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ARTICLE

All That Glitters is Not Gold: Viewer Understanding of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's Candy Spill Installations

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ABSTRACT

The push to "queer the museum" calls for an increase in the inclusion of LGBT+ artworks and artists as an intervention into the heterosexual museum and canon. While popular, the display of queer, abstract objects is complicated as many museum visitors do not perceive the LGBT+ themes. In this article, I present the data on audience interpretation of two candy spill installations, *Untitled (L.A.)* (1991) and *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* (1993), when they were featured in exhibitions at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, AR. Participant observation of and interviews with visitors demonstrate that while they understood the piece as a disruption to the site, no LGBT+ content was perceived. I make specific recommendations to museums based on the findings that argue the installation display, label text and placement, and museum staff training impact the viewer's understanding. As museums continue to participate in the *queer turn,* more should be considered when tackling the ethical display of LGBT+ works.

1 | Introduction

In 2015, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, AR, acquired *Untitled (L.A.)* (1991) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres for 7.6 million dollars (Crystal Bridges 2015a). Felix Gonzalez-Torres was a gay Cuban American who explored the themes of love, loss, AIDS, and LGBT+ activism through installation and object-based work in the 1990s. Unique to many of his pieces, sculptures like *Untitled* invite visitors to participate by taking a piece of the art, in this case, candy. Curator Chad Alligood stated of the purchase, "This acquisition particularly dovetails Crystal Bridges' mission to welcome all to celebrate the American spirit...[*Untitled*] helps us tell an expanded story of American art" (Crystal Bridges 2015a). To Alligood, the participatory component of *Untitled (L.A.)* engaged viewers in critical and often erased LGBT+ histories. Though the museum and regional art lovers were excited about the purchase as a needed addition to Crystal Bridges' overwhelmingly heterosexual collection, many Arkansans saw the spending of $7.6 million on candy as not only absurd but a further divide between the elite and the everyday state citizen. This confusion was demonstrated in the reply comments to the Crystal Bridges purchase announcement on Facebook. Sandy Riddell Wagner stated, "Damn this is dumb. You wasted an entire exhibition space on a floor filled with green candy?" Ken Kupchick said, "I can appreciate works such as this as temporary installations, but as a permanent collection work, you've been sold a bag of beans" (Crystal Bridges 2015b). The responses suggest that many readers saw a pile of overpriced candy and not a major work by one of the 1990s most influential gay artists. This incident raises questions about the critical gap between museums' intentions in showing abstract, queer work like *Untitled* with diversity in mind and audience understanding, or I should say misunderstanding, of the conceptual work.

The recent push to "queer the museum" calls for a disruption of the museum as a heteronormative site through new modes of collection, curation, and education that broaden LGBT+ representation, like the acquisition of *Untitled (L.A.)*. An exciting subgenre of this push has been an investment in showing queer,

abstract art due to the vast interpretive possibilities. However, as demonstrated in the incident between Crystal Bridges and its audience, these conceptual works require intentional interpretive strategies for general audiences to engage with them fully. The goal of the presented studies is to identify what gaps, if any, exist between abstract LGBT+ art content and viewer understanding, and how museums can bridge the identified gaps with the broad aim of strengthening LGBT+ representation within museums.

The article utilizes two case studies that I conducted on candy spill installations by Felix Gonzalez-Torres shown at Crystal Bridges: a study done on *Untitled (L.A.)* (1991) in 2022, when it was part of the *Entre/Between* exhibition, and a study done on *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* (1993) in 2019, when it was part of the *Personal Space* exhibition. While many works can be considered queer abstraction, the candy spill installations were chosen for data collection because they provide multiple layers of audience interaction to document and analyze: reading the label and looking, touching, and eating the work. I designed the studies to answer three research questions: (1) Do museum visitors interpret or discern LGBT+ related content from viewing or interacting with the candy spill installations of Felix Gonzalez-Torres? (2) What meanings or associations do viewers make with the installations? and (3) How did museum decisions such as the installation of the work and label text and placement influence or shape these interpretations?

Participant observation and interview data were collected to assess how visitors interacted with the work and, importantly, how visitors interpreted meanings. I will demonstrate through the study findings that, while museums and art historians laud abstracted works like those of Gonzalez-Torres for their radical approach to LGBT+ representation, general audiences did not perceive content related to LGBT+ identity. They did interpret the candy spills as disruptive to museum protocol, which could be framed as a *queering* of the space. Based on audience interaction and interpretation findings, I make specific recommendations to museums on candy spill display best practices, focused on label placement and content, installation layout, and staff training. While this study is specific to the audience at Crystal Bridges, I hope that the findings will highlight gaps between museum and audience understandings of the work and inform future interpretive planning around similar abstract, queer pieces.[1]

2 | Background

"Queering the Museum" uses the word *queering* on two levels to explain the action of disrupting the museum as a heteronormative site and the expansion of LGBT+ presence within museums through the new collection, education, and curatorial practices focused on LGBT+ history and representation. Like other institutions, the museum is historically framed as a neutral producer and preserver of cultural knowledge. However, museums act as arbiters of value and actively create histories through their choices of what to display and collect. Beginning with the Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s, artists and curators began to critique the museum as "an important site for the production and display of discourse," which includes echoing certain cultural norms and biases like patriarchal privilege and compulsory heterosexuality (Steorn 2012, 355). These biases inform museum practices like collecting, exhibitions, and displays, and impact *who* and *what* is included in the historical record. This means that while museums appear neutral, inherent biases around sexuality and gender result in limited collections that exclude certain populations like female and LGBT+ makers from collections, exhibitions, and programming (McIntyre 2007, 48–53).

