



# TIME FRAMES

Julie Ault and Andrea Rosen

*The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres died in 1996 at the age of 38. His friends Julie Ault and Andrea Rosen were responsible for taking care of his personal possessions, among which were at least a dozen clocks designed by George Nelson in the late 1940s and '50, as well as hundreds of plastic toy figures collected by the artist, and his books. Ault and Rosen distributed the objects among Gonzalez-Torres's intimates, friends, and colleagues. Now the clocks are on loan to Ever Ephemeral, which is part of a larger investigation of the intersection of memory, history, time, and archiving. On July 7, 2011, fifteen years after the dispersal of the artist's belongings, Ault and Rosen reflected together on their decisions.*

AULT: Last night I read this letter that Felix sent to you in 1993, which at the time accompanied the gift of a clock. Until I read it, I had not consciously been thinking about the emotional content of reassembling the group of clocks. I've been mostly focused on the practicalities. The letter begins, "This is not a clock. It's more than just a machine that marks time," and ends, "To more time." It threw me into an emotional state, which was not how I'd planned to begin our conversation.

One interpretation of Felix collecting “optimistic clocks” the last couple years of his life is that he was buying time. But I never liked that explanation, in part because it doesn’t reconcile with Felix as I knew him. Perhaps the clocks were not amulets so much as they were beautiful, tough objects that fed his process of working through the complex relationships to time, which the conditions he was living in, and with, brought forward. Perhaps the clocks were about *facing* time. Diagramming a situation of no escape. You can’t ignore time when you have a dozen clocks on the wall.

What led me to regather the clocks was the desire to see them together again, and generate an occasion to recollect our memories of thinking through what to do with Felix’s things when he died, specifically his books, the clocks, and the toys he collected. I’d like to revisit our decisions to disperse those things as we did and reflect on how they sit with us fifteen years later. There is also a desire to symbolically stage a reunion of community that was united around Felix and is now diffused, although particular bonds remain active.

ROSEN: The movement between emotionality and objectivity you are talking about is a really essential part of this

dialogue, because these positions were always fused in Felix’s work. The work is a guiding force, or example, in that it imbues something with one’s own personal emotionality but at the same time allows it to be stripped of anything personal in order that it might have some greater existence.

I’m remembering how museum curators would ask Felix, “Do you mind if we don’t allow people to take sheets of paper from the stack during the opening?” and he’d say, “No, I don’t mind,” and I’d say, “But Felix, why did you agree to that when dispersal is at the essence of what you believe and what the work is about?” Referring to institutions, he explained how you have to allow for the nature of what things are. Then, there was a situation when the stacks were shown at a gallery, and the gallery had hired people to roll up sheets from the stacks and give them out at the opening. At that point Felix said he actually hated seeing people take them at openings. Felix maintained the works no longer belonged to him, and these kinds of shifts and ambiguity helped me realize that the work can only really transcend itself through other people.

I think we used Felix as our example when we made those decisions about his things, which is to say, it’s not that the

clocks weren't imbued with meaning, it's not that you can't read them as being about holding onto time, it's not that anyone shouldn't have considered them precious or representational. But Felix set up an agenda. No matter how essentially private or however much something is saturated with emotional content the only thing you can do for that to continue is to give it up. Felix set an agenda for us.

AULT: We proceeded with dispersal in step with his principles, but it amazes me that we never talked about it in those terms. My memory of the period is vague, as is my recollection of the physicality of the experience and whether we dismantled his apartment over a few days or a few weeks. Although I don't recall the contour of our discussion I am reasonably certain that we didn't explicitly address what should happen with his things in analytic terms. I don't think we even considered keeping the toys he'd amassed, or the clocks, or even his library together, or talked about any of these being institutionalized in the form of an archive. At that moment his things were somewhere between life and becoming artifact. Your reading of the situation mirrors mine, that the resolution happened organically, that it was the only thing to do that made sense.

ROSEN: Felix was not didactic, he didn't say this is what my work is about, or this is what I want you to do, but he trained us in a way of thinking. He exposed a realm of possibility.

AULT: I'm hoping to activate my memory through tapping into yours. Do you know when Felix started getting the Nelson clocks, or recall any fragments of discussions about them, or being with him when he found a clock? I thought he collected clocks for about two years before he died, but the letter he sent you was written in February 1993, indicating it must have been at least three years.

