by Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, especially in the publication *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (2004). Here, Burckhardt theorizes the recognition of the individual, as a form of self-consciousness that separates the individual from the collective, and that elevates him to a desire of personal achievements and developments.<sup>36</sup> Renaissance philosophy, supported by humanist belief, saw an increasingly marked interest in the arts and sciences. To the point of leading to the creation of the *Uomo Universale*, a man who knew no limit in learning. Moreover, as proposed by Burckhardt

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<sup>32</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, *Renaissance Art: A Very Short Introduction*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Burckhardt, Middlemore, Burke, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 70-71

the growing interest in the field of human anatomy as well as physiology, also led to the creation of more realistic portraits.<sup>37</sup>

## Likeness in Renaissance

The concept of likeness, that has been addressed previously, appears to be much more complicated and difficult to understand. Likeness is considered to be one of the main characteristics of portraiture, as Woodall notes: “The representation of ‘likeness’ was seen as one of the most important tasks of portrait art”.<sup>38</sup> However, just as in the contemporary world, modifying a person's physical features in a photograph has become as effortless as it is predictable, even in classic portraiture representations of likeness were interwoven with elements more closely associated with imagination.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, likeness can refer to both the aesthetic appearance, and the intimate virtues of the sitter, as the art historian professor, Catherine Soussloff in her publication *the subject in art* (2006) elucidated. Soussloff writes: “The truth claim of an indexical exteriority, or resemblance, to the person portrayed simultaneously coexists in the genre with a claim to the representation of interiority, or spirituality. Both of these are said to reside in the portrait representation itself and in the eyes of the beholder.”<sup>40</sup> However, she adds, portraits do not always accurately depict a person, and a resemblance to a figure doesn't guarantee his identification, highlighting once again the flexibility of likeness.<sup>41</sup>

As it has been mentioned before the Renaissance period saw an interest in the representation of facial likeness in close details, that sometimes included the depiction of imperfections and physical flaws in the subjects, as well as a realistic rendering of the scene.<sup>42</sup> This, however, is not a prerogative of the genre, and even during the Renaissance, portraits were manipulated; to use Johnson's words: “Renaissance portrait was a very deliberately crafted and carefully constructed thing”.<sup>43</sup> In the quote,

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<sup>37</sup> Burckhardt, Middlemore, Burke, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 119.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>40</sup> Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *Renaissance Art: A Very Short Introduction*, 63.

the author is referring to the common tendency during the Renaissance period to create perfect images of people that would best represent the sitter, the objects were presented in a strategic manner, and the most notable features of the subject were emphasised, thus leading to the creation of an external resemblance that was recognisable but conditioned by idealisation.

The Flemish painter Jan van Eyck (1390-1441) is known to be a symbolic figure in the period, for his incredible ability to render even the smallest details.<sup>44</sup> In his *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1953), art historian Erwin Panofsky goes as far as describing him as “the most exhaustive and the most tantalizing interpreter of human nature”.<sup>45</sup> Panofsky categorizes van Eyck’s art as descriptive rather than interpretative, focusing more on the individuality of the subjects depicted and not on the universal examples. However, Panofsky adds, the process to which van Eyck’s art is subjected to is one of reconstruction rather than reproduction.<sup>46</sup> A remarkable example that symbolically and stylistically encapsulates van Eyck’s style is the masterpiece *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) [Fig. 7]. The artwork is now widely regarded as one of the most emblematic case studies of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, due to its originality, complex iconography, and beautifully rendered depiction of reality.<sup>47</sup> The portrait represents the merchant Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife, identified for the astonishing similarity to a picture mentioned in the Austrian Lady Margaret Collection. *The Arnolfini Portrait*, Panofsky articulates, is distinguished not only by its depiction of a non-Noble couple, but also by the creation of a remarkably structured and meticulously studied domestic scene. The newlywed couple is standing in the middle of an elegantly furnished room, the atmosphere however is made austere by the solemnity of the scene, and the uncrossed gazes of the two subjects.<sup>48</sup> The work, preserved in the National Gallery in London, appears to have been carefully crafted with the intention of facilitating the recognition of the two protagonists. However, the arrangement of the objects and the selection of elements incorporated seem to suggest the couple’s social status. Furthermore, it has been suggested by Panofsky that, given the position and rigidity of the two bodies and their

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<sup>44</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 1-2.

<sup>45</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 194.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>47</sup> Panofsky, “Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait.”, 117.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

interlaced hands, the scene depicted is not a domestic one, as the setting suggests, but rather the memorial portrait of the moment of the wedding celebration between the two spouses, and crafted to represent the jubilant day.<sup>49</sup>

### High Renaissance and the *Mona Lisa*

As stated on the official website of the Musée du Louvre, where the *Mona Lisa* (1503-1519) is housed, the following statement is to be found: “This is the most famous portrait in the world”.<sup>50</sup> (Fig.8) Leonardo da Vinci’s (1452-1519) *Mona Lisa* is widely regarded as the most iconic portrait ever created, and arguably, the most renowned portrait painting of all time; the Emeritus Professor Donald Sasson in his publication “*Mona Lisa: the best known girl in the whole wide world*” commenced his analysis with the assertion: “No other painting in the world is recognized so instantly as ‘art’”.<sup>51</sup> The primary motivation behind this statement, prior to investigating the answers, is the immense popularity of this artwork. No other work in any museum in the world, Sasson argues, not even the other masterpieces in the Louvre, can boast such profound adoration.<sup>52</sup>

It is almost impossible to provide a comprehensive summary of the extent studies, concerning the *Mona Lisa*. Nevertheless, the analysis of Leonardo’s portrait by Sasson provides a significant insight into one of the most enigmatic and recognisable faces in the Art history. The *Mona Lisa* has been considered by the Emeritus Professor to embody the genius of Leonardo and has come to be regarded as the most widely recognised portrait in existence, transcending historical and stylistic periods, thus becoming the very symbol of the portraiture genre itself.<sup>53</sup> The portrait, which was completed between 1503 and 1519, depicts Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo. This is the reason why the painting is known in France as *La Joconde* and in Italy as *La Gioconda*. A significant innovation introduced by Leonardo da Vinci with this portrait is the position of the sitter herself. In her portrait Lisa’s face is depicted frontally;

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<sup>49</sup> Panofsky, “Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait.”, 117-118.

<sup>50</sup> Musée du Louvre, “From the Mona Lisa to the wedding feast at Cana”, Official Website.

<sup>51</sup> Sassoon, *Mona Lisa: The History of the World’s Most Famous Painting*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Sassoon, “Mona Lisa: The Best-Known Girl in the Whole Wide World.”, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

her gaze is directed toward the eyes of the viewers creating a powerful connection that is only increased by the enigmatic smile that touches her lips.<sup>54</sup>

Sasson emphasises the innovative techniques employed by Leonardo, to achieve this artwork, including the *contrapposto* (that consists in drawing a three-quarter view of the subject, with the torso rotated in a different direction from the face) to create movement and depth thereby representing a scene from life as realistically as possible in two dimensions. In addition, the *Mona Lisa* is painted on a wooden panel. Leonardo employed a technique known as *sfumato*, which involves overlapping multiple thin layers of colour, ranging from darkest to lightest, allowing the artist to create an interplay of lights and shadows that influence each other. The absence of sharp contours allowed the artist to create the desired effect of depth which was so highly sought at that time. Simultaneously, it imbued the figure of Lisa Gherardini with an aura of mystery which has led to the work being so thoroughly studied and interpreted in a variety of ways.<sup>55</sup>

In conclusion, as Andreas Beyer observes in his study of Western painted portraits, the *Mona Lisa's* most significant achievements lie in its independence, which exemplifies the extent to which portraiture has been able to extrapolate – and arguably, exaggerate – its function.<sup>56</sup> When mentioning the *Mona Lisa*, one does not think of the real identity of the woman depicted; instead, the focus is on the woman in Leonardo's portrait, with the distinguished features and the enigmatic nature surrounding her. In this instance, the debatable resemblance to a real subject is superseded by the artist's remarkable ability to animate a new subject and to create a face that represents the portraiture genre.<sup>57</sup>

## Revolutions in 19th- and 20th-century Portraiture

Before analysing Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) and identifying the innovations they introduce to the genre of portraiture, it is

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<sup>54</sup> Sassoon, "Mona Lisa: The Best-Known Girl in the Whole Wide World.", 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Beyer, Lindberg, *Portraits: A History*, 137.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

necessary to briefly acknowledge the various artistic styles and movements that have succeeded one another over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although the analysis conducted in this thesis is limited to comparing Gonzalez-Torres' portraiture with what has been defined as the traditional style that began with the Renaissance period.<sup>58</sup> It is necessary to take into account those movements which, while retaining some of the more classical characteristics, have redefined the genre of portraiture, bringing it closer to our contemporary era and paving the way for Gonzalez-Torres' innovations.

