

SOME SHARED TIME
WITH FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES AND JIM HODGES

BILL ARNING

I like being older, with a lot of good times and hard times behind me. Having been a curator, a critic, an arts administrator and a teacher since my mid-twenties, I have enjoyed working with visual artists during the time in their lives when they create themselves as artistic practitioners—through the periods in which they struggle to be seen. In a small percentage of cases, they went on to birth artworks deemed significant by enough of my colleagues to be written into history, and in some very rare cases, I have witnessed their transformation into canonical figures who are taught in schools as worthy of significant attention and emulation. Some other times I get to be there for their periods of self-reinvention, as well.

I can never let myself forget how lucky I have been to have had this life and to have been an active participant in a few moments that loom large in retrospect. I began my career in 1984 as assistant director at White Columns, an alternative arts space in New York. Since then, I have written criticism and taught, and I was the curator at MIT from 2000 to 2009, after which I moved to Texas to become the director of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. While the years since White Columns have been full of adventures and growth, my sensibility was formed during my eleven years there, a space that since the late '60s has been one of the main venues through which artists arrive in the art world. The aesthetic of “alternaity,” which I would describe as a mixture of contrarian spirit and an irresistible desire to align oneself with the underdogs, continues to inform my practice as a director today, and I acquired and refined that sensibility through my interactions with artists. During those years I was privileged to work with and come to know Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Jim Hodges, two artists who have radically altered art practice and inspired and licensed the freethinking of thousands of young artists. I would refer to each as canonical figures if I were not aware of how both would resist and argue with that appellation. Those were amazing times for me, and if the projects I did in those years were all I ever got to do in my career as a director, critic and curator, I would have felt satisfied that my life’s work was what I wanted it to be. The desire I had when I chose to study art history—to witness and be around the most meaningful art of my generation—has, against all odds, been fulfilled.

However, it is often disconcerting to witness the process by which the time and place where one was working is made into history, transformed into narratives by historians and scholars who were not there. In good faith, they defer to the firsthand witnesses for statements of fact, yet they must still make a compelling, complete narrative out of the chaotic flow of time, which will always make it seem unfamiliar to those who lived it. When I was starting, I heard my most respected

elder artists and curators bitch about things not being gotten right, and I would feel they were vaguely ungrateful, criticizing minor oversights by well-meaning scholars. Historians were devoting themselves to the work, and wasn't that enough for anyone?

But as I read texts devoted to the 1980s and '90s, on the art that was made in response to AIDS, on identity politics, on pathetic and body arts, on New Wave and punk rock—all the issues I felt that *belonged* to my generational peer group—I feel repeatedly *disgruntled*...that something of the essence is left out. I am left wishing I could correct some undefined thing. Connections that seemed meaningful are missing, and other extraneous links are made. The call-and-response of situation and work are made too neat, too inevitable.

Yet now, asked to write about a time and work about which I feel particularly strongly, I am adrift. The sequence of events is unclear; what are left are impressions, feelings and snapshot-like moments, episodic visions that for some reason are burned in without any connective tissue at all. I don't feel I can correct anyone else's misapprehensions, and I keep checking the published literature in my library on both Felix and Jim to figure out when things happened.

Random memories are dominant (Felix declining an invitation to my family beach house with the strange phrase, "I want to go 'cause I want to go, but I can't"; running into Jim on the Hudson River piers on a spectacular summer day), memories that I can't connect with the artists' works in any meaningful way but that somehow are more vivid than the chats we had formally in their studios.

Somewhere on a loose armature of facts I can hang a few anecdotes and observations that might convey some other aspects of an era. I am ultimately okay with the ellipses in my memories. In fact, as I look at their work, especially Felix's widely celebrated works that consist of mixed public and private events and their dates, I think that the gaps between the marked events are what make them markers of individuals and not mirrors of published news. The connections that the fictional diarist makes are the same as the frustration of participants trying to remember their own lived histories with the linear clarity of the later historians, is the point. What I remember and what I forget has meaning and has to do with the layering of the past with layers of time.