Articles including "The Museum's Silent Sexual Performance" (Sanders 2008), "Gay and Lesbian Visitors and Cultural Institutions" (Heimlich and Koke 2008), and "LGBT Welcoming Guidelines for Museums" (Leitch et al. 2016) examine these exclusions and call for specific interventions in museum staff policy, education, collection guidelines, and exhibition programming. The studies demonstrate that interpretation around objects, events, and exhibitions highlighting queer histories resulted in the LGBT+ community participating at higher and more consistent rates. The intentional telling of LGBT+ narratives created feelings of belonging amongst LGBT+ identified audiences (Heimlich and Koke 2008, 101; Leitch et al. 2016, 143). The programming can also increase empathy and cultural sensitivity in heterosexual, cisgender museumgoers for the LGBT+ community (Gokcigdem 2016, xxvi; Middleton 2017, 80–81). The purchase of *Untitled (L.A.)* can be understood as a part of the new inclusion priorities at museums, as Alligood's statement highlighted Gonzalez-Torres's identity and want to "expand" the canon of American art.

A growing subgenre of LGBT+ inclusion through exhibitions is an emphasis on queer, abstract art with major exhibitions like *Haptic Tactics* (2018) at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in New York, NY, *Queer Abstraction* (2019–2020) at the Des Moines Art Center in Des Moines, IA, and *Gay Guerrilla* (2019) online at the Arcade Project Gallery.[2] Queer abstraction centers on the display of abstract art created by LGBT+ artists that address LGBT+ themes. "Abstraction" is applied broadly and includes approaches from non-objective color-field and expressionist approaches to object-based work like Gonzalez-Torres's. Artists and scholars have lauded queer abstract art as a mode to explore themes such as queer embodiment, desire, and protest outside of the constraints or risks of figurative representation (Doyle and Getsy 2013; Getsy and Simmons 2015, 45; Hammond 2000, 89).

While scholarly discourse supports the "dynamic potential" (Getsy and Simmons 2015, 43) or "transgressive potential" (Hammond 2000, 89) in queer, abstract work to *queer* the museum, examinations of work, like the candy spills installed state otherwise. Abstract, conceptual work can be off-putting to audiences, especially those new to museums (Deeth 2012). Audiences enter museums with previous knowledge and museum experiences that shape their expectations of the work and the museum's responsibility as guide (Deeth 2012; Falk 2009, 81; Larceneux, Caro, and Krebs 2016). At risk with abstract, queer art is further LGBT+ erasure. If museums are showing abstract, queer work with the aim of inclusion but are not providing interpretive support, audiences struggle to make the desired intersectional identity connections. Museums can offset discomfort and increase other outcomes like participation and attendance through interpretation and education initiatives (Deeth 2012; Falk 2009, 215; Hein 1998, 161).

2.1 | Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Queer Abstract Art

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was a Cuban American visual artist who created object-based sculpture and installation in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s. Gonzalez-Torres's partner Ross Laycock died from AIDS in 1991. The *Untitled* candy spill installations consist of hundreds of pieces of small, wrapped candies displayed on the gallery floor. Per the artists' instructions, the candy spills are arranged along an edge between the wall and floor, in a corner, or the center of the room. The color of the candies and wrappers differ based on different works. The use of candy as the medium, along with the invitation for viewers to take and eat a piece, was intentionally chosen by Gonzalez-Torres as a metaphor for the body of his partner Ross Laycock. Using dispensable candy, he enacts both queer sexuality through the touching and tasting of the object, and loss through the wasting and disappearance of the installation. Unlike representational works that can depict acts of overt queer sexuality or intimacy, candy as a medium eludes censorship.

The early candy spill installations have predetermined weights that correlate to Laycock's changing body weight during his battle with AIDS. For example, the mass of candy used in *Portrait of Ross in L.A*. (1990) is required to weigh precisely 175 pounds. This weight correlates to Laycock's healthy weight before he became ill. Gonzalez-Torres intended for the work to diminish while it was being consumed. He stated, "In a way this 'letting go' of the work—this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form—was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day right in front of my eyes" (Gonzalez-Torres and Rollins 1996, 88). Gonzalez-Torres argued that the form and display of the piece intentionally enact both wasting and loss related to AIDS that is masochistically repeated with each installation. He both controls and endures the process of dying and mourning.

Due to the interactive nature of the installations, the physical object-based form, and the LGBT+ themes, Gonzalez-Torres's pieces continue to be a popular addition to exhibitions centered on identity like *Entre/Between*, which focused on the work of Latinx Americans and *Personal Space*, that explored privacy and intimacy. His work has also been included in exhibitions with only LGBT+ artists like *Oh, Honey...A Queer Reading of the Collection* at the University of Michigan Museum of Art in 2020 and *Queer Abstraction*. When designing these studies to assess the impacts of queer, abstract work on audiences, the candy spills were chosen because they were created by an LGBT+ artist, continue to be relevant and shown in LGBT+-focused shows, are abstract, object-based works, and provide multiple levels of visitor engagement to analyze.

3 | Methods

To collect visitor data on *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* and *Untitled (L.A.)*, I utilized participant observation and interviews. All visitors were included in participant observation data, while only adults 18 years of age or older were interviewed. The participants were not recruited before the study but were approached in the gallery spaces that featured the installations. Those interviewed included visitors new to Crystal Bridges and returning visitors, visitors who had seen similar work by Gonzalez-Torres before, and those who had never heard of the artist or encountered his work.