As posited by art historian Beyer in his publication, the initial symbolic steps of this modern analysis are exemplified by the *portraits historié* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century France, whose main recognised exponent is Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), appointed as the Napoleon emperor's court painter. The intention was to utilise his art as a medium for the dissemination of propaganda, his symbolism is still visible in emblematic works such as the series of portraits *Napoleon crossing the Alps* (1801-1805), which depict Napoleon in the military Italian invasion.<sup>59</sup> Beyer's analysis of portraits continues with a consideration of 20<sup>th</sup> century portraits, a period distinguished by the emergence of two major artistic movements: Cubism and Surrealism.<sup>60</sup> The former, led by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braques (1882-1963) who, through the deconstruction of conventional forms and the incorporation of multiple perspectives, employed the external representation of subjects solely as a starting point for the creation of a work where the boundaries of the subject are blurred, and the figures are recomposed in the mind of the viewers.<sup>61</sup> Equally important the avant-garde movement of Surrealism with artists such as Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978) and Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) who used portraits not to depict reality but to create allegorical and enigmatic entities where individuality was intertwined with metaphysics.<sup>62</sup> The genre of self-portraiture also underwent significant stylistic and conceptual innovations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One particularly noteworthy figure is Egon Schiele (1890-1918), who produced a significant body of self-portraits, shedding light on the existentialist idea of individual

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<sup>58</sup> Beyer, Lindberg, *Portraits: A History*, 287-386.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 287-289.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 349-386.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 369-370.

responsibility. Schiele often depicted a grotesque image of himself, to the point of creating contorted and fractured images, that was read as a psychoanalysis of de-corporealization.<sup>63</sup> From this point onwards, novel artistic movements emerged, including Abstract art, Conceptual art, and Arte Povera. Furthermore, Contemporary art and digital media have been instrumental in the ongoing transformation of the very concepts of representation.<sup>64</sup>

In conclusion, the concepts introduced in this first chapter are revisited and reinforced. The primary objective of this study is to establish an historical structure for the genre of portraiture that could serve as a basis for comparison with the innovations introduced into the genre of portraiture by Gonzalez-Torres. It is acknowledged that it is impossible to cover the entire history of portraits; therefore, the starting point for the following discussion is what has been defined as "traditional portraiture", with a focus on the Renaissance period.

The present chapter also acknowledges that Western portraiture has far earlier origins, beginning in ancient Egypt, where portraits were utilized for funerary purposes, and evolving through ancient Rome, where likeness was employed for political purposes and to project authority. However, during the Renaissance period, artists deliberately created portraits that closely resembled their subjects in order to convey an honourable character. Nevertheless, in certain instances, such as in Jan van Eyck's renowned artwork, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, the use of symbolism transcended mere likeness, serving as a representation of a significant event.<sup>65</sup> As previously stated, the Renaissance period was also a time of significant inventions, as exemplified by the celebrated masterpiece *Mona Lisa*, which is widely regarded as the pinnacle of Renaissance portraiture and a prime example of Leonardo da Vinci's artistic talent, indeed, the painting has come to symbolise the genre of portraiture itself.<sup>66</sup>

While acknowledging the mastery and innovations that the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries brought to the world of portraiture, this chapter elucidates the stylistic and

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<sup>63</sup> Beyer, Lindberg. *Portraits: A History*, 352-353

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Panofsky, "Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait".

<sup>66</sup> Sassoon, *Mona Lisa: The History of the World's Most Famous Painting*.

conceptual traditions that have been established over the course of several centuries in the artistic genre of portraiture, with a view to defining the symbolic features that conceptualise the Renaissance portrait. This historical framework subsequently provides a context for the following two chapters, which are dedicated to the research and analysis of the innovations that Gonzalez-Torres introduced into the genre of portraiture through "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross).

## Issues on Materiality: Between Likeness and Fluidity

Having allocated, in the first chapter, the Renaissance period under the concept of ‘traditional portraiture’, in order to create a term of comparison to highlight the artistic innovations conceived by Gonzalez-Torres, the following step of the analysis is focused towards said innovations. The focus of this second chapter will be placed directly on the works “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross). To provide a more organic discussion, the chapter focuses on the concept of materiality – and correspondingly immateriality – within the two portraits being studied.

The issue of materiality in Gonzalez-Torres’ candy portraits is a complex topic that can take many forms, concerning not only the physicality of the artworks themselves, but also their relationship with the surrounding space and the visitors.<sup>1</sup> The following discussion explores the concept of materiality within “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), aiming at understanding how their existence proposes original ways of conceptualizing portraiture. The chapter hypothesises that the innovative choice of materials influences the perception of the portraits themselves, proposing new concepts of identity. Furthermore, analysing the candies in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) from the perspective of fluidity – understood as the circular process of destruction and restoration of the artworks – the materiality is addressed from a point of view of ownership to understand how it influences the perception of physicality and temporality of the portraits themselves.

Moreover, in the final section of the chapter, the concept of likeness, already discussed in relation to traditional portraiture in the prior section, will be explored within the example of Ross’ candy portraits, to analyse how the materials in Gonzalez-Torres’ *candy works* shape the process of recognition that arise in the interaction of the viewers with the art objects.

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<sup>1</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*.

## Materials and Materiality

The medium of an artwork indicates the materials that constitute the art object, the matter of the art.<sup>2</sup> However, the concept of 'materiality' is one that comprises the materials, but which expands beyond the limits of the mediums themselves. It is around this concept that this discussion revolves. The term materiality, broader and more vague, was defined by Professor Dr. Christian Berger as follows: “[A term that] encompasses these more abstract considerations as well as the concrete interest in materials and their potentials”.<sup>3</sup> The concept proves to be complex, however, it can be interpreted as the body of notions that define and research the materials, the genesis, the physicality, the development of an artwork, as well as its relationship with the audience.<sup>4</sup>

As asserted in her paper “*(Im)Materiality: On the Matter of Art*” (2008), Professor Amanda du Preez stated: “Through its materiality the art object exists physically in the world”.<sup>5</sup> Explaining the idea that art physically matters because it consists of objects that exist in the real world. Each of the artworks referenced herein are composed of something, for example oil colours and wood were utilized as mediums for the *Mona Lisa* and *The Arnolfini Portrait*.<sup>6</sup> While, in the case of Gonzalez-Torres’ “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), the sculptures are entirely composed of edible sweets.<sup>7</sup> In accordance with the theory proposed by Professor du Preez, the physical existence of Gonzalez-Torres’ *candy works* in the world is irrefutable, because from a practical point of view, the portraits are very material. The candy portraits are present to the point that visitors can physically interact with them, touching, eating or taking a piece home.<sup>8</sup> This notion alone dismantles the conventional boundaries that historically belong to art objects. While traditional artworks are physically present in museums, and their palpable presence is indisputable to the visitors that are able to see or experience the art, it is not possible for them to touch it. However, Gonzalez-Torres offers to the

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<sup>2</sup> Welton, “medium” in “The Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques in Art.”

<sup>3</sup> Berger, *Conceptualism and Materiality*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Mills, “Materiality as the Basis for the Aesthetic Experience in Contemporary Art”, 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> Preez, “(Im)Materiality: on the matter of art”, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Musée du Louvre official website and London National Gallery official website.

<sup>7</sup> “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross)” in Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

<sup>8</sup> Irvin, ‘Rules in Art?’, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-37

audience the possibility of experiencing the materiality of Ross' "Untitled" candy portraits first hand.<sup>9</sup>

In addressing the concept of materiality, Sherri Irvin, American Professor specialised in the philosophy of art, has conducted extensive analysis. Her research is exemplified by the publication *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* (2022), where Irvin analyses the concept of materiality, directly referring to "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), from the perspective of the rules applied to the candies by Gonzalez-Torres. Irvin's study explores the repercussions these rules have on the way the artwork is presented to the public and perceived by the audience. In the dedicated chapter, Irvin writes: "This work is not like a traditional sculpture".<sup>10</sup> In an attempt to demonstrate how the reasons behind this statement are influenced by the materiality of the portrait, she explains that the candies are not unique objects made by the artist, because disregarding the background provided by the artistic context, are merely candies. However, Irvin continues, in the context of the portrait those are not just candies, the physical piles intrinsically contain the possibility of destruction and total replacement of the sweets they are made of, they are part of a process, a slowly deterioration that is not only a consumption of the sweets themselves but that became a bodily degradation.<sup>11</sup>