A little factual summary might be helpful for this discussion. I met the principal artists in the artist collective Group Material in the early '90s and worked with them on an exhibition at White Columns called *Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)* in 1986. I met Felix through them in 1987. It was in 1988 that I included Felix in a three-artist main room show at White Columns called *Real World*. The other artists in the show were Jon Tower and Lorna Simpson. By 1990, Felix had joined the White Columns board of directors.

I met Jim in 1990. I did a solo project on one of our White Room Project spaces in 1991. Jim did a very ambitious installation that involved building a room within the room and shutting visitors out of his new enclosure with a fine spiderweb, the size of the elements ranging from a delicate silver necklace to large-gauge bicycle chain. The room was bright blue inside, and most visitors described it as heavenly. This piece anticipated the other enclosures that Jim continues to make.

There was an annual summation show of the project rooms called *Update*, intended as a snapshot of what the emerging artists of a particular year were thinking about. Despite White Columns' minuscule budget, we published a catalogue that the commercial galleries took as a menu of available new talent. Looking back at those catalogues today is often a wonderful lesson in the harsh capriciousness of the art world; each one has a couple artists whose work is today hung in the permanent collection displays of museums around the world, while the majority are relegated to the uncomfortable area of the forgotten.

Each artist who had done a project room was asked to contribute one piece to the show. Jim's piece for this show was as fragile and profoundly slight as his project room was theatrical and grand. Drawings of flowers on napkins, appearing as if drawn in a coffee shop, were pinned to the wall. Sad love songs to an inaccessible person sent by an insomniac was how I remember them, and in their grunginess and repetitions they were immediately memorable for those of us prone to lovesickness. And they fluttered lightly as one walked past, anticipating by 15 years the artist's experiments with making photographs of trees flutter by cutting out individual leaves. It was during this show that Jim and Felix met.

I remember standing with Felix admiring Jim's piece, but in my memory they already knew each other. The world of out gay artists at the time was still pretty small, and the interweaving of who knew who, who had dated or fucked each other, been arrested together at ACT-UP protests, created shows, performances or films together, gotten sober or relapsed together or taken care of each other during times of sickness was a huge blur. I tended to assume previous encounters, so when Felix asked about Jim, given their proximity I assumed he knew Jim at least slightly—Jim, then as now, with his beautiful eyes and smile is hard to miss and I figured they had been in the same room more than once. But Jim corrected me—that discussion was to lead to their first meeting.

Felix wanted to buy the piece for himself, but he needed to negotiate a lower price and/or a payment plan so he needed to talk to Jim directly. Felix was in his work and life very aware of the relationship between the art market and the making of meaning and creation of cultural power around artworks. I remember (in Felix's role as a White Columns board member) when he donated a portrait commission

to one of our benefit auctions at a flat price, a very generous offer, and the offense he took when another board member offered to buy it at a significantly lower price. But when he was passionate about something and wanted it, he would find a way to make it work financially, and he was also committed to the value of discussions between like-minded artists.

Somewhere in this period, White Columns moved from west Spring Street, where Felix's show was, first to a storefront on Christopher Street, and then to a larger second-floor interior space, where Jim had his show. We were closed for several months between spaces and we were at a severe risk of closing our doors forever if we could not raise the money for build-out. There were the NEA wars, which were essentially attacks by the politically powerful right wing of the government upon the new inclusiveness of the cultural sphere, in which gay men and women, in addition to people of color, were speaking openly about their lives and experiences without needing to code their images. And AIDS was at this point a daily fact of life in which death, dying, caregiving, protests and memorial services were normalized in a way that is only comparable to life in a war zone. That the community responded by mobilizing and loving one another was another historical event that I feel profoundly privileged to have witnessed—humanity at its very best.

When in 2009 I attended the gay and lesbian march on Washington and heard sweet college-age lesbians chanting ACT-UP slogans and J.D. Sampson's radical rock band MEN featuring "Silence = Death" as a backdrop, I teared up, because our largely unsuccessful efforts to save the lives of those we loved did not fade from memory because of their futility.

