

How Might You Define a Work as Art?

Core Competency: Critical Thinking

Felix Gonzalez-Torres created “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (figure 2.47) in 1991. Ross was the artist’s partner, who died from an AIDS-related illness that year. When this work was created, people who contracted AIDS often died after suffering from an illness that caused infections, weakness, and weight loss. They were also often shunned and discriminated against.¹

When exhibited, the work consists of 175 pounds of wrapped pieces of candy heaped on the floor in a pile that can vary in size. Its weight can be understood to correspond to Ross’s ideal body weight. Visitors are allowed to take a piece of candy. The exhibiting museum or gallery either replenishes the candy every night, so each day it starts at 175 pounds, or allows the work to be completely removed by visitors. In that visitors can take a part of the art, it is similar to Gonzalez-Torres’s “Untitled” (*Death by Gun*) (figure 2.20).

Consider the material in Chapter 2 and answer the following questions about this work:

- Is the work *representational*, *abstract*, or *nonobjective*? How do you know?
- What is the *subject matter* of the work?
- What is the *form* of the work and how can it change? (Describe at least five different things.)
- What *context* do you know about the artist’s biography and the period when the work was created?
- What is your experience with terminal diseases?
- What is your experience with candy? (Describe positive and negative aspects.)
- What do you think the *content* of the work is?
- How do the subject matter, form, context, and your personal experience suggest the content?

- Which *theme* do you think the work falls under? Why?
- Do you think you would have thought this work was art before you read this chapter?
- Do you think the work is art now?
- Picking from one of the ways that art can be defined as described in Chapter 2, why is this work art?
- If you have changed your mind about whether the work is art, how did being an active viewer make you change your mind?



FIGURE 2.47. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*). 1991. Candies, individually wrapped in multicolor cellophane, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight 175 lb. Installation view: *More Love: Art, Politics and Sharing Since the 1990s*. Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1 February – 31 March 2013. Curator Claire Schneider. Catalogue. [*Travels to Cheekwood, Nashville, Tennessee, 21 September – 31 December 2013*]. Photographer Peter Geoffrion. © Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Courtesy of The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

¹ It should be noted that this information includes just some of the historical factors that could affect an understanding of the work, and, while they are aspects widely shared with regard to this work, they do not reflect a specific intention of the artist for a context through which his work should be understood.