To use Irvin's words, she directly connected the diminishing of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), with the human body ageing, stating as follow: "A pile of candy is similar to a human body in this respect: human bodies are physical objects that survive the gradual replacement of their physical components. In this way, then, the construal of the work as a pile of candy would connect it to the body of Ross".<sup>12</sup> The meaning of the quotation is that the pile of candy in "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) became Ross, each component in the pile constitutes a part of Ross' body, in this sense, the transformation of the pile of sweets into a physical and real body is achieve. Each spectator who takes a candy, symbolically hold a part of Ross in their hands, and the destruction operated by the audience has consequences not only for the physical

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<sup>9</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-37.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

pile displayed, but also metaphorically for Ross himself, who vanishes under everyone's eyes.<sup>13</sup> The modification of the identity of the portraits thus became more evident: "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) not only depict Laycock as a sitter, but they also embody it, metamorphosing into it. Moreover, taking from Irvin's publication, and expanding the idea to both the portraits under analysis, it is possible to understand the action of the audience of consuming the candies, as a means to symbolically incorporate fragments of Ross' body. During the process of disruption, the time of the work shrinks, affecting the temporality of the portraits, and imposing on the viewer the role of consumer, no longer just of the sweet that is dissolving in his mouth, but of Ross's life as well.<sup>14</sup>

Prior to the theories just explored, Professor Irvin has addressed the topic of materiality in Gonzalez-Torres from an ontological perspective in the publication *New Waves in Aesthetics* (2008), in which she theorized that the artist's creation of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), capable of surviving any attempt at destruction but requiring a physical medium of representation in order to be exhibited, classified it as a concrete non-physical entity, open to the representation of human nature. Moreover, the Professor asserted, the non-physical nature of the artwork, concretized in display through as assemblage of physical objects, allows the artist to bridge conceptual and visual art, presenting ideas by means of materials, thus creating critical interest in the understanding of the meaning of the artwork. And it is precisely in the search for meaning that Irvin focuses, stipulating that 'Untitled' (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) is halfway between an abstract concept that exists even without its physical part, but which at the same time is determined by a series of parameters for exhibition.<sup>15</sup>

## Conceptual Ideas

In order to comprehend the innovative implications on the artistic genre of portraiture, of the choice of Gonzalez-Torres to utilise candies as material for creating "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), it is beneficial to analyse the conceptual

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<sup>13</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10

<sup>14</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 144-145.

<sup>15</sup> Irvin, "The ontological diversity in visual artworks" *New Waves in Aesthetics*, 5-12.

influence on the artist's work.<sup>16</sup> In particular, it is crucial to consider the understanding of the concept of 'ideas' in conceptual art, which, when applied to Ross' candy portraits, enables significant analysis on the materiality of the two artworks analysed. Specifically, it allows to explore the innovative way in which the existence of Gonzalez-Torres' candy portraits is perceived.

To achieve said understanding, the definition proposed by the American artist Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) proves to be a symbolic starting point. LeWitt, in "Paragraphs on conceptual art" (1967) wrote: "In conceptual art the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. [...] The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."<sup>17</sup> The emphasis is placed on the idea; the concept behind the artwork is valued more than the artwork itself. The notion is further discussed by the writer, critic and curator Lucy Lippard, she explains how, within the conceptual movement, the physical presence of obsolete objects was set aside, to favour instead ideas, concepts and processes.<sup>18</sup> The implications of the conceptual theory on "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), concern the physical edges of the candy spill, or more simply, what is to be considered artwork, and how the definition shifts within the display of the candy portraits in museums settings.

In order to understand the functionality of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), it is essential to analyse the "Core Tenets for Gonzalez-Torres's candy works", a document provided by the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, created with the intention to clarifying the parameters inherent in the artist's *candy works*, enabling a clearer and more profound understanding for those who possess, exhibit or engage directly with them.<sup>19</sup> According to the Core Tenets document, "[The owner of one of the *candy works*] Has the right to choose to manifest the work at any time".<sup>20</sup> The concept of manifestation is, in the case of the portraits under analysis, particularly innovative, as they define the conditions of existence of ephemeral works, which become physically visible only when displayed. As delineated in the Core Tenets document itself, the *candy works* are manifest when they are being displayed, and candies are potentially

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<sup>16</sup> Storr, "When this you see remember me", 11.

<sup>17</sup> LeWitt, "Paragraphs on conceptual art", 79-84.

<sup>18</sup> Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, VII-XXII.

<sup>19</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, "Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works".

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

present. However, it is added: “The candy works exist regardless of whether they are physically manifest”.<sup>21</sup> The authentic existence of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) – and more generally of Gonzalez-Torres’ *candy works* – is therefore not constituted by the physical presence of candies, the visible manifestation of the artworks allows them to be exhibited and consequently enables visitors to interact with the artworks. However, the existence of the portrait, its uniqueness, and the very identity of the pile of sweets is attested by the *Certificate of Authenticity and Ownership*, and not by the candies themselves.<sup>22</sup>

The discussion in regards of the existence of the artworks can be further explored in a practical way, the Core Tenets document asserts: “Individual candies, all candies taken collectively, and any candies remaining at the end of any given manifestation do not constitute a unique work and are not the work”.<sup>23</sup> This means that, when a manifestation of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) or “Untitled” (Ross) ends, the physical materials of the artworks – candies – ceases to be a work of art, or to embody Laycock, and returns to its original function. Once again, Professor Irvin addresses the issue, for which she wrote: “The work, however, does not cease to exist at that point. Instead, it persists in the collection and may be displayed again in the future.”<sup>24</sup> To indicate how “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) or “Untitled” (Ross) are not the candies, they are the idea behind it, with the physical materials being only temporary in the context of displays.

Irvin hypothesises a similarity with the artistic genres of musicals or performances, because although “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) are in all intents sculptures, they may exist in a form that is not physically visible – not considering the *Certificate of Authenticity and Ownership* that proves the uniqueness of the artwork but does not represent it – and they can be recreated endlessly, without losing value or significance if some of the aspect of the portraits differs from one exhibition to the other.<sup>25</sup> Gonzalez-Torres infused life into artworks that can be consumed in their totality and still exist. Ross *is* the pile of candy, he is into each

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<sup>21</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, “Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works”.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 105-126.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

candy, but he will continue to exist even when each of his pieces are scattered among cities and countries, all the museums are closed, and all the candies are consumed.<sup>26</sup> The concept of idea associated with the candy portraits of Ross, and all the repercussion it has on the artworks, has not to be confused with the concept of ephemerality that will be discussed later on in the thesis. Although both themes are connected to the identity of the portrait and their perception by the audience. The innovation that Gonzalez-Torres brought to the genre of portraiture with the conceptual understanding of ideas, is strongly linked with the materiality of the artworks, for it refers to the display of the portraits, and their identity as art objects, more than their temporal dimension.

### The Fluidity of the Portraits

The choice made by Gonzalez-Torres of using candies to create “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) contributes to a series of features that revolutionise the fluidity of portraits.<sup>27</sup> The already mentioned Professor Irvin in *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* uses the contradictory examples of static and vanishing piles of candies, to explain how Gonzalez-Torres’ *candy works* manage to function in a museum setting precisely because they are not fixed artworks.<sup>28</sup> Repurposing her theory, and applying it specifically to the genre of portraiture, in relation with the artworks "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), I propose the utilization of the concepts of dynamism and perpetuation to accentuate Gonzalez-Torres’ materials innovations.

In contrast to what Irvin defines as ‘static’, which she identifies as the traditional function of a sculpture as an object presented by the artist and preserved in its original form, dynamism indicates the absence of distance between the work and the visitors, who are generously invited by Gonzalez-Torres to grab a candy and experience the portraits with more senses than simply vision.<sup>29</sup> Thanks to "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) opening the possibility for the audience to consume the

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<sup>26</sup> Irvin, “The ontological diversity in visual artworks” *New Waves in Aesthetics*, 9-10.

<sup>27</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

person they represent, the candy portraits are not always present in the same form during an exhibition, in fact, it is precisely the act of consuming the sweets by the public that transforms Ross's portraits into constantly changing works of art.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, perpetuation, focuses on the possibility of replenishing the candies, used in contrast with the concept of 'vanishing piles' hypothesised by Irvin. The concept of perpetuation I propose, is based on the possibility for the owner of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) or "Untitled" (Ross) to replenish the sweets in the piles, allowing them to reconstruct what was the original weight of the artworks.<sup>31</sup> The possibility of restoring the two portraits of Ross's by Gonzalez-Torres is a fundamental aspect of the artworks, as is also mentioned by The Art Institute of Chicago, where "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) is included in their collection: "As visitors take candy, the configuration changes, linking the participatory action with loss—even though the work holds the potential for endless replenishment."<sup>32</sup> Dynamism and perpetuation are connected features in Gonzalez-Torres' candy portraits, shaping our understanding of portraiture by changing their relation with time.