We were forced to deal with the big questions of life prematurely. When I spend time with gay guys in their twenties today and they can seem so young and fragile to me, I cannot imagine that we were that age when we were suddenly in a battlefield being told to assume that if you were a gay man who had sex, you were probably infected, and be prepared to die young. We suddenly were forced to confront the impermanence of the pleasures of this world at a time when, as young men, they should have seemed boundless and inexhaustible. We needed to try to decide what life meant. Our art lives were still in formation, and the morbid facts of our reduced life expectancy affected everything about the shape they ultimately took.

We had a sense that we could, if we found the right person to scream at, save the lives of friends, lovers and ourselves. I gave White Columns to ACT-UP to mount a show of activist posters, and I needed to be personally, as well as professionally and politically, out of the closet because everything was life-or-death issues at the time. We were clearly not the only generation to have known young death on a large scale, but the experience of AIDS was unique because the carnage was intertwined with

our love and sex lives. Every kiss, every protest, every controversy was charged with excess energy of our youthful libidos, romances and passions. In some ways that are hard to explain, everything mattered so much that, through the sorrow and anger, I must admit I have never felt more vibrantly alive since.

Writers should never pretend to be neutral when they aren't, when they are involved emotionally with the artists with whom they are writing, and honestly, if one is working closely with an artist on a show or a catalogue and you aren't emotionally tied, something is broken in you or at least in the relationship. The rules certain institutions make concerning conflict of interest at the critical and museum level are pathetic props to make those of us who work with art pretend that our jobs are respectable, and that we are capable of a scientific detachment, but that is just a fraud. We are in a business of emotions, passions, desire and immeasurable successes and failures. Our work is paid for by grants, donations from patrons, and collectors who are, or at least should be, equally nonobjective in their decisions. The myth of the uninvolved critic/curator whose aesthetic choices were beyond biography, desire and emotions had, I felt, been proudly exposed as a pernicious myth long ago. Still, we are encouraged in many forums to pretend objectivity.

This essay is not objective. I loved and love still both Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Jim Hodges as artists, as friends, as colleagues, as fellow gay men, and as glowing, gentle, complex spirits. When I taught Felix's work to my students at NYU, RISD and SVA in the years after his death, I was never able to get to the end of the talk without crying. Sometimes I would have to stop and regroup before finishing the talk; sometimes I just bullied through the tears. I might have frightened some students, but I decided after a couple times to just let the tears flow. I came to know when to mentally step back and watch my emotions swell as certain pieces hit the screen: "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*), the billboard of two pillows, the empty ghost of "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) in the form of two metal rings where the lovers/clocks had been. I explained to my students my political position that allowing myself to cry in front of them was a choice, so that hopefully, whatever they pursued in their future lives, they would not shrink from a passionate involvement with their work.

I don't wish to imply that one needs to have been there to have an emotional response to these works. I have heard anecdotally about viewers who intuitively responded to Felix's black-and-white billboard of two empty pillows as deeply and universally sad without knowing its explicit content or even that it was an artwork. Everyone has been left behind sometime and fixated on traces of absent friends. It is perhaps the purest, most eloquent piece about love ever made by a human.

I have occasionally virally transmitted my responses to students who heard my voice crack while discussing the piece, students who are young enough to have

not known significant loss and must borrow my sorrows until they have their own. The experience of that billboard has changed for me continually since I first saw it, based on the artists and my own life circumstances. When I first saw it installed, Felix's lover Ross was only very recently dead and Felix was still alive. I was young and partnered and thought those two conditions would last forever. Now I am 49, single and unsure if I want that to change (well, the 49 will change, 50 beckons, and the rest is not so clear).

I had socialized with Ross only a few times, and the time I remember best was his refusing to go to a fancy restaurant in Los Angeles because he was looking too ill and didn't want to scare other diners, until Felix insisted that given his love of good food that staying behind was not alive...and screw other diners' phobias...life was literally too short to care. A few months after Ross died, I remember asking Felix what his state was, and his response was that the color had gone out of everything with Ross gone and did not seem to be returning. The black-and-white billboard was at that time a manifestation of that part of the grief process.