Detailed participation observation, including behavior sampling, was collected to record how frequently visitors looked at the works, read the labels, interacted with the work by taking a piece of candy, and ate the candy in the space. Participant observation of visitors within museums allows for a better understanding of how visitors move through the gallery spaces and interact with works and each other to create meaningful interactions and learning (Hein 1998, 101). The candy spill installations are displayed on the floor and are made of everyday objects—candies. Participant observation focused data collection on whether or not visitors acknowledged the candy spills in the gallery space and how the frequency and quality of those encounters compared to those with other works in the same space.

Participant observation was also vital in forming the knowledge foundation for creating interview questions and choosing interviewees. Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as a second method for these studies as it allows for a deeper, detailed look at museum visitors' thoughts and reflections right after looking at or interacting with the candy spills (Hein 1998, 123–125). A semi-structured approach allowed for more conversational interaction with the ability to ask follow-up or clarifying questions if needed. As I will demonstrate, interviewing visitors also provided important information on how to expand current staff training around the spills (Hein 1998, 130).

The interviews were structured in two parts to collect visitors' first, unfiltered impressions of the work and then a deeper discussion of the work after providing specific background information. I started all interviews with basic information, including asking if the visitors had visited Crystal Bridges before, had previously seen a candy spill, or were familiar with the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. I then asked about their first impressions of the piece and what they thought the meaning was. If they agreed, I then read the visitors' background information about the candy spill installations and Gonzalez-Torres's biographical information, including his relationship with Ross Laycock. I emphasized the information on the labels and provided further background information on the work. I then asked their thoughts on the piece, specifically requesting their feelings on the abstract representation of the body and the ingesting of the body. Conducting research on LGBT+ history and themes requires sensitivity and respect. For the interviews, no identifying information on participants was collected, consent in participation was ongoing with participants allowed to opt out of questions or the interviews at any time, and semi-structured interviewing allowed participants to address only themes they were comfortable with.

The participant observation field notes and interviews were recorded as jottings in the museum and then transcribed in detail the same day for precision. Common occurrences and statements were informally noted at the end of each day. At the end of all data collection for each study, jottings and interviews were coded based on repeated events and statements deemed relevant to the research questions.

4 | Case 1: Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-For-Roni) (1993)

The galleries in Crystal Bridges are arranged chronologically, moving from early American Art to Contemporary Art. *Personal Space* was set up in two rooms at the end of the first section of early American art. *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* (1993) was installed in the second room, which had two entrances and an elevator. If entering the space from the early American galleries, which a majority of the observed visitors did, *Untitled* sat to the immediate middle-left of one's vision field. The highly reflective gold wrappers were arranged in a pyramid shape in the corner between the lilac gallery wall, the white wall of *Room* (2007–2008) by Alison Elisabeth Taylor, and the warm wooden floors of the gallery space. The two labels for *Untitled* were placed to the left of the work on the gallery wall (Figure 1, *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)*).

Untitled was accompanied by two labels that described the piece. The left-hand label contained an image of Roni Horn's *Landscape* and a description of the friendship between Horn and Gonzalez-Torres. This label explained how *Untitled* and *Landscape* were connected through the artists' relationship. The right-hand label addressed *Untitled* and included the artist, year, title, and description. The descriptive information read:

> You are invited to take a piece of candy. With his candy spills, Felix-Gonzalez-Torres invites the viewer into the work. Made of an everyday, non-art material, *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* is designed to suggest a wide range of meanings. Unlike most works of art, this one invites you to touch, taste, and actively engage. Although the artist makes recommendations on the color and weight of the works (specifically using the word "ideal"), each of the candy spills are open-ended. The curator has the opportunity to choose the color, size, weight, and placement of the work. In this case, the color is not changed from the artist's intention and relates to Roni Horn's piece seen in the "In Conversation" label nearby.

> A Cuban-born American Citizen, Gonzalez-Torres moved to New York City in the early 1980s where he joined the artist collaborative Group Material.