Portraits have traditionally served the function of immortalising the sitter depicted, either by representing their physical features or personality, and freezing their image in an immobile picture of them.<sup>33</sup> Gonzalez-Torres with the candy portraits alternated the perception of time, creating works of art that explore the representation between presence and absence, giving birth to something that – like a real body – is destined to evolve, to age, and to be impacted by external influences.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the weight of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) or "Untitled" (Ross), is an interesting feature that defines the artworks' fluidity, the weight of Gonzalez-Torres' candy portraits, in fact, depends on the body weight of the person that is intended to be represented.<sup>35</sup> However, as specified on the already mentioned Core Tenets document, the dimension for all the candy artworks is preceded by: "Overall dimensions vary with installation".<sup>36</sup> Gonzalez-Torres leaves it up to the owner or those responsible for

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<sup>30</sup> "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), Art Institute Chicago.

<sup>31</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

<sup>32</sup> "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), Art Institute Chicago.

<sup>33</sup> Christiansen and Weppelmann, *The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini*, 64.

<sup>34</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the world" in *Flash Art International*.

<sup>36</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, "Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works".

installing his works to decide how the piles of sweets should be displayed. Even the weight of the portraits – the only physical characteristic that can be linked to the person represented – thus becomes an inconsistent aspect, subjected to continuous changes.<sup>37</sup>

Conclusively, a feature of the candy portraits of Ross that strengthen the fluidity of the artworks is their shape. "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), possess the remarkable ability to portray Laycock in a variety of forms. It is a well-established fact that multiple portraits of the same person can exist, with each artwork exhibiting distinctive features or presenting the sitter from a different perspective, as well as portraits of the same sitter made by different artists.<sup>38</sup> However, Gonzalez-Torres conceived a portrait that can be presented in an infinite number of different shapes. The sculpture, according to the artist's statement, should be exhibited in accordance with the owner's interpretation. The candy portraits of Ross can manifest in the manner originally employed by Gonzalez-Torres – a pile supported by the wall on two sides – however, the instructions for the display offer the possibility of completely transforming their installation shape.<sup>39</sup> Different types of installations were employed during the years, especially the candies of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) were transformed in a colourful rug that covered a big section of the room where the artwork was installed at the Art Institute of Chicago (2024) [Fig. 10], or in a pile in the middle of a room, during an exhibition at the Jane Addams Hull House-Museum (2012). [Fig.11].

Gonzalez-Torres' oeuvre changed the portraiture tradition based on fixed images of sitters, treated by museums as objects to be preserved and conserved in their original form, far from the hands – and mouths – of viewers.<sup>40</sup> The result is a series of works that shift in meaning according to the viewer's personal experience. Professor Irvin's theory posits that the process of destruction that the candy portraits of Ross seek in the audience serves to shape the relationship of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) with the materials of the artworks. This relationship evolves

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> West, *Portraiture*, 22-23.

<sup>39</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, "Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works".

<sup>40</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

over time and in the presence of different objects, modifying our understanding of the artworks based on what is present at the moment of interaction.<sup>41</sup>

## Likeness and Recognition

This chapter has examined a series of innovations and developments in the genre of portraiture, which, being linked to the materials used by the artist in the creation of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), have influenced their attributes. In particular, it has been demonstrated how common objects such as sweets can embody the subject they represent. However, it is also beneficial to address the issue from the perspective of the subject's identity, in order to comprehend how the materiality of the sweets is employed in the creation of Laycock's characterisation. Previously, in this thesis, the issue of likeness has been proposed in relation with Renaissance portraits, to highlight the tendency of various artists to depict the sitters, not to resemble their authentic appearance, but to create idealised types that could convey emulation and aristocratic ideology.<sup>42</sup> However, even when idealised, a certain level of realistic likeness was present in Renaissance artworks, as the art historian Woodall clarifies: “From the mid-fifteenth century, the union of this traditional, ‘idealising’ format with ‘realistic’ likeness personalised the articulation of socio-spiritual authority.”<sup>43</sup> Leading, consequently, to the creation of a series of works that, while distancing themselves from authentic representations, undoubtedly depicted human subjects that could be linked to existing personality to be emulated.

It is certainly evident that, in the case of Gonzalez-Torres’ “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), the candies cannot resemble the features of the subject. The shape, the colours or the wrappers of the sweets do not contain any kind of reference to Laycock physiognomy, and neither does the manner they are displayed, which, it must be recalled, is freely chosen by the person displaying it. [Fig., 12]. Laycock’s persona, as well as his personality, are not visibly depicted, making it

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<sup>41</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

<sup>42</sup> Woodall, *Portraiture: facing the subject*, 2-4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

impossible for visitors to identify a precise person in the piles.<sup>44</sup> The element of likeness, which was considered an essential feature for the portraiture genre, it is completely missing in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) as well as in “Untitled” (Ross). This results in artworks that comprises both the concept of materiality and immateriality, thereby embodying a physical presence, an existing subject; and a powerful abstract series of sentiments, an idea that transcends the ‘art’ object. American curator Nancy Spector in *Felix Gonzalez Torres* (1995), proposes an interpretation of Gonzalez-Torres' refusal to offer a mimetic representation of his subjects in terms of the openness of the portrait. Towards the creation of works that distance themselves from concepts intrinsically linked to representations of similarity, such as gender, sex and sexual orientation. Instead, Gonzalez-Torres' portraits encourage the viewer to seek an internal, personal and culturally conditioned meaning.<sup>45</sup>

The viewers' recognition of the subject depicted, is therefore a central topic in the discussion of portraiture. The art history professor, Catherine Soussloff in *The Subject in Art* (2006), addresses the issue of likeness from the point of view of the relationship with the visitor. Soussloff, in her publication, writes: “The expectation that we can potentially or actually recognize an individual in the portrait makes the genre what it is.”<sup>46</sup> According to the theory, the Professor explains, although portraits do not always accurately depict the appearance of the subject, making it impossible at times to verify the true identity of the sitter, viewers' perception of the portrait emerges as a central element. Rather than focusing on identification, visitors rely on the recognition of the subject. The approach, though less precise and subjective, fosters the expectation of potential recognition of the subject, thereby defining the genre of portraiture.<sup>47</sup> However, as discussed previously, the experience of viewing “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) in an exhibition settings, where the portraits are frequently observed in a corner, directly on the floor, in a form of piles of colourful confectionery, the expectations of recognizing an identifiable individual are empty. Despite the viewers' awareness that the works are portraits, and that the

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<sup>44</sup> Spector, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 143.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 143-147.

<sup>46</sup> Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern*, 6.

portraits were created by the artist to represent his partner, there is no possibility of recognising the image of a man in the sweets, or of identifying his physical appearance. However, it is evident that the candy spills symbolise Laycock, as explicitly stated in the parenthetical subtitles: “Portrait of Ross in L.A.” and again “Ross”.<sup>48</sup> Gonzalez-Torres subverted the conventional concept of identification associated with the genre of portraiture, rendering an individual potentially identifiable, a mass of sweets with no fixed shape and no human connotations.

The *sweet spills* are everything one would never anticipate, because the totality of all the pieces together creates a portrait, the representation of the artist’s lover. And because Gonzalez-Torres in his candy portraits, has neglected the likeness as in physiognomic resemblance, has focused attention on different details, proposing a way of conceiving and experimenting with portraits that differs greatly from the Renaissance examples seen so far. One of the main aspects that the artist has used in creating his candy portraits is weight.<sup>49</sup> As previously mentioned, the weight of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), is not constant, not only because the artworks are subjected to perpetual diminishing during the exposition, due to the visitors taking away parts of the portraits. Moreover, Gonzalez-Torres delegated the decision concerning the original weight employed by the artist to the owner of the works or those responsible for their installation, thereby enabling them to determine whether to maintain it or modify it for the exhibition.<sup>50</sup>

However, when the artist created the candy portraits, he did it with a clear intention in mind and decided to use the sitters’ weight in sweets to represent their body. In an interview conducted by the writer and curator Robert Nickas in 1991, Gonzalez-Torres articulated his intentions explicitly, addressing his *candy works*. Despite the absence of a direct reference to either “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) or “Untitled” (Ross), he declared: “The pieces called ‘Lover Boys’ are piles of candy based on body weights. I use my own weight or mine and Ross’s together. If I do a portrait of

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<sup>48</sup> In an interview with Rober Nickas, Gonzalez-Torres explained that his subtitles in brackets are a way of alluding to a meaning, leaving open the possibility of a shift, while still giving a clue as to the original idea. Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World." in *Flash Art International*.

<sup>49</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, “Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works”.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

someone, I use their weight”.<sup>51</sup> In doing so, the artist introduces a significant innovation both in the identity of the portrait and in the way portraits are perceived by the viewers: aesthetic resemblance, a fundamental element in the process of identifying depicted subjects and an essential component in traditional portraiture is replaced, in the artworks under analysis, with an aspect – body weight – that, while still relating to the physicality of the sitter, does not represent an identifying feature.