ROSEN: There had to have been a time when he could only start affording such things, but I think that he had one clock that began it. I would guess, although I don't know why, that it was the multicolored one.

AULT: I also recall it was one of the atomic clocks. I remember him being very taken with those around the same time that he got excited about Sputnik lamps, which were also symbolic period objects alluding to the paradox of progress.

ROSEN: His fascination was with all George Nelson things

—it was chairs and furniture—and probably started less with the consciousness of a clock and more with awareness of Nelson’s design. The letter is 1993, so he must have already been collecting them well before, because otherwise he would not have been giving one to me.

AULT: It seems to me it was probably only a couple months before that he began. The fact that he gave you one, and wrote about optimistic design in the letter indicates a newfound pleasure that he wanted to share. He wouldn’t have bought a lot of clocks already and then decided to give you one. I suspect he wanted to share the excitement he felt immediately.

ROSEN: It’s such a condensed time period. One could ask what difference does it make whether it was 1993 or 1994 or 1995; they’re very close together. But between them there was a huge expanse of time in terms of what happened in Felix’s life. Post Ross’s death there were a number of relationships, exhibitions, and so much progression. I’m surprised how finite his letter sounds, how much it has to do with a feeling of him already being at the end.

AULT: That’s certainly what unleashed my emotions reading

it—the sense of prediction, fate, a rehearsal of saying goodbye. Even though he probably didn’t start getting the clocks until much later, I consider their time frame to be January 1991, when Ross died, and January 1996, when Felix died. The letter is midway, at an incredibly complicated period.

If you were in the situation today that we were in 1996 would you do the same? I’ve felt some regret about scattering Felix’s books, but I don’t know if it’s legitimate.

ROSEN: My only major concern is about how we archived our choices. I think there was hastiness in treating the recording of the books the same way we did other things; thinking that we only needed to write down “book” or “three books” and who they were given to.

AULT: You and I kept a lot of books, though I’ve since given some away. And we gave some of his close friends books that related to their shared histories and interests. Some choices were very specific, for instance we sent Felix’s dog-eared copy of *Remaking History* to Barbara Kruger because she edited it, thinking she would appreciate his margin notes and use. But I think we had a different relationship to the clocks and saw



them as more elevated than anything else because of their symbolic content, especially at that moment.

ROSEN: Felix chose to amass the clocks into a collection, which was different than selecting a certain chair, for instance. There was something about the collectiveness. At Felix's memorial Mario Nunez said everyone in this room is like a part of a library and we're all responsible for remembering different chapters—together we make up this library that is Felix. I believe we had dispersed the objects prior to that, but I remember how profound that was to me.

We never felt that his objects should stay together or that we were sacrificing them to fulfill the agenda of distribution. Keeping Felix's collected toys together would have been a strange misplaced relationship of trying to hold onto something that didn't exist. There was also the acknowledgement that if you have two of the toys for instance, you have the essence as if you had all of them, whereas holding onto all of them would express a false sense of possession of something else.

AULT: One reason we didn't want to keep these things to-

gether reflects that Felix felt one could never own or depend on anything; you have to let go. Archiving would have created illusions of permanence and coherence that seemed contrary to his philosophy. I have a different consciousness now about archiving. I wouldn't change our decisions, but I think if we were in the situation now we would discuss whether or not to keep his books together. Were they part of his papers?

ROSEN: I guess they were a slightly gray area. We thought about people who would want something Felix used and wrote in, something referring to his intellect. Something that touched on work and not only the light side. There's also the fact that a book with margin notes has Felix's hand in it. Nothing else left in his apartment had his hand in it like that. I think it's worthwhile to go back and contact everyone we gave a book to, and ask them what book it was and what edition, and to photograph the covers. Beyond that I don't regret not having those tangible things. It's impossible to interpret why Felix underlined a certain passage in a book. And I'm skeptical when a curator says, "I want to look at Felix's library, I want to look at every single thing he underlined, and I want to read every note he ever wrote." But what happens if these things were all together? I would be happy to provide some-

one with a list of every book that was in Felix's library and leave it at that. But if I had every one of those books, would I want people to look at them?