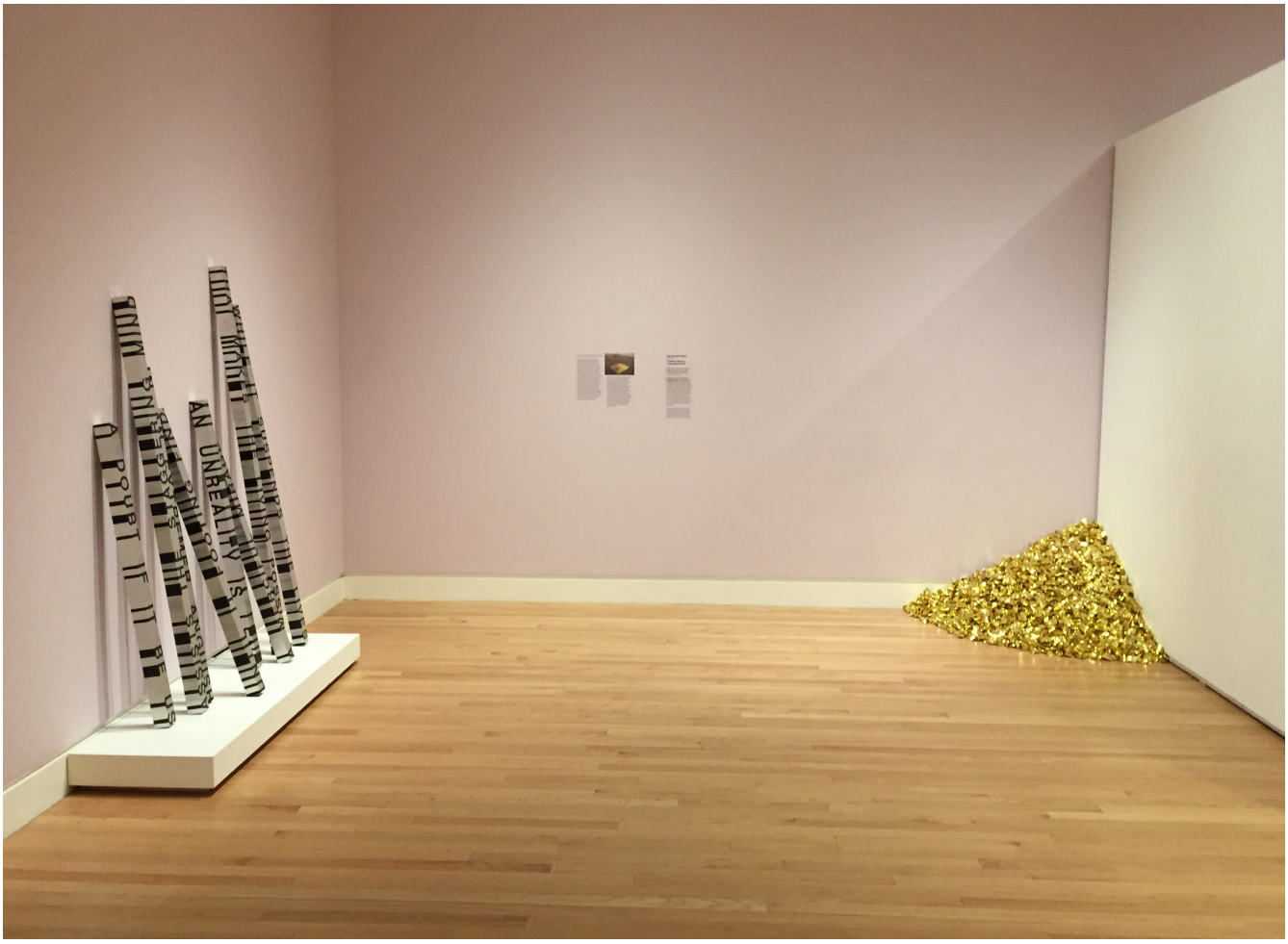

FIGURE 1 | *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* (1993) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, installed at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, AR, as part of the *Personal Space* exhibition (October 27, 2018—March 2019). The two labels for the installation can be seen to the upper left of the piece on the back wall. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> Using Materials like candy, lightbulbs, and paper, he invited renewed attention to the objects in our everyday lives.

Along with *Untitled and Room*, this space also held *OOO OOO* (2016) by Ming Song to the right of *Room*. To collect data, I stood inside the entrance and slightly to the right. The research staff requested this position so as not to obstruct the flow of visitors.

4.1 | Findings: Participant Observation

Data were collected from 183 visitors in the *Personal Space* exhibition over one hour. Seventy-three visitors appeared to look at *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)*, 49 appeared to read the label, 51 took a piece of candy, and 8 were observed opening and eating the candy in the gallery space. Several factors impacted visitor interaction with *Untitled*, such as the abstracted nature of the work, the placement of the work in the gallery, and the physical features of the gallery (Table 1, Participant Observation).

The most common path was for people to enter the space through the breezeway entrance, walk to the opening of *Room*, and either look in or go into the space. The high interaction rate of 39.9% with *Untitled* may be attributed to the work's bright gold color and texture, both of which were noted in visitor interviews. Not only was it the brightest object in the room, but it was also in the direct line of sight for visitors entering the space from both the breezeway and the staircase entrances.

Seventy-three of the 183 visitors (40%) looked at *Untitled* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Forty-nine of these visitors (67%) appeared to read one or both of the two labels accompanying the Gonzalez-Torres piece. The Felix Gonzalez-Torres labels were the most read in the gallery, followed by the label that accompanied *Room*. Compared to previous studies on label usage that documented around 55%, 67% is a high participation rate (McManus 1989, 175; Smith, Smith, and Tinio 2017, 80).

The museum as a site for art display has many inherent rules that include not touching or interacting with the art. This may have created anxiety for visitors around touching *Untitled* or taking candy. Many visitors read the label multiple times, talked among themselves, or questioned the Protection Specialist before interacting with the piece or taking candy.[3] The Protection Specialist was seen as an authoritative extension of the museum and could permit interactions with the piece. This suggests that a museum employee was deemed a more official source of information than the museum signage.

I observed some factors that appeared to increase the likelihood of visitors taking a piece of candy. If a visitor saw another visitor take a piece of candy, they were likelier to take it. The more visitors there were in the space, the more likely candy would be taken. This was not because of the increase in visitors. If one or two people in the full gallery took a piece of candy, the other visitors would notice, and a snowball effect of candy-taking would occur. The sound of the metallic wrappers being manipulated in the space signaled to other visitors that the candy was available to be taken and consumed. Visitors would hear the sound and look toward the action of other viewers touching the piece. Very few visitors ate the candy in the space. Most put it in a pocket or purse and carried it out of the gallery.

4.2 | Findings: Interviews

Twenty-one interviews were conducted over two days in the special exhibition gallery of Crystal Bridges. I focused these interviews on visitors I had seen looking at or interacting with *Untitled* somehow. The reasoning behind this choice was that, by choosing visitors who had engaged with the work in some way, these visitors would already have made considerations or judgments on the work that I could assess. As outlined in the Methodology section, these interviews were conducted in two parts: First Impressions and, after I read them a paragraph about the piece, Follow-up Interviews.

