

WHAT WAS
JIM HODGES

Felix and I never discussed showing our work together. The idea never entered my mind during the few years that we were friends, from 1992 until his death early in 1996. I don't think Felix ever imagined it either, and if he did he never mentioned it. He was very busy in those days, producing the work he wanted and needed to, planning numerous exhibitions, and preparing for what was to come—the unavoidable countered by the uncertainty of a possible future.

I think back to those days and to everything we shared, everything he gave me, every gesture, each subtle nuance, his suggestions and opinions, his praise, his criticisms, advice, encouragement, trust, and belief. He privileged me in sharing his struggles and labored decision making; he discussed his work and his all-night battles with time and ideas. Felix was often unable to sleep, and spent late nights working at the dining room table—his “studio”—meticulously drawing straight lines over prepared white watercolor paper while Biko, Pebbles, Mary, or Bruno walked on soft cat paws over file folders, papers, and floor plans for shows. He talked about his personal histories, about Ross, and about Jeff. Mostly Felix would talk and I would listen. “I am afraid of what I will become as I get sicker; I'm afraid I will be mean...” “...You will just be more you—as you get closer, the more you you will become; don't worry about that...”

I'd listen to the sadness in the story, his desire, his strength and courage that toned his struggle, the flavor of loss, the fixation on time—an impossible body never meant to be held, the impossibility of ending and the unrelenting insistence of the unavoidable concrete horror of what was to come, the tragedy, the crime—and I would see him, with a fierce practiced restraint, extracting and composing from this battlefield life a range of ingenious inventions of great poetic simplicity: openness lay strewn across the floor or stacked into “ideal” piles. He'd tell me what he was going to do next, how it defied expectation, how it would be the opposite of what “they” anticipated. We'd talk about color, about language, about titles and phrasing, about poetry, and the power and influence of music—the Smiths, Morrissey, how on a cross-country flight returning home from the West Coast the music he was listening to had “saved his life.” He'd talk about vulnerability, the space of disconnection in the air at thirty thousand feet above many terrains, and how a plane was a perfect place for tears, a location and context that he and I utilized similarly.

He'd talk about the importance of controlled gestures, the slightest gesture being the most revered... about art, artists, those admired and others. He'd talk about history, its continual presence; about optimism in design and “social amnesia”; of a

lack of brilliance in our surroundings—"brilliance," a rarity that was diminishing with each loss to AIDS. He'd talk of standards, of higher ground and the slipping of our society motivated toward profit and stardom. About hypocrisy, a privileged morality dictated by a detached few who called themselves "the moral majority." He'd talk of the lack of irony and imagination. He'd talk about love and compassion. He'd talk about Brecht, Derrida, Stevens, Arenas, Rilke, and Genet; about *Hiroshima mon amour*, *The Golden Girls*, *Dynasty*, and "the city of light."

Mostly we would laugh and smile across a table from each other enjoying a simple meal he had prepared in his kitchen with the orange floor, surrounded by the many cartoon plastic figurines he collected, hundreds of them in the living room, lining the shelves he had specially made, shelves so packed and overflowing that the figures would spill off into the open mouth of the unused fireplace nearby and fill that space too. The "friends," as he called them, were taking over, rivaling the George Nelson clocks for space, becoming a testament to Felix's belief in things. Things revealing choices, things revealing his commitment, his sense of humor, his point of view, and his joy. With an insistence that was sharp and focused, unrelenting and specific, he'd fill out the spectrum of a thing, unfolding its many designed variations and chance alterations from life. I perceived these collections as monuments of hope, life, dreams, and wishes, each individual example needed and embraced like parts of a puzzle he was endlessly and enthusiastically assembling.

Back then, there was optimism in many of the black-marked messages he wrote across the backs of snapshots and postcards dropped in the mail. One read: "Jimmy, today I mailed 20 letters!"

There were kittens with soft noses—four beauties, two sets—and later came an English bulldog.

There was Julie, and there was a missing friend who was often mentioned: Jorge. There was dancing at 5 a.m. at the Sound Factory, and there were Sunday mornings I'd call him—"not too early"—to meet at the flea market, where we would scour the islands of tables in search of the next plastic cartoon toy to join the collection and become one of the friends.

There were ticking clocks; a yellow star and white-faced sun with black pointed hands hung close to a window.

There was a multicolored marshmallow couch and a white coconut chair.

There were white-globed lamps and dark wooden tables.

There were black and blue ink drawings on paper napkins pinned above the bed.

There were kisses and hugs and fragrant soaps.

There was Penhaligon's, and there were flowers, many, many flowers in shades of blue.

There was the answering machine with the stern command, "do not leave a message..."

There was the gallery; there were Andrea, Michelle, and John.

There was Miami.

There was a rented red Mustang convertible.

There was August, the hottest month for South Beach.
 There was family; there was "Grandma."
 There was Cuban coffee and guava pastries.
 There was the gym, and there were never too many sit-ups!
 There was music and dancing and the sexy heat of the street.
 There was the water as warm as a bath, floating together, staring into endlessness.
 There were birds circling overhead, and there were sand and beach chairs seen
 from a balcony many stories above, a view south...

There was distance.
 There was fear.
 There was disappointment.
 And there was absence.

For the months leading up to this exhibition, I conjured Felix in my imagination and sustained his presence with concentration and effort: every decision was weighted by the two of us in my internally created joint effort. Balancing this practice of "alliance" while maintaining my sense of focus was an immense challenge that inspired and at times overwhelmed me. Repeatedly I faltered and lost my way. When I needed help, it was always there from friends who came to my rescue. Throughout the entire process, including this writing, I relied on the honesty and sensitivity they brought to the challenge of making this exhibition, and I thank them for their kindness and insight.

Today, *Floating a Boulder* comes down. Sometime today a dancer will appear in the gallery, wearing a silver lamé swimsuit, a little too small to cover the beauty of his body, muscled and tattooed. He'll be focused on the sound of music only he can hear. He'll enter the gallery with purpose; he'll ignore anyone who is there. He'll be inside the music, and he'll dance for himself. Everyone else will disappear; he'll become a dream, a physical reality of a thought, of an idea. For a few short minutes he will be the thought. He will contain the energy of meaning. He will move atop a pale blue surface and curve rhythmically in a warm glow of light. He will see the whiteness of the walls, hints of reflections glistening from pixelated mirrors through half-open eyes. He'll dance and the music will lift him into the air; he will move beyond the platform; he will be a projection of the artist's imagination, dancing there in that space of blue becoming the sky, traveling beyond the walls and windows, merged music and movement dissolving over the horizon; and then he will vanish, leave as he came, silently, self-contained, eyes fixed on his destination, without a sound. The platform will stand empty, with the aura of the dancer haloed in the space he had filled.