Then after Felix was gone too, and the piece was reinstalled on my daily dog walk path, it seemed unbearable.... I changed my daily walk while it was there to avoid it. Now I stare at its current manifestation on the High Line Park in New York City, and its subject seems totally universal, or more specifically, it's a mirror to remember those people who I have slept next to in my 49 years.

Many times in my life have I have cried over artworks when I did not know the artist personally—Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* and Marsden Hartley's lost soldier paintings are two examples that spring to mind. But in this case, my public and private tears and passions mix. This work, as cool as it may seem, came out of a time in which love and loss were intertwined, and to pretend otherwise would be to get it wrong.

But Felix is gone, Jim is still on earth, and that biographical fact alters my response. Yet nothing is one-dimensional here; Felix is only somewhat gone—his reputation as an artist has grown since he left this world. I see his works in faraway places and see his impact on artists who were mere children when he died.

Felix's work is no more tragic than Jim's work, and Jim might even be more drawn to the elegiac. The principal thoughts that Felix and Jim's work give me are similar: life is short; all relationships are temporary; nothing can be controlled; joy must be cherished and nothing can be held onto; one has this moment and some memories and the things we use to keep memories vivid. If one is lucky, one has some gratitude for one's gifts, the unearned facilities, and all the people who have passed through our lives. These are the type of revelations that many people seek in churches, temples, spiritual retreats and ashrams, but in rare cases they can be found in the houses of culture.

One of the qualities that all works of (Western high) art have shared since the invention of the category up until the '60s was the quality of “pastness”—once finished, the art objects were dated and then slipped into past tense. They would exist as relics of an action that are preserved in physical form, and the work of art historians and museum conservators is to reveal their pastness, to show them in their original state, to tell the audience how and why the artist made them, who paid for them, in what context they were supposed to be seen first, how they might have changed over time and to excavate the layers of misapprehension that might have altered how we see the works now. Conceptualism, the ur-language for artists in all forms today, in its embrace of dematerialization confused this—works that exist only when they are remade, refabricated or reinstalled are somehow less in the past because they cannot literally gather dust. And the introduction of time basis for artwork also changes the degree to which things remain in the past.

This exhibition foregrounds a relationship between two artists that refuses to stay politely in the past, since the objects themselves slip between past and present like inebriated time travelers. Jim’s work has been characterized by cycles of innovation and reinvention, and the choices of works by the mature Jim Hodges up until 2008—an artist with multiple international museum shows—here are imbricated with older Hodges works, made while he was still in formation, in the period when I first visited him in a Tribeca basement.

The roomlike structures that Jim has been making since, such as *A Good Fence* (2008), shown here with a small Felix Photostat work placed discretely inside of it, modern designer furniture and stargazer lilies in a vase, are both reminiscent of the installation at White Columns and, like some of Felix’s, such as an empty photo album, show that artwork can take the form of a frame-like container of other people’s experiences. When I visited the show, I sat inside Hodges’ stockade on the '60s modern couches with Jim, my ex-boyfriend, the artist Erik Hanson, and three talented younger artists: Conrad Ventur, Rick Herron and Daniel Coeyman. We had been seeing galleries since 10 AM, and by 1 PM the couches provided a much-needed comfortable place to rest and enjoy one another, so we lingered 40 minutes or so in that slightly claustrophobic chamber.

Three of us, Jim, Erik and I, are around 50, and the other three around 30, and the enclosure served as a lens to bring into sharp focus the differences in our perspectives on life. The younger gents are all well informed about what our older generation went through around HIV and the politics Reagan/Bush years. They had each first learned of Hodges’ and Gonzalez-Torres’ work when it had already become canonical. All six of us were gay men and we worked in art, and those two qualities in our relationships are enough to establish an easy camaraderie. I know

my history with each of them; from the one who I was coupled with for eight years to the one I spent time with for the first time that day. I have gone through some sorrow together with some of these men, and some tears have fallen in my life as a result of our relationships, and yet in autumn 2009 we were joyfully together.