For their first impressions of the pieces, visitors most frequently noted the physical characteristics of the work or made associations between the shiny pile of wrappers and similar everyday things. Words like “bright,” “shiny,” or “gold” were most commonly mentioned. Broadening the connections between the metallic material of the piece, visitors related it to things like “treasure,” “Christmas tinsel,” or “confetti.” Seven visitors associated the mass of candy with consumerism. One woman stated that the piece reminded her of “trash that piles up, consumerism, and landfills.” Another visitor stated that the work reminded her of “American consumerism” and that “people take more than they need.” In contrast, three visitors associated the installation with “trash” or “a pile of trash.”

4.3 | Interviews Part 2: Follow-Up to Biographical and Artwork Information

Eighteen of the 21 people agreed to hear the background information. The interviewees were then asked again about their interpretation of the work. Their comments about the work and their interpretation of meaning can be organized into four categories: relationships, Communion, Disease, and Museum Protocols.

4.3.1 | Relationships and Interaction

Seven visitors specifically responded to the interactive quality of the work and how that is related to personal relationships. Two visitors specifically noted the vulnerability in the act of sharing the body. One man stated: “the artist doesn't know what the visitor will do with it—he gives the art to the world.”

4.3.2 | Catholicism or Communion

Four visitors connect the metaphorical act of eating the body to religious, specifically Catholic traditions of utilizing statues to honor the deceased or the eating of the candy as a type of communion.

TABLE 1 | Data from 1 h of participant observation of *Untitled* (1993).

		% of total visitors	% of visitors who looked at the piece
Total number of visitors	183	100	—
Visitors who were observed looking at *Untitled*	73	39.9	100
Visitors who read the label of *Untitled*	49	26.8	67.1
Visitors who took a piece of candy	51	27.6	69.1
Visitors who ate candy in the gallery space	8	4.3	11

4.3.3 | Disease

Four visitors discussed AIDS or disease. Two expressed intensely negative reactions. One visitor called the installation "morbid." Another visitor, who had just given one piece of candy to each of her children, asked in disgust: "So we are eating an AIDS-infected body?"

4.3.4 | Museum Protocol

Seven visitors commented on how the participatory element of the work challenged museum protocols. This is demonstrated in one woman's comment: "Most art you can't touch. They invite you to be part of the project and it transforms the interaction."

5 | Case 2: Untitled (L.A.) (1991)

Entre/Between was installed in an exhibition space with an outer hallway and oblong room off the first gallery space of early American art at Crystal Bridges. *Entre/Between* included several works in the outer hall and an adjacent special exhibition room. The exhibition room had two entrances facing the larger main exhibition space. The walls of the room were painted dark blue, and the floors were light, warm wood.

Untitled (L.A.) (1991) was installed on either side of a two-by-six-foot bench in the center of the room (Figure 2, *Untitled (L.A.)*). The candy was organized into two small piles. *Untitled (L.A.)* consists of light green candies wrapped in clear wrappers. The separate piles of candies sat between the warm wooden face of the bench and the similarly toned, warm wooden floor. The label for *Untitled (L.A.)* was posted on the wall near the first entrance to the space, to the left of the large television playing *Tercera Raiz (Third Root)* (2020) by Carlos Martiel.

The label for *Untitled (L.A.)* (1991) included the artist's name, title, date, physical description of the work, and further information. This label had the information twice: in Spanish above and English below. The further information stated:

> Gonzalez-Torres created this artwork in Los Angeles in 1991, the same year his longtime partner Ross Laycock died of complications from AIDS. Because of this, scholars often interpret the artist's depiction of candy spills as metaphors for the human body ravaged by illness. The artist symbolically grants the body everlasting life by providing endless replenishment of the candy. However, Gonzalez-Torres avoided assigning definite meanings, choosing instead to keep the work open-ended.

For the data collection, I stood at the second entrance as this was the least obstructive place to view the work. For this study, I added two other dimensions of participant observation. First, I recorded comparison data on how many visitors looked at *Untitled (L.A.)* compared with two other pieces in the space. Second, I recorded how many visitors stepped on the work. This action was not noticed in my observations of *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* but was very notable when observing *Untitled (L.A.)*.

5.1 | Findings: Participant Observation

After my data collection of *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* in 2019, I concluded that more hours of participant observation were needed to better capture visitor interactions. I gathered four hours total of participant observation of *Untitled (L.A.)*, two hours of visitor interaction with the installation, and two hours comparing how many visitors looked at *Untitled* compared with other artworks in the same exhibition.

For the first dataset, I compared the number of visitors who looked at *Untitled (L.A.)* with those who looked at *Tercera Raiz (Third Root)* by Carlos Mariel and four photographs by David Levinthal (Table 2, Comparing Viewing Data).[4] *Tercera Raiz* was chosen because the piece was installed opposite of where I stood, in a nook at the end of the space. Visitors could stand or sit in two provided chairs to watch. The four Levinthal photographs were chosen because they were installed in a single block away from the other works being observed.

In looking at the comparative data, more visitors looked at *Untitled (L.A.)*(1991) than the other two works. Compared to the previous study, more visitors looked at *Untitled (L.A.)* than *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)*.