AULT: But eventually you won't be around. The books contain notes he wrote for himself; they are precious like diaries and work journals. Even an enigmatic notation in a book becomes precious to a researcher.

ROSEN: But there's an assumption that he read each book equally or with equal intention, and in fact we don't know when he read them or with what intentions or in what order, or whether he underlined for a class or for something else.

AULT: On one hand there are no assumptions that are legitimate, but on the other all assumptions are legitimate—maybe this is intrinsic to both research and historical representation. Someone tries to find the puzzle pieces and put them together in order to form a picture for him or herself.

ROSEN: Felix did not want the picture to be about him. It's the work. Whatever he digested from readings that margin notes might reflect went into the work. He didn't want the

subject to be him or him personally. I really believe in his desire to keep the separation between what went on with the work and him as a person.

AULT: As you know, when I was working on the book on Felix's work I also wanted to read and see everything, and did, but I did not write explicitly about Felix's work or reveal inside information about his process. For me, looking at everything I can get my hands on during research has to do with absorbing sensibility, tone, inference, and various content, ideas, and angles—all stimulating the process, but it does not imply a one-to-one relationship with portrayal. There's a difference between taking it all in and what you do with it.

I don't think that we sufficiently considered the difference between books and the other collections like toys and clocks. A library is accumulated over time and reflects periods in one's life and growth. It's eclectic. It's not the same as comprehensively collecting certain kinds of toys or Nelson designs. And because it shows the pathways and idiosyncrasies of one's thinking processes it's illuminating to researchers. Dispersing books is somewhat radical, because it goes against conservation and the notion that if you keep annotated books



together you can apprehend a person's intellectual itinerary. Such a collection or archive would support that idea, which many people probably do not regard with skepticism but consider being a sound method. And to some degree the logic makes sense: if I read and see everything and consult every image and piece of information possible then I am going to get to a deeper understanding of the thinking and process and conditions of the person I'm studying. I subscribe to this too but also stand by the conclusion of not objectifying Felix's reading through archiving the books.

ROSEN: The work needs to stand on its own. Felix used those books for him to make the work. And the work is what exists. The work can only be open for interpretation. Felix was very poignant about this to me; the work needed to stand on its own. The idea that his books should be disseminated came from this root, and maybe over however many years it is since Felix died, we've lost that part of how rigorous he was about that.

AULT: There is great value in archiving. At the same time archive authority has to be taken with a grain of salt; if they had been archived, the books would apparently say, this is what

Felix was reading. But he was also reading other things that didn't get saved. We don't know the scope of what he read and if and to what degree anything he read or saw influenced his thinking and his work.

Anyone who approaches the archive and tries to get a handle on a subject must to some degree understand the ambiguity of what's encountered within, and understand archives are partial and sometimes random.

If we had chosen to keep the books together then I would have made a case for the clocks being archived too; they are potentially as important as the books. There is the work, and then there is everything else. There are lines that can be drawn, but I don't think it is only his books that speak to his intellectual exchange. The clocks do too, and the toys. Everything could.

I'm just beginning to think about what it means to see the clocks together again. They're really beautiful and compelling, but there's some sadness about the whole thing, not only about Felix's death, but that the community is so different. They represent a specific community as well as a larger con-

text made up of overlapping communities that Felix's work emerged from that not only changed but eventually disappeared. Addressing the inevitability of dissolution is one of the reasons I wanted to organize this reunion.

ROSEN: That's the interesting thing about community; it can't be what you expect. You can't have an expectation of what all that effort to create community will be. The community of who Felix touched in his lifetime could only be so much and we are not bound together. That's what's so interesting about his work. It can't be insular. If you keep the group the same it only has its limitations. Yet someone can write me a letter that tells how Felix's work affected him or her that I would never have anticipated.

Out of the toys and books and everything Felix had the clocks are content-wise the closest things to his work. In the end this clock is an object and it doesn't represent Felix. But this letter is Felix. We can detach ourselves from these objects. They don't hold Felix. It's harder for us to think about giving up those things that have his handwriting on them. There's an assumption that a book Felix read and annotated is Felix more than that clock is Felix.

AULT: There's a continual paradox—"that object is not Felix, but it also is Felix." And the paradox keeps upping the ante. So those papers of Felix's that do remain, enter the archive, and become accessible take on tremendous weight.