An uncomfortable aspect of this show for the Bill Arning that came out of alternative spaces and queer activism, but is today a respectable museum director in Houston, is that today both Hodges and Gonzalez-Torres are likewise respectable. They are now part of the master narrative, considered indispensable in museum collections that are trying to tell the story of the '90s and that are taught in schools. In fact, I believe that their most radical innovations might have found their first most receptive audiences among art students. By the late '90s I was seeing iterations of their works in scores of grad student studios. Seeing one work by either artist in a museum collection, it fully holds the inarguable cultural authority that museum collection hangings are meant to imply. Yet seeing the show with younger friends, its continuing radicality remains startlingly clear.

Equally as profound for me were the histories between them that I can never know and the future relationships that might form, in other words, the endless potentialities of all human interactions. Being part of other people's lives is life, and any catalyst that helps me appreciate that gift is what art does at its best. My experience of the work was that our histories, potentialities and profound affection among all of us were as physically present in the room as a two-ton Richard Serra sculpture. And, like being near a Serra sculpture, there is always the awareness that things could fall on you without warning, a look, a smell, a word of affection, and the world changes. The daily decision to risk love and loss needs to be brought to consciousness and reaffirmed as grace itself.

Perhaps this was more conspicuous because the show we had come to see was about a relationship that happened, as all relationships must, by chance, even in our age of cyber dating. White Columns at the period was a place of connections, in which artists, curators and critics met in a very different art world than exists today. Felix and Jim became close quickly, and seeing them together in New York, they were a beautiful, talented and memorable pair. Knowing what goes on with anyone else's interpersonal relationships is impossible; I can barely come up with serviceable definitions of my own relationships. I want to somehow have access to some essence of what constituted the relationship between these two artists. This show is as near as I can probably ever get, and that in itself is pretty magical.

Felix, despite having been deceased for over a decade, does not stay comfortably in the past, by his own nature and design. He redefined artworks in ways that require that they are never frozen or static, works require active remaking and

reinstallation, and even the language in his text-based works is altered, as can be the physical candies in his edible works. One part was the artist's desire to acknowledge that there is never a pure experience of how something once was—try as we might, time travel remains impossible.

In the human psyche, the past is never one defined thing but rather a shifting, relativistic mirror of the present, and that is as true with personal histories as art histories. The complexities that Felix foregrounds are always there but unacknowledged in the work of the collection's curator. When James Rondeau, the brilliant curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, makes a decision about which names and dates to add to the portrait of his museum, he is merely doing explicitly what curators do all the time: shaping the past through the lens of the present.

I gave Felix one of his first studio visits, having been sent there by my friends Julie Ault, Tim Rollins and Doug Ashford (aka the now-legendary collective Group Material) to visit the new member of the group. He was working in a tiny apartment near White Columns on Grove Street, the space I was directing at the time, located on nearby Christopher Street. His work—mainly objects from his recent graduate show at NYU—was barely physically there at all—sheets of pictures, strange fragile acculturations of paper, sometimes in tacky plastic frames from Woolworth's to hint at a distant idea of normal presentation—but nothing that looked like art.

I was in my capacity directing an alternative space quite used to visiting artists who had no idea how to present their work. I was good at prepping them, ready to take advantage of the showcase opportunity to be seen that White Columns offered them, and at first I was confused as to whether Felix had not considered presentation issues. I enjoyed his mind, but I was unsure where the work was and how it was meant to operate. At the time there were also artists exploring returns to the scatter-art provocations of twenty years earlier, using pours of non-art materials. There was also what was coming to be known as a wave of interest in the abject, usually in the form of a focus on disposable materials, beer cans and plastic mats. I made all the usual moves toward comprehension by making comparisons to what I was seeing in other emerging artists' studios, but I remember Felix being very sure what he was and was not doing and not needing to borrow critical language from some visiting curator.

Our discussion was about how there were large events, presidential elections, wars, AIDS and there were the small events, like getting a Walkman, and somehow life was the resonances between them. In all the best visits I learn something crucial, and here I learned that the points were where the smallness of our lives intersect with the larger epoch.