In the second set of data, out of the averaged total of 235 visitors in the space, 101 (44%) looked at *Untitled (L.A.)*. Out of the

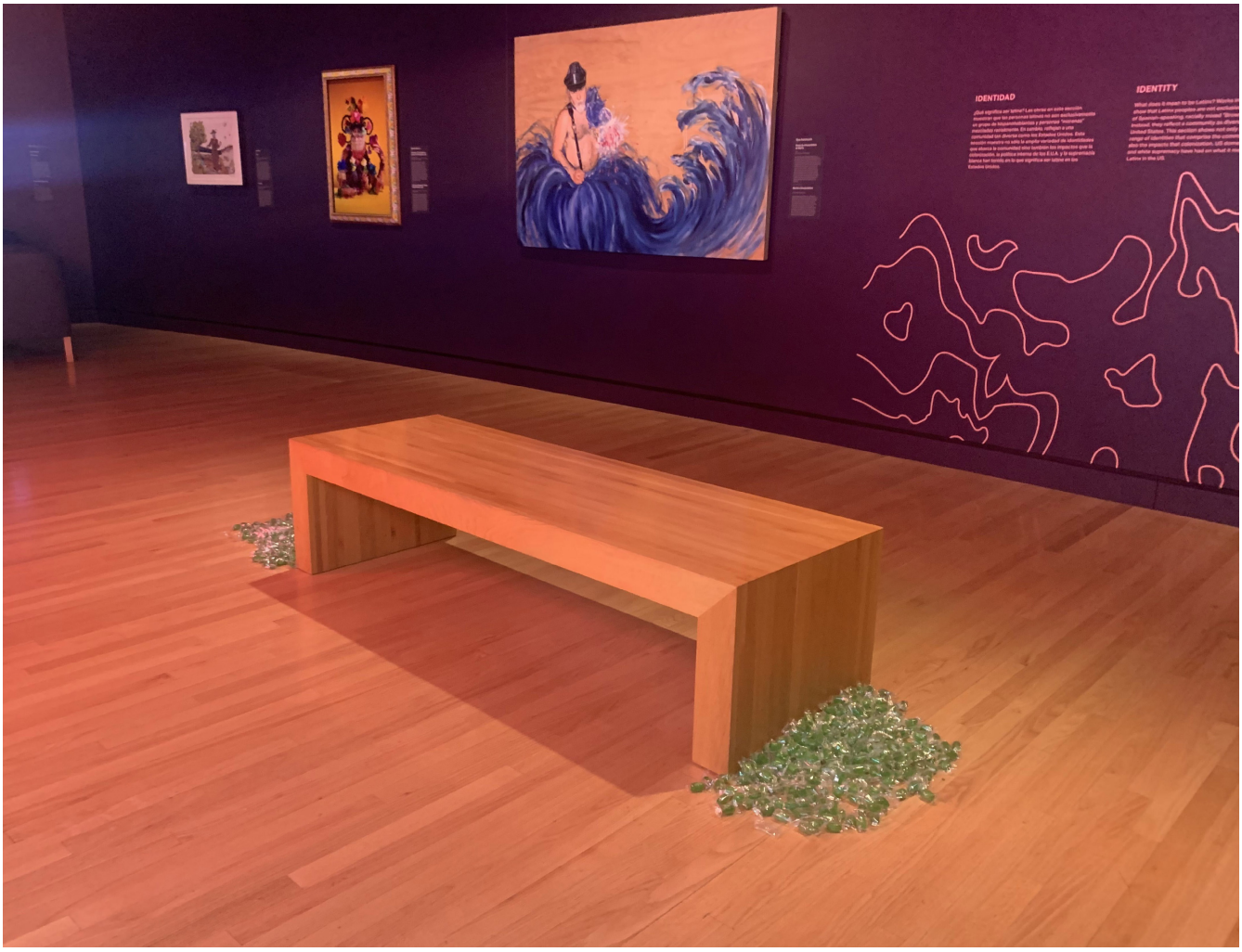

FIGURE 2 | *Untitled (L.A.)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, installed at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, AR, as part of the *Entre/Between exhibition* (October 1, 2022—March 20, 2023). Note the piece was installed in two small piles on either side of the wooden bench. The label for the piece is not pictured. It was placed in the far back left corner of this space, on the opposite wall to what is shown. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

visitors who looked at *Untitled (L.A.)*, 15.5 (7%) read the label, 31.5 (13.4%) took a piece of candy, and 5.5 (2.3%) were observed eating the candy in the space (Table 3, Average Interaction). For this dataset, I also added a category: Visitors who Stepped on the Piece. Unlike the first study, in which no visitors were observed stepping on the candy, visitors to *Entre/Between* were observed stepping on the piece accidentally or kicking the piece purposely.

Like in the previous study, anxiety around *Untitled (L.A.)* was notable. This was perceived in how visitors discussed the piece with one another before interacting. A singular adult or child alerting others in the room (both inside and outside of their group) to the work was the main precipitator of viewers looking at or interacting with the work. Unlike in the previous study, the wrapper colors and sounds were not noticeable. The muted piles stood out against the bench as a separate object, but they were somewhat camouflaged due to the similar floor and bench materials. Similarly, the size of this larger space led to the wrapper sounds being negligible.

Like previously, Protection Specialists played a vital role in the interactions. When the Protection Specialists were present, visitors asked about the piece. The piece was refilled once during my visit. This drew all the visitors' attention, leading to interpersonal conversations about the work, higher interactivity with the piece, and interactions with the Protection Specialist. During the first day of observation, a volunteer guide brought in a group. She instructed the group: "It looks like candy, but I'm sure we're not supposed to touch it." While the Protection Specialists were trained to work with *Untitled (L.A.)*, this volunteer guide was not.

The label placement for *Untitled (L.A.)* led to confusion. Unlike in the previous study, this label was mounted far away from the installation in an unrelated area. Of the 15.5 (7%) visitors on average who read the label, only a handful were seen connecting it to the piece. Visitors who read the label were seen looking at the adjacent walls for the artwork described, with most connecting it to *Tercera Raíz (Third Root)*, which was closest. The label did not invite visitors to eat the candy.

Reflecting on the high rate of label usage in the previous study and the fact that visitors often re-read the label to clarify that interaction was allowed, this label placement hurt visitors' understanding of and interaction with the piece. As I will discuss below in the interview portion, many visitors were unclear if *Untitled (L.A.)* was an artwork.