In summary, the concept of materiality in art has been demonstrated to be a fundamental element in the analysis of Gonzalez-Torres’ artistic practice, both because materials are symbols of a deliberate artistic choice and because they influence the interactions with the public. In the case of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), the discussion over materiality proves to be particularly significant, because it opens up to a series of innovative ways of conceptualizing the genre of portraiture. These innovative approaches are articulated both in relation of the identity of the works and in the representation of its subject, thereby diverging from the conventional characteristics of likeness as exemplified by Renaissance portraiture.<sup>52</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres’ choice to use an organic and ordinary element such as candies for “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), combined with the influences of a conceptual style, led to the creation of two portraits that embody the essence of the subjects they represent, allowing the audience to experiment with the feelings of loss and absence, but at the same time, unable to represent Laycock’s features or allow for any form of recognition. Laycock’s physical identity thus disappears from the portrait, except for the original weight of the pile of sweets, designed to mimic that of the subject depicted. Gonzalez-Torres, moreover, creates a portrait that departs from the classical standards of steadiness found in traditional portraiture, presenting instead a fluidity that affects the materials, meaning, temporality and presence of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World." in *Flash Art International*.

<sup>52</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*.

<sup>53</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

## Audience Engagement: Ephemeral Presence and Oral Consumption

The third and final chapter of the present thesis focuses on the relationship between “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) with the audience. The candy portraits by Gonzalez-Torres are created with the intention of stimulating a contact with the viewers, who are assigned the task of slowly destroying the piles of sweets depicting Laycock by consuming their parts.<sup>1</sup> The chapter is articulated around the concept of active participation, starting from the theories expressed by the British art historian and critic Clare Bishop.<sup>2</sup> “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) are analysed through the lens of direct interaction with the audience, examining how the visitors become essential components in the creation of the works themselves. However, as Bishop acknowledges, it is important to bear in mind that interest in participatory art emerged in the early 1990s. The practice was influenced by a wide range of socio-cultural events in different parts of the globe. Therefore, while Gonzalez-Torres was one of the most influential artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to make use of the aesthetic, it would be inaccurate to consider him as a solitary precursor.<sup>3</sup>

The ingestion of candies is analysed herein in particular terms, and associated with the topics of religion, sexuality and illness. This miscellaneous interpretation of the orality in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), facilitates comprehension of the identity of Laycock's portraits, specifying their meanings and demonstrating how ‘eating the portrait’ is not merely a performative action, but conveys profound implications that transform the perspective on the portraits’ identity.<sup>4</sup> The present chapter analyses the topic of ephemerality, which is closely linked to that of audience participation, as it is a consequence of the circular decay and restoration of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross). In this chapter, the issue of the fluidity of the artworks is revisited in order to analyse how the impermanent nature of Ross’ candy portraits, intertwines with the topics of presence, absence and communitarian involvement. This prompts Gonzalez-Torres to propose a reinterpretation

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, “Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works”.

<sup>2</sup> Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*.

<sup>3</sup> Bishop, *Artificial hell*, 11-40. Bishop, *Installation art*, 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*.

of the portrait according to flexible structures, drawing parallels with performance art, symbolic in the creation of a portrait that is not subjected to the rules of fixed time but takes on conditions of impermanence.<sup>5</sup>

### Active Participation

In 2005 Claire Bishop, British art historian and critic, published *Installation Art (2005)*, a volume to explore the concepts surrounding what she describes as an immersive art: “Installation art therefore differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space.”<sup>6</sup> Essential is the presence of the viewer in the space of the exhibition, because the installation art is not merely presented to the viewer, rather, it demands a physical and metaphorical entry into the space of art. The art object and the space become a connected entity, that seeks a bodily and active response from the visitor.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the British scholar, in her well-known volume *Artificial Hells (2012)*, explores the term ‘participatory art’ to indicate a type of project in which visitors constitute the central medium of the production. The employment of this specific terminology, she asserted, is consciously opposed to the interactive art, which works on a one-on-one dialogue between viewer and artistic creation.<sup>8</sup>

As previously elucidated, both “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) operate on the concept of gradual degradation, signifying that it is solely through visitor interaction that the sculptures’ true significance is brought to life. In a seminar in 1994, Gonzalez-Torres was asked to consider the *candy works* and whether their maximum symbolic level is reached at the end of their life, or when they are first displayed. In response the artist replied: “The ideal situation for me is when it’s been activated, when it’s the middle, when people are taking it, when it’s just going away, when it’s going out there into the world.”<sup>9</sup> As it has been repeatedly asserted, the viewers are recognised as an indispensable element in Gonzalez-Torres’ art. They are

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<sup>5</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop Claire, *Artificial Hells*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Artist lecture at the Whitney Museum of American art.

not merely the recipients of the artwork; they also become the means by which the art comes into being. It is only through the audience's active engagement that Ross' candy portraits acquire meaning.<sup>10</sup>

In an interview with curator, critic and historian Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Gonzalez-Torres addresses the topic of participatory art, expressing with determination his absolute need for an audience that interacts with his works, which otherwise, he confides, would be just another sculpture sitting on the floor. In his own words, his works must *happen*, because the artworks are not merely a pile of sweets; rather, the final form to which the portraits aspire is the form that the sweets take once they have been consumed and expelled from the visitors' bodies.<sup>11</sup> In the same interview with Obrist, Gonzalez-Torres shares his perspective on audience participation in art, particularly in relation to his *stacks* and *candy works*, offering a significant insight into how the artist redefines the concept of 'artist' and consequently of artwork – including portraits –. Gonzalez-Torres asserts: “Oh, a sculpture?’ And it’s not, not really. [...] This is an excuse to redefine my role as an artist. Because I see myself then almost as a theatre director, directing a very spontaneous performance”.<sup>12</sup>

“Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) are not performances, they are in fact considered art installations by the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.<sup>13</sup> However, Ross' candy portraits can also be considered performative to a certain extent, even if the claim has not been clearly stated, the participation of the audience does not only consist in the physical consumption of the sweets, and therefore through the degradation of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross). But, as curator Rainer Fuchs has observed, through the active participation of the audience in the works, the artist has granted them the opportunity to shape, modify and destroy the portraits. Not neglecting the authorship of Gonzalez-Torres – who maintains his role of creator – but questioning the traditional category of author, allowing the creation of a portrait that is subjected to the time, the space, the individual reception and the sociocultural surroundings, which are in turn subject to change over time.<sup>14</sup> Following

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<sup>10</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 57-59.

<sup>11</sup> Obrist, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres” in *Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Interviews*, 3; 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), in Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

<sup>14</sup> Fuchs, “The authorized viewer” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 105-110.

Fuchs' theory, It can be inferred that, while maintaining the authority of Gonzalez-Torres, who provides the stimulus to the public by offering them the choice to take and consume one of the candies from "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), the audience becomes directly responsible for the future of the artworks, thus transforming Ross' portraits into collective efforts.<sup>15</sup>

### The meaning of Orality

As has now been made clear, the audience engagement with the candy portraits of Ross primarily consists in the visitor being permitted to ingest the candies that comprise the artworks of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross).<sup>16</sup> The act of consuming the sculptures by the visitors is both an oral and bodily action, and while the action of diminishing the piles results in the destruction of the artworks themselves, the manner in which it happens, the actual ingestion of parts of the portraits, proposes an innovative paradigm of conceiving portraits and audience participation, that openly challenges the limitations imposed by traditional art and curatorial practices.<sup>17</sup> In particular, the orality in "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) reformulates the genre of portraiture, which, from having a representational function, becomes a process of incorporation.<sup>18</sup>

"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) represent Gonzalez-Torres' intention of portraying his late partner, Ross, who fought against AIDS in the last years of his life.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the two candy portraits under analysis are to be regarded as figurative representations of Ross at the time of their installation. Rather than depicting him physically, the works can be considered a metaphorical personification of the subject.<sup>20</sup> As this section will demonstrate, the destruction of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) by the audience may be interpreted as a representation of Laycock's decline as his illness progresses, performed by the viewers

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<sup>15</sup> Fuchs, "The authorized viewer" in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 105-110.

<sup>16</sup> "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) in Art institute of Chicago.

<sup>17</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-12.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, "Spit or swallow? Orality in Felix Gonzalez-Torres", *Art History* 43, 793.

<sup>19</sup> Mato, "Spectator as Witness: Trauma and Testimonio in Contemporary Cuban Art", 2.