In response to his confidence and the clarity of his vision, I did a strange thing: I was compelled to ask if he ever sold any of the things on his table as art objects. There was a small piece in a store-bought cheap frame, with the transparent words:

*Bitburg Cemetery, 1985, Walkman 1979, Cape Town 1985,
Waterproof Mascara 1971, Personal Computer 1981 TLC*

Through the clear letters you could see lush images of clouds clipped from an advertisement and stuck behind. (There was a later more standard edition of the Duratrans text without the background collage.) He said it would be \$125, and I had a checkbook, so I bought it and carried it home in my gym bag. I felt no special need to protect it, and it seemed the opposite of precious, but I think he put it into an envelope for safety. It has stayed with me everywhere I have lived since then and has been sitting on my lap during part of the time I was writing this, a time traveler of sorts as well. Two decades later, the piece is as scrappy and weird as it was that first day.

He showed a work on canvas called *“Untitled” (7 Days of Bloodworks)* from 1988, as well as a two panel puzzle piece that he installed on one of the curved walls and a small endless stack on a pedestal. I remember trying to help each of them avoid mistakes career-wise—the job at White Columns was to find artists ready for first shows and help them to do that well, with the explicit goal of getting them into the competitive New York gallery world.

I remember how patiently Felix explained that the responsibility of replenishing the offset prints would pass from the artist to the owner of the work; in the case of a sale, he would provide a master to them, but they would need to go to the shop and have the copies made. This seemed absurd in the middle of New York City, in the center of the art market to erect a hurdle over which the collectors would have to jump. But I also remember his surety of what he was doing and that he had no self-doubts around that aspect of his work, and combined with my general nature to be supportive of artist’s visions, we went ahead and explained to our supporters what was required. A few years later, while Felix was still alive, that innovative redefinition of what artworks could be swept graduate programs, widely imitated, and proved to be the most accessible and easiest-to-absorb aspect of his work.

When Felix died, I attended his memorial at the Guggenheim Museum’s SoHo branch, and I remember feeling then as I do now that in terms of influence—i.e., redefining the meaning of what we mean when we say “art”—he was one artist who would surely remain in the ranks of the greatest modern artists: Duchamp, Picasso, Pollock, etc.... Yet today it matters more to me that he made a work that

taught me how to live life, best exemplified in the twin clocks of Felix's "*Untitled*" *Perfect Lovers*. Felix said that all human relationships were defined by spans of time, from one relationship with family, to the quickest romance, and that the idea that anything was more infinite than that was an illusion born of the very human desire for permanence and stability, a desire that our mortality makes impossible. In every relationship, someone leaves first, via death or the door. And yet every relationship adds value and meaning to our experience of this world in ways that have little to do with how long they last. I have never forgotten that lesson when people in my life have died, moved or left since then. Including the artist himself.

The day I saw the show, I went from The FLAG Art Foundation to lunch with the guys, then off to visit my mother, who had been hanging on with a rare cancer for several months in a specialized cancer hospital. When I made it to the hospice, it was clear she had declined seriously and that she would pass from this world soon, and I spent my days finishing this essay sitting by her side. She died a few days later.

I was profoundly sad, and I felt the loss of her company and of her constant worrying for my well-being. Yet her passing did not feel tragic. She had lived a full life and was leaving it surrounded by love. I had received wise council from the people in my life in her last years to give her all the time she wanted, that I would not regret that time ever, that making those memories would mean more to me than whatever I had missed. After she had gone, I revisited those clocks again at The FLAG Art Foundation, and they served as a reminder that I have indeed learned something about life in my years, from art, from friends, and had behaved in ways that respected my life, hers and those of my friends. While I am still sad, I am grateful to acknowledge the pain as a testament to love and life. Works that Felix made to understand the loss of the love of his life, Ross, which gained levels of meaning from missing Felix after his death, now helped me grieve the loss of my mother.

It is rare that art can fundamentally change the way one experiences life's vicissitudes, but Jim Hodges and Felix Gonzalez-Torres have had that effect on me. Revisiting this work made me realize how the young man I was when I first experienced their art has matured into a man who can appreciate life in all its finitude, and that journey was richer in the company of Felix and Jim.