Confusion around the work was also reflected in visitors interacting with me at a higher rate. Unlike the previous study, my presence in the gallery was noticeable, with visitors often asking me about *Untitled*. I documented over a dozen visitors asking me about the work in my field notes. Three asked if it was a "social experiment" or "experiment" that I had set up.

During my two days of data collection, I observed three to five visitors per hour (1.4%) stepping on *Untitled (L.A.)*. I documented ten individuals accidentally stepping into the candy and five visitors purposely nudging the candy with their feet. Most accidental step-ins resulted from visitors not seeing the candy by the bench and stepping into it. The individuals observed nudging the candy were already looking at the piece. The nudging seemed exploratory to understand what they saw on the ground. One woman approached the candy asking, "Is that real, or is it like…?" Then she nudged the candy, stating, "whoa." The layout of the split installation of two small piles, along with the translucent wrappers, led to visitors being more unsure of what was situated by the bench and if it was intentional.[5]

TABLE 2 | Comparing viewing data for *Untitled* (1991), *Tercera Raíz (Third Root)* (2020), and the four Levinthal photographs.

Average/Hour over two hours		
		% of total visitors
Total number of visitors	221.5	100
Visitors who were observed looking at *Untitled*	126.5	57.1
Visitors were observed looking at *Tercera Raíz (Third Root)*	114	51.4
Visitors were observed looking at the Four Levinthal photographs	95.5	43.1

5.2 | Findings: Interviews

For *Untitled (L.A.)*, I conducted interviews with 12 visitors. These interviews were organized in the same format as the previous study. The first impressions of this piece were broader than those of the last. Six visitors stated they only noticed the piece after another person interacted with it or pointed it out. These interactions also revealed visitor anxiety around the work and questions of whether it was intentional. One woman in a couple said: "I didn't notice it (the work), it was him," pointing to her partner. The partner stated: "But I saw some (visitors) do it—they took a photograph. Does this have something to do with art?" The woman responded, "Do not touch it—if it is art."

Five visitors thought the work was meant to test the behavior of the visitors. One visitor described the mental struggle that the artwork requires of visitors who are used to no-touch museum policies: "It makes you strongly reflect on your behavior. 'I want one—Did someone see?—No one will miss it (a piece of candy)—Is it okay to take?' It is mischievous. Like 'No one will notice.' But then I thought, 'I better ask or my guilt will get me.'" The visitors' reactions tie back to other visitors asking me previously if the work was a social experiment. The works' layout, aesthetics, and lack of label instructions made visitors question whether the work was art, performance, or test. Three of the 12 interviewees noted the work's disruptive nature, stating it either upset the space or the visitor experience.

Only one visitor interviewed read the label. He was the only interviewee who brought up the specific information that he had read, such as AIDS and the stigma around the disease. Likewise, I interviewed a mother and daughter pair who had seen a candy spill at the Art Institute of Chicago. They were able to relate biographical information and the interactive component.

5.3 | Interviews Part 2: Follow-Up to Biographical and Artwork Information

The second interview section was organized and completed in the same manner as the previous study. I organized the responses

TABLE 3 | Average interaction per hour from 2 h of participant observation of *Untitled* (1993).

		% of total visitors	**% of visitors who looked at the piece**
Total number of visitors	235	100	—
Visitors who were observed looking at *Untitled*	101	44	100
Visitors who read the label of *Untitled*	15.5	7	15.3
Visitors who took a piece of candy	31.5	13.4	31.1
Visitors who ate candy in the gallery space	5.5	2.3	4.5
Visitors who stepped on the piece	3.5	1.4	3.4

into four themes: Memories/Memorialize, Interaction/Museum Protocol, Disease, and Communion.

5.3.1 | Memories or Memorialize

Ten visitors stated that the work "remembered" or "memorialized" the relationship between Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock. They used descriptors like "sweet," "bittersweet," or "heartbreaking." One participant stated about the work, "It's symbolic—more touching to the heart...it is about the loss of a loved one. How someone experiences the loss is unique to everyone. It memorializes them. Touching."

5.3.2 | Communion

Only one of the 12 participants mentioned that the interactive component of the piece was a "Christ analogy," referring to the eating of a metaphorical body.

5.3.3 | Disease

Four participants discussed "disease." Two specifically referred to AIDS and the stigma around it during the 1990s. One man connected the emotional toll that caring for a dying loved one takes to the wasting property of the work: "It's heartbreaking to see them diminish before your eyes." One woman interviewed expressed disgust stating sarcastically, "Well, that is good to know after we already ate a piece!"

5.3.4 | Interaction or Museum Protocol

Five interviewees noted that the viewer was able to "interact" with the piece or be "part of the experience." Three of these five referenced the relationship between Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock, stating that visitors participated in or remembered their stories. Only one of the five discussed how they did not initially take a piece of candy because it was against museum protocol. After we discussed the piece, this man reflected that it was "good to carry on the memory—to cherish part of him (Ross)... like he is forever living." He then took a piece of candy from the installation. His comment demonstrates that he understood how the piece worked as a metaphor, as it was frequently replenished. After hearing more about its background, he found it important to participate in the piece.