<sup>20</sup> Miao, "Félix González-Torres's Portrait of Ross"

as they ingest parts of the portraits.<sup>21</sup> The joyful image of sweets is replaced by a profound sense of loss, as the works impose on the viewers the role of consumer, no longer just of the sweets that are vanishing in their mouths, but of Ross' life as well. The process of ingestion implemented by the audience can be defined as 'incorporation' and is essential in the understanding of the orality in Gonzalez-Torres' candy portraits, because it encapsulates the action highlighted by the artist himself, performed by the audience, of eating, digesting and eventually expelling Ross' body.<sup>22</sup>

A provocative connection that can be established on the topic of orality, symbolic in the discourse of portraiture embodiment, is the association between the consumption of a sweet – and therefore eat a piece of Ross' body – with the traditional Christian ritual of Eucharist, in which the faithful consume the body of Christ at the moment of communion. Despite the paucity of sources available in this area, the religious topic offers a different perspective on the embodiment of the artwork. The action that viewers perform in relation to "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) powerfully evokes the Christian Eucharist, also referred to as transubstantiation. This concept involves the transformation of the body and blood of Christ into the forms of bread and wine, which are presented as spiritual offerings during religious ceremonies.<sup>23</sup> A similar approach is adopted in the portraits of Ross, wherein Gonzalez-Torres presents viewers with the body of his late partner, distributed throughout the world and kept alive. The museum space thus assumes an almost sacred significance, becoming a site of commemoration and grief, yet in the very act, life is celebrated and remembered.<sup>24</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, curator of the English installation "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" in 2010 directly references the oral consumption that visitors are invited to experiment: "When we put the candy in our mouth, we participate in the diminishment, directly and personally, of his partner. We also engage in the Catholic ritual of communion."<sup>25</sup> Laycock' body is divided endless

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<sup>21</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-37

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 308-316.

<sup>23</sup> Miao, Félix González-Torres's Portrait of Ross: Beyond Form and Content.

<sup>24</sup> Miao, Félix González-Torres's Portrait of Ross: Beyond Form and Content.

<sup>25</sup> Katz, co-curator of "Hide/Seek", National Portrait Gallery, Youtube video.

times and offered to the viewers for remembrance, a faceless martyr offered up to the public to be digested.<sup>26</sup>

In his essay "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion" (1995), the American curator, critic and writer Robert Storr analyses the function of candies in the context of their oral consumption.<sup>27</sup> According to Storr, the sweets in "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) function as an interactive medium for viewers. The visitors are seduced by the shiny piles, and invited to suck the hard candies, taking their time to savour their sweetness. The action – which may be considered a metaphorical act of tasting Laycock's body – is connected to the topic of sexuality and more specifically to the act of oral sex. This provides a valuable insight into the thematic representation of the artist's homosexuality within portraits dedicated to his former partner.<sup>28</sup> The artist himself addressed the topic of orality in his works, as reported by the American curator Nancy Spector in her book *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (1995), where she reports: "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."<sup>29</sup> The erotic undertones expressed by Gonzalez-Torres, while not directly referring to "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), take shape in the two portraits under analysis, as the connection between Laycock and the artist's homosexuality is visible and recognised. Spector draws parallels between the experience of the viewers who consume a candy from the piles, experiencing the pleasure of sucking a piece of the portraits, with the sexual homoerotic act of oral sex, so strongly condemned at the time.<sup>30</sup> The ingestion of the candies from "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), thus symbolises an intimate and sensual process, offered to the audience in a subtle form, since it is not an intrinsic meaning of the sweets but depends on the identity that the candies assume during the exhibitions, that of Laycock.

A final analysis of Gonzalez-Torres' oral approach is proposed to assist the delineation of the reinterpretations of portraiture proposed in the participation with viewers. This approach, concerning the issue of AIDS, clarifies how the identity not only

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<sup>26</sup> Miao, Félix González-Torres's Portrait of Ross: Beyond Form and Content.

<sup>27</sup> Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion" in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 229-239.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 146-150.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

of the subject represented but also of the art object, changes connotations. In “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), Gonzalez-Torres delves into the concept of disappearance, which is symbolised by the consumption of the candies. Because the sweets serve as a metaphor for the physical decline of Laycock, the passage of time, therefore, impacts the portraits, much in the same way as it did on Laycock's body, thereby symbolising his illness.<sup>31</sup> Given the extensive nature of the subject of AIDS, which is both subjective and political, as experienced by Gonzalez-Torres, it is taken into account here solely in relation to the theme of the orality of consumption. In *The Art Story* (2017), the concept of orality has been associated with AIDS as through the metaphor that transforms the visitor into a participant, who, by performing the act of consumption, assumes the role of consumer. It cites as follows: “As the viewer unwraps and eats the candy, he or she becomes complicit in the disappearing process”.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, recognizing a darker meaning for the artworks “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), is the analogy provided by Assistant Professor Niko Vicario for *The Burlington Contemporary*, (2022) according to whom, the artist's silent request for the viewers to take a sweet from the ground and eat it, spreading pieces of the portraits among the audience, represents the diffusion of the HIV virus.<sup>33</sup> This interpretation was similarly articulated by Curator Katz during his discourse on “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), wherein he elucidates: “[By eating] potentially take contagion into ourselves.”<sup>34</sup> The topic, however, is not further discussed, and my understanding on it is limited due to a lack of academic theories. Nevertheless, I believe that this interpretation of the orality in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), reveals the portraits’ ability to assign an active task to viewers, who, even if only for the few minutes it takes them to consume the candy, they consciously become part of the process of destroying the artworks, assuming responsibility as consumers.

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<sup>31</sup> Miao, “Félix González-Torres's Portrait of Ross: Beyond Form and Content.”

<sup>32</sup> *The Art Story*, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Artworks.

<sup>33</sup> Vicario, “Rules that break other rules” in *Burlington Contemporary*.

<sup>34</sup> Vicario, “Rules that break other rules” in *Burlington Contemporary*.

## Ephemerality and Inexhaustibility

It has previously been posited that the portraits "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) are subjected, during their installation, to a circular process of destruction and restoration, performed by the act of ingestion from the audience, and the replenishment operated by the museums or art institutions to allow the maintenance of the piles themselves. Korean curator Miwon Kwon refers to the process of disappearance and reappearance of the artworks (the death and the renewal) as a 'permanent condition of impermanence', regulated by the rules in the certificate of authenticity and ownership.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, Gonzalez-Torres' portraits are in a constant state of flux, perpetually undergoing modifications, and simultaneously embodying the qualities of both impermanence and continuity. The issue of Ross' candy portraits and their status as a work of impermanent nature must be addressed. As outlined in the second chapter, following the theory proposed by Professor Sherri Irvin, both "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) exhibit a distinctive fluid quality, due to their susceptibility to physical alterations in form. These changes are influenced by the installation choices of the owner and the involvement of the public, who actively participate in the consumption of Gonzalez-Torres' candy portraits.<sup>36</sup>

With "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), Gonzalez-Torres managed to create a more complex relationship encompassing mortality and immortality, that not only comprises the vitality of the subject but the life of the artworks themselves. Professor Irvin examines the issue of fluidity in Gonzalez-Torres' candy works from the perspective of the ephemerality of the artworks. She hypothesises that the candy sculptures of Gonzalez-Torres, the piles, which are composed of organic everyday objects, and due to the continuous consumption performed by the visitors, undergoes a process of decomposition that repeatedly ensure their destruction. However, it is precisely because of this characteristic of the artworks being destroyed that "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), became fluid.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Kwon, "The becoming of a work of art", in Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 293-294.

<sup>36</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Ephemerality, from the Greek *ephemeros*, indicate something short-lived, the same concept applied to art, thus indicate an artwork that exist only for a limited period of time.<sup>38</sup> “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), together with all the *candy works* by Gonzalez-Torres, are recognized as ephemeral artworks, due to the usage of organic material for their creation, and the consumption they undergo. The physical aspect of the artworks themselves will be modified not only by comparing the already short period of time that elapses between the beginning and conclusion of an artistic display, but also by virtue of the fact that each viewer who interacts with the portraits will modify their physical form.<sup>39</sup> This characteristic of ephemerality is of particular significance in the creation of a portrait, as it transforms the static nature of a traditional portrait – which, by fixing the sitter in time at the moment of its production, did not allow for any alteration – into a process.<sup>40</sup> In the case of Gonzalez-Torres, as it has been previously stated, this process of modification is relevant to the active participation of the public in transforming the portrait into a performance. The portraits’ inherent capacity to be presented to the public thus becomes the medium through which Gonzalez-Torres creates Ross’ portraits. The emphasis is not on the physical representation of Laycock, but rather on the metaphorical representation of his fragility. The ephemerality of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) is the fundamental element in the representation of the subject’s body, as Spector proposes, because it’s the element Gonzalez-Torres uses to present the sentiment of absence and loss, and moreover the personal element that the artist uses to present his connection with Laycock.