ROSEN: Yes, those things that exist are disparate and disproportionate, but I feel he specifically chose to keep the things he kept, though in no way is it a complete record. What we're striving to do is create broader archives so these things have contexts. For instance there's a picture of a bracelet of the dolphins. We can assume that that picture was not the source but a source for his idea of continuous dolphins. And then there's a history of the dolphin stack and the decisions made around that work. I'd like to see that information exist in as many files as could potentially be relevant. It is one piece of information in a history of information.

At the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation we are working with the idea of case studies, how decisions were made in Felix's lifetime and after: Why did this thing happen, how did that next thing happen? Almost no decision that we make is done on speculation or on my assumption. We go back and see how decisions were made, what happened in that exhibi-

tion, and in that one. This tracing also becomes part of the archive, as well as any information or oral history that goes into it. A document or element may go into a section about a particular stack piece, and it may go into a segment about stacks in general, and it may go into an archive about a particular exhibition like the Guggenheim show. So the idea is that information exists in many places. To sift through that archive autonomously, as though these are the only things left in Felix's archive, seems to me to be irrelevant. We take that material and integrate it elsewhere, not the original piece of paper but a copy, so it is in the context of other relevant decisions and those case studies perpetually growing.

AULT: Of course there is also the original piece of paper. Where does that live? What you're saying makes sense, Felix's work and his thinking and the archival traces don't synch comfortably with the boundaries and classification system of the archive. There's also the problem of interpretation, the tendency to articulate one-to-one relations between artwork and source, which is often reductive or just wrong (though in some instances might be accurate). Searching for sources and connecting the dots and creating genealogies happens frequently in art history writing. You're speaking of an archive

based on cross-referencing as a set of possibilities, which is designed with the capacity to generate lots of readings and a context of cross-connecting information to other information rather than confining particular informational artifacts or turning them into specific stories.

ROSEN: It's like your book on Felix; it's about contradiction. That piece of information contradicts another, and you're going to be able to see the contradictions. I'm much more interested in that situation of differences than in, "oh, here it is." Maybe it is the closest way of letting people experience Felix's way of thinking; the way he almost trained us to think; the responsibility to not take something at face value and to be responsible for evolving the information and constantly re-contextualizing.

AULT: This letter is a good example. I'm glad I never saw it before, or if I did see it I screened it out. I read yours and Felix's correspondence years ago, and I feel like I would have paid attention to it, but maybe not, maybe I read it and it had nothing to do with what I was thinking at the moment, and I just didn't take it in. Of course if you start applying this letter to thinking about the works with two clocks, "*Untitled*"

*(Perfect Lovers)*, well, that's a valid connection to make but it's not sure or singular.

This is an exciting challenge, to make such a new kind of archive. At its core Felix's work requires that all formats for enacting it be tailored or rethought. Tailoring the archive extends from that.

ROSEN: My intention with the archive and foundation is for its format to be a replication of Felix's intentions. It's taken years to do that. It has its own ambiguities and open-endedness and it's not instructive or didactic, it provides a way of thinking that will hopefully guide someone's strategies of how to make future decisions.

AULT: It might take another ten years but I don't think that matters. It's not about getting it done fast and simply creating access. You're charged with the responsibility, and there's a time when the ideas of how to make information, including that which has been private, accessible in a fitting way, and how to structure it takes as long as it takes.

ROSEN: It's not even a choice. It has its own organic time

frame and it has to unfold as it unfolds. The risk of that is like the urgency of Felix's letter, that he was in a situation where he felt like we all live with the illusion that we're going to be around for another however many years.

AULT: In the second part of the letter, like in other correspondence from Felix, and even in the clocks, there was clarity.

ROSEN: As much as he's telling me in it to think with certain optimism, you can't ignore the finiteness of this letter. And the clicking of the clock is way more finite having read this letter, even though it wasn't his intention.

AULT: In only a few sentences in Felix's letter multiple intentions are expressed. "And then it will always remind you of the good times, the growing times or times of growing, the important time, the urgent time, the beautiful time we had the luck of having together, by chance." It implies different tenses. That's one of the things I find so beautiful about the clocks, that they invoke ephemerality and permanence, memory, history, and questions about perception of time. What tense are these objects? What tense is the archive?



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