6 | Discussion

Revisiting the research questions, a majority of visitors needed further information to interpret LGBT+ content in the spills. Instead, they made meaningful connections between the works' physical properties to events and objects they were familiar with, such as confetti, celebrations, or trash. Visitors who had previously seen the work or read the label discussed biographical and content-related points. After learning more in the second interview portion, visitors were enthusiastic about discussing the meaning and making thoughtful connections to relationships, mourning, illness, and museum experiences. Visitors who had previously seen a spill stated they specifically sought out the pieces to reengage, and some visitors were observed leaving the space and returning with others to look, talk, and take again. None of the participants self-identified as LGBT+. The engagement with spills through dialogue and reflection demonstrated that visitors were not only analytically thinking about the dynamics of the piece but empathetically engaging with how the artist felt by connecting themes with their own lives and experiences (McDonald et al. 2016, 50).

While visitors did not perceive any overt LGBT+ content in the spills without information, their understanding of the installations as "disruptors" can be seen as a *queering* of the space. In line with the conceptual goals of queer abstraction, both works were described as "disruptors" that challenged museum protocols. The unconventional presentation on the floor and the interactive component caused a range of emotions, such as anxiety, glee, and mischievousness. The work as a disruptor of protocol and the physical gallery space can be read as a *queering* or subversion of the museum site as it allows visitors to interact in unconventional ways with each other and the works.

The findings of the two studies demonstrate that multiple factors influenced how the visitors interacted with and interpreted the *Untitled* candy spills, including the physical qualities of works, installation display, label text and placement, and museum staff and volunteer training. The object-based nature of the work made it a difficult piece that caused visitors anxiety. They looked to the label, other visitors, Protection Specialists, and me for clarification. These points should be seen as vital intervention opportunities for the museum to alleviate visitors' stress around understanding and interacting with the spills by providing clarification and reassurance (Deeth 2012, 2; Hein 1998, 161).

Label text and placement were central to visitor understanding and interaction rate. In the first study, the close label placement and the inclusion of instructions that visitors could take a piece of candy alleviated discomfort and increased interaction (Hein 1998, 138; Bitgood 2013, 93). While the label did contain vital background information in the second study, it was too far away and did not include instructions about participation. Labels increase time spent with work, lead to greater learning outcomes, and higher satisfaction rates with the museum experience (Hein 1998, 136). Here, both labels should be placed in close proximity to the piece and include interaction instructions and background information. It is important to note that after hearing that the work was a metaphor for a gay, AIDS-infected body, that three visitors expressed disgust and regret they had interacted with the piece. These statements emphasize the sensitive content of this work and the necessity to provide visitors with full background information so that they can interact with knowledge and consent.

The differing physical qualities and displays of the spills also influenced interpretation. The opaque, gold wrappers of *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for-Roni)* made the installation appear as an intentional solid form leading most visitors to read it as an

artwork. This is contrasted with *Untitled (L.A.)*, where the clear wrappers and the light green candies prevented visitors from seeing the work clearly. The display of the piece into two small piles further complicated understanding as visitors did not interpret the piece as an intentional work, stepped into the pile, and looked to others for assistance. Unlike the first study, in which color and texture attracted visitors to the piece, viewers looked at *Untitled (L.A.)* due to other visitor interactions, including stepping on the work. The color and texture of the candies and wrappers had a significant impact on the works' legibility. Stepping on artwork should be avoided and discouraged, especially the spills, which are edible. Reflecting on the work as a metaphor for the queer body, stepping on the work is highly offensive. Curators decide where and how candy spill pieces are installed. When displaying any spills in the future, the candy and wrapper color, reflectivity, and opacity should be considered as a major factor in placement.

Both studies demonstrate that visitors look to outside sources, including other visitors, the labels, the Protection Specialists, and volunteers, to clarify the work and proper interaction with it. While Protection Specialist responsibilities are usually limited to safety and supervision, they played an important expanded role in these unconventional, difficult works. Interviewing and observing the guards provided important information about visitor experiences (Hein 1998, 113). Some Protection Specialists had training on the spills, which included cleaning up and rearranging the candy, refilling the candy, and knowing visitors could take the candy. When visitors asked content-related questions, the Specialists referred them to the wall label. The spills are on temporary display at Crystal Bridges, and it is recommended that new training be provided before subsequent showings. The one observed volunteer guide incorrectly instructed their group that it was prohibited to touch or take the candy. This demonstrated a gap in training across different levels of staff, including volunteers and docents.

7 | Conclusion

While the acquisition and display of abstract, queer works like the *Untitled* candy spills is progress in, as Alligood stated, "tell[ing] an expanded story of American art" through increased LGBT+ representation, this study finds that visitors *want* and *need* institutional curatorial and interpretive support to fully understand the works' LGBT+ content and how their interaction contributes to that meaning. Label text and placement, installation arrangement, placement, and physical properties, as well as staff training are vital to the understanding of and interactions with the candy spills. As the positive discourse around the inclusive potential of queer, abstract art objects and themed exhibitions grows, scholars and curators need to address the interpretive limits of these difficult works through intentional strategies for audience outreach to achieve diversity and inclusion goals.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

[1] The University of Kansas Institutional Research Board approved this human subject research. The data collection for these studies was partially funded by a Graduate Scholarly Development Award from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and a Graduate Research Fellowship, both from the University of Kansas in Lawrence, KS.

[2] Queer Abstraction traveled to the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Overland Park, KS, and was on display in 2019–2020.

[3] Protection Specialist is the title for museum security staff at Crystal Bridges.

[4] Four photographs from Levinthal's "Baseball" series (1998–2004) were installed. From left to right: Pedro Martinez, Roberto Clemente, Albert Pujols, and Sammy Sosa.

[5] After collecting data on Untitled *(L.A.)*, I shared my findings with Juli Goss, Director of Strategy, at Crystal Bridges. I noted the step-ins. She stated that she would alert the curatorial staff and request that the labels be moved to the bench. In a follow-up email after my visit, Goss stated that the labels were not relocated.

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