The ephemerality of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), however, does not only consist in the possibility for the sculptures to be consumed, but it is also connected with their inexhaustibility. Despite the fact that the portraits are composed of colourful and edible candies, the actual object that is being purchased, borrowed and exchanged is a piece of paper containing the *Certificate of Authenticity and Ownership*, which declares the transfer of ownership of the work to the buyer.<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup> “Ephemeral Art”. Tate Modern official website.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-14.

<sup>40</sup> Irvin, 'Rules in Art?', *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 10-14.

<sup>41</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation Official Website.

certificate, in the case of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) – as well as all the other *candy works* by the artist – ensures their continuity, as analysed by Professor Joshua Chambers-Letson, because it is the means by which Gonzalez-Torres ensures that his ideas are disseminated.<sup>42</sup> The Professor states: “The logic of the certificates of authenticity drew upon the ‘deadening’ force of contract law to suggest that death and destruction are always, to some degree, imminent but not permanent.”<sup>43</sup>

One of the innovations that Gonzalez-Torres has introduced to the art world with his candy portraits can be encapsulated in two words found in their descriptions: *Endless Supply*.<sup>44</sup> The unstable aspect of the composition of the artworks is not only relevant in terms of the materiality of the sweets, which exist in ever-changing forms; but also speaks about the immortality of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) themselves, which are victims of an endless process of destruction and resurrection.<sup>45</sup> In an interview with the American artist Tim Rollins, Gonzalez-Torres while talking about his *Paper and Candy Works* asserted: “All these pieces are indestructible because they can be endlessly duplicated. They will always exist because they don't really exist or because they don't have to exist all the time.”<sup>46</sup>

The ephemerality of Gonzalez-Torres’ candy portraits introduces an additional dimension to the notion of immortality because what happens to the sculptures is a process of gradual decay, the artworks undergo a decrease since the moment of their creation, but simultaneously they are kept alive by the museums who ensure their replenishment, transforming “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) in inextinguishable portraits.<sup>47</sup> The physical presence of the piles is undeniable when they are exhibited in a museum, just as it is when they are consumed. Arguably, the physicality in the sculptures is accentuated even further by the audience, precisely because the contact with the latter highlights their fragility, revealing the process of creation and destruction, and creating a direct dialogue that attests to their authenticity. The endless element in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled”

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<sup>42</sup> Chambers-Letson. “Contracting justice: the viral strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres”. 577-579

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 579.

<sup>44</sup> “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), in Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

<sup>45</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Tim Rollins. "Interview by Tim Rollins." Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

<sup>47</sup> Kwon, “The becoming of a work of art”, in Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 293-294.

(Ross) is constituted by the possibility of a new life, and artistically the element that allows Gonzalez-Torres to create something that is continuing to exist, even decades after his death, and having been consumed by thousands of visitors. At the same time, the candies in the portraits are the objects that ensure their degradation. The museums and art institutions, take care of the two sculptures during the exhibition period, guaranteeing their visible – and edible – presence, but as expressed by Gonzalez-Torres himself, the works are immortal regardless of this consideration, as they never truly cease to exist.<sup>48</sup>

In summary, this analysis of the active participation and the ephemerality of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) demonstrates how Gonzalez-Torres reworks the genre of portraiture by incorporating Ross' candy portraits, thereby creating a portrait that is perpetually subject to alteration by human interaction. The materialisation of Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross), which serves as representations of Laycock, is achieved through the construction of physical objects. In contrast to traditional portraits or sculptures, which comprise physical components that exist in a single form and cannot be replicated while maintaining the same meaning. "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) are distinguished by their replaceable components, thereby facilitating a connection with the audience that represents both presence and absence, ephemerality and continuity.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, the concept that epitomises audience participation in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) is orality, showing how the artist imbues the candy portraits with meanings that are brought to life through public engagement. The revolution brought by the artist and highlighted by examples such as “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), is relevant to the theme of portraiture, which is revisited by the artist in the creation of examples that transform the portraits from fixed images of the sitter, into an example of artworks in progress. Simultaneously, the artist reworks the conceptualisation of portraiture and the concept of memory,

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<sup>48</sup> Irvin, Sherri “The ontological diversity in visual artworks” in *New Waves in Aesthetic*, 5-12.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

creating portraits that are strongly personal for the artist but that became collective experiences by sharing parts of them with the people.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Barrette, *The edges of trauma*, 122-134.

## Conclusion

The present thesis aims to outline and explore the innovations introduced into the genre of portraiture by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, which are recognizable in the artworks “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross). In order to attempt a focused and narrow analysis, as specified at the beginning of the thesis, the discussion was initiated by offering a term of comparison that could better define the innovations, understood as reformulations, offered by Gonzalez-Torres. The focus of the study was placed on innovations in the spheres of portraits’ identity, their temporality, the rules imposed by the artist for their understanding, and finally in the relationship between the portraits and the audience. As it would have been impossible to propose a comparison with the genre of portraiture in general, the term 'traditional portraits' has been introduced here in order to indicate the specific historical period of the European Renaissance of the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, to identify its main characteristics, and introduce the following discussion. In the two chapters: “Issues on Materiality: Between Likeness and Fluidity” and “Audience Engagement: Ephemeral Presence and Oral Consumption”, a series of features of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) were analysed. I, in fact, outlined characteristic of the artworks that depart from the traditional portraiture and which, for the purposes of clarity, have been divided into two broad categories: innovations related to the materiality of the works as art objects, and innovations related to human interactions with the portraits and with the meanings of the works.

The second chapter tackles the notion of materiality in the artist's oeuvre; a concept elucidated within the text itself. The thematic features of "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and "Untitled" (Ross) exemplify the intricacies of materiality. Contrary to traditional artworks, such as the *Mona Lisa* cited in the historical introduction, which exist as a tangible physical object, “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) exist as conceptualisations. Indeed, Laycock's two portraits, prior to their state as two accumulations of colourful candies, function as a paper document that certifies and specifies the conditions of existence, installation, and conservation of the

artworks.<sup>51</sup> The *Certificate of Authenticity and Ownership*, serves as a document that facilitates the sale, exchange, and loaning of the works. According to scholars such as the curator Kwon, the document fulfils a dual role as both a legal certificate and a means by which Gonzalez-Torres guarantees the dissemination of the works and his ideas. The document no longer functions as a preventative measure against misinterpretations; rather, it establishes an open possibility for both the owners and the audience.<sup>52</sup> Gonzalez-Torres through the certificate innovates the perception of the portraits, giving freedom for interpretation.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the artworks, which may appear abstract, are actually manifest in physical, concrete forms within the context of exhibitions. The issue of the materiality is thus primarily concerned with the installations of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross). Indeed, in the dedicated chapter, it has been acknowledged that the piles are composed of edible candies. The employment of specific biodegradable everyday objects within the context of portraiture permits an analysis of their materiality. The candy portraits are simultaneously organic objects that can be consumed, and ideas. Kwon defines the condition of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) as a "permanent condition of impermanence" precisely to indicate how the non-abstract works can be simultaneously absent in their physical form and present as works-ideas.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, the materiality of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), gives rise to innovations regarding the physicality of the portraits themselves. The fluidity of the portraits is introduced by the artist’s permission to reinterpret not only the meanings but also the displays and the compositions of the artworks. The owners of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) can in fact modify the manner in which the portraits are presented, as well as their weight, which may vary with installations. The fluidity of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), however, expands into different contexts. To reiterate the example of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, it can be asserted with a high degree of confidence that the original work is represented by a single copy. The portrait serves as a permanent imprint of Lisa’s face

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<sup>51</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, “Core Tenets for Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy Works”.

<sup>52</sup> Kwon, “The becoming of a work of art”, in Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 281-314.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

on the wooden surface of the painting, and albeit being susceptible to the passage of time and the effects of ageing, observing the work at different moments in time, it is evident that it remains constant.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, the situation is significantly different in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross). The portraits are subjected to constant flux, this is due to the fact that, under the conditions of their existence, it is intended that the sweets that comprise Ross’ candy portraits may be consumed by viewers, and that they in turn may be replenished by museums, which prevent their disappearance. It can thus be concluded that “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) are in a constant state of transformation, undergoing a perpetual cycle of destruction and resurrection.

In addition, in order to provide a more comprehensive analysis, upon revisiting the concept of materiality, it is necessary to discuss the similarities between “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) and the subject they represent in more detail. In the opening chapter, the topic of likeness is discussed, in relation to Jan van Eyck's work *The Arnolfini Portrait* serving as a prime example. The Dutch artist demonstrates a meticulous attention to details in his depiction, striving to create an artwork that enables the identification of subjects through the utilisation of distinctive elements. Simultaneously, he possessed the ability to manipulate reality by crafting a scene that aligned with the messages he sought to convey.<sup>55</sup> However, in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), Gonzalez-Torres eliminates any kind of mimetic element. It is only through the medium of the exhibition labels, which provide the title of the works, that viewers can interpret the piles of candy as portraits of the artist's late partner. Laycock's physical presence is rendered negligible, and his personality is rendered indistinguishable. Gonzalez-Torres introduces an aspect in the portraits that cannot be identified simply looking at them and that is impossible to render through painted or sculpted portraits. Indeed, the work is intended to imitate Ross's weight.<sup>56</sup>

The weight of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) is one of the essential elements that opens up the discussion on the meanings of the portraits. In

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<sup>54</sup> Benjamin, “The work of art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction”. 3-5.

<sup>55</sup> Panofsky, “Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait.” 117; 125.

<sup>56</sup> Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World." in *Flash Art International*.

particular in the discourse regarding the re-conceptualisation that takes place in the process of degradation of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), in fact, the two candy portraits acquire meaning as they lose weight. The third chapter of this thesis analyses the concepts that seek to understand how the relationship between the public and artworks functions.

To reiterate the example of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, the masterpiece is displayed in the Musée du Louvre behind a protective glass and at a safe distance from the public, who are prevented from getting too close or touching it. [Fig. 13]. Gonzalez-Torres, with “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross), proposes instead the creation of two portraits that actively involve the public, giving them a specific role in the creation – or rather in the continuous process of re-creation, which presupposes a continuous modification of the subject represented. The deterioration of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) represents an innovative topic when introduced into the genre of portraiture, and the manner in which the gesture is performed. Ross' portraits are not simply destroyed by viewers, but ingested, and the gesture has been compared both to the concept of a sexual act performed by viewers who suck on part of Ross' body metaphorically contained in the candy. But also, to the topic of AIDS, in the degradation of a body of flesh and blood that is displayed in its fragility through the candy. No longer immortal, like the face of the *Mona Lisa* or the Arnolfini's marriage, but impermanent.<sup>57</sup>

Orality in Gonzalez-Torres also assumes a communal significance, it was posited in the thesis that the artworks “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) are in fact comparable to performances, with the audience completing the portraits by ingesting their pieces until the works disappear (or the exhibitions end together with the performances). It can thus be concluded that Gonzalez-Torres reinterprets the concept of portraiture, transforming traditional portraits, which are observed and admired from a distance, into works of art that belong to everyone, with a gesture that binds viewers who, by consuming a piece of candy, metaphorically assimilate Ross' body into their own.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, Ross's portraits becomes

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<sup>57</sup> Miao, “Félix González-Torres's Portrait of Ross: Beyond Form and Content.”

<sup>58</sup> Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, 144-145.

ephemeral and transient, presented to viewers in symbolic piles of sweets that rapidly dissipates before their eyes. This symbolises the profound pain experienced by the artist following the loss of his partner, which is consumed gradually with each candy ingested by the audience.

Gonzalez-Torres rethinking of portraiture is in part technical, as expressed by the issue of the materiality of the sculpture, and artistic in the reinterpretation of the relationship between the art piece and the audience, but it is also conceptual. The artist in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) plays with the duality between presence and absence, between pain and memory, between love and loss, because he created artworks that differ from painted or sculpted portraits, which require the physical pieces that compose them to be preserved in order to be admired.<sup>59</sup> For every Ross’ “Untitled” that is consumed, there is always the possibility of reconstruction, and in the process of degradation and restoration Gonzalez-Torres’ ideas are perpetuated. Gonzalez-Torres devotes “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross) to the public, and preservation – understood in the classical sense of protecting and restoring the work – becomes care and consumption.

As previously stated, the genre of portraiture is vast and offers an extensive range of insights, Gonzalez-Torres' artistic oeuvre is equally open to numerous reinterpretations. Due to limitations in terms of the available space, the present project concentrates on a select number of the most significant issues, and exclusively those related to “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) and “Untitled” (Ross). However, the topic of Gonzalez-Torres' innovations in portraiture can also be approached from other angles. The *candy works* series comprises works that not only depict a single subject, but also represent the bodies of Laycock and Gonzalez-Torres together, thus prompting more in-depth analysis within the context of the AIDS epidemic, as well as the romanticised portrayal associated with the artworks.<sup>60</sup> The theme of portraiture can, however, also be interpreted in relation to the series of the *Paper Stacks*, or the *Portraits*, in order to analyse how the usage of different materials offers different

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<sup>59</sup> Irvin, Sherri “The ontological diversity in visual artworks” in *New Waves in Aesthetic*, 5-12.

<sup>60</sup> See for example “Untitled” (Lover Boys) (1991) or “Untitled” (Placebo) (1991).

interpretations of the genre of portraiture.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, this study provides a comprehensive examination of its subjects thereby establishing the foundation for future research into Gonzalez-Torres' contribution to the development of portraiture as a genre, reaffirming the enduring relevance of his artistic practice.

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<sup>61</sup> See for example "Untitled" (Double Portrait) (1991) or "Untitled" (Portrait of Julie Ault) (1991).

## List of Illustrations



Fig.1, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991. Candies in various coloured wrappers, endless supply. (Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2022-2024.)



Fig.2, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (Ross), 1991. Candies in various coloured wrappers, endless supply. (Installed in the home of a private collector, 1992.)



Fig.3, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991. Candies in various coloured wrappers, endless supply. (Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark, 2010.)



Fig.4, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Portrait of Dad), 1991. White candies in clear wrappers, endless supply. (Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario, Canada)



Fig.5, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient), 1992. Candies in blue wrappers, endless supply. (Galerie Kreo, Paris, France, 2013.)



Fig.6, Anonymous, statua equestre di Marco Aurelio, 176 d.C., gilded bronze, 424 x 387cm (Musei Capitolini, Roma, inv. MC3247)



Fig.7, Jan Van Eyck, Arnolfini Portrait, 1434. 82.2 x 60 cm. (The National Gallery, London, NG186)



Fig. 8, Leonardo da Vinci, Mona Lisa, 1503-1519. Oil on wood. 79,4 x 53,4 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris, INV 779)



Fig. 9, Jaques Louis-David, Bonaparte crossing the Great Saint Bernhard Pass, 1801. Oil on canvas, 272 x 232 cm, (Malmaison Musée National du Château).



Fig. 10, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991. Candies in various coloured wrappers, endless supply. (Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2024.)



Fig. 11, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991. Candies in various coloured wrappers, endless supply. (Chicago, Jane Addams Hull House-Museum, 2012).



Fig. 12, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Ross), 1991. Candies in various coloured wrappers, endless supply, Detail. (New York, David Zwirner, 2017).

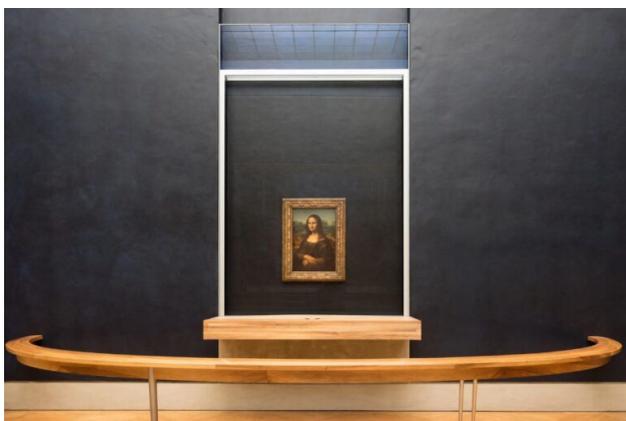


Fig. 13, Leonardo da Vinci, Mona Lisa, 1503-1519. Oil on wood. 79,4 x 53,4 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris, INV 779).

## Illustrations Credits

Fig. 1, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Downloaded 11 December 2025.

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-portrait-of-ross-in-l-a>

Fig. 2, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Downloaded 11 December 2025.

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-ross>

Fig.3, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Downloaded 11 December 2025.

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-portrait-of-ross-in-l-a>

Fig.4, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Downloaded 11 December 2025.

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-portrait-of-dad>

Fig. 5, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Downloaded 11 December 2025.

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-portrait-of-marcel-brient>

Fig. 6, Musei Capitolini, Downloaded 11 December 2025.

<https://www.museicapitolini.org/it/opera/statua-equestre-di-marco-aurelio>

Fig. 7, The National Gallery, Downloaded 11 December 2025.

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait>

Fig. 8, Musée du Louvre, Downloaded 11 December 2025.

<https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010062370>

Fig. 9, Beyer, 2003. Plate n. 175.

Fig. 10, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Downloaded 12 December 2025.

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-portrait-of-ross-in-l-a>

Fig. 11, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Downloaded 12 December 2025.

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-portrait-of-ross-in-l-a>

Fig. 12, Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Downloaded 12 December 2025.

<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-ross>

Fig. 13, Musée du Louvre, Downloaded 18 December 2025.

<https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/the-palace/from-the-mona-lisa-to-the-wedding-feast-at-cana>

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