

A matter of time

Élisabeth Lebovici

“The other day I was still thinking about this piece and how it fulfills me now even more. You know, the title: (*Passport*) is very crucial and significant – a white empty blank un-inscribed piece of paper, an untouched feeling, an undiscovered experience. A passport to another place, to another life, to a new beginning, to chance; to the chance of meeting that other who makes life a moving force, a chance to alter one’s life and future, an empty passport for life: to inscribe it with the best, the most painful, the most banal, the most sublime, and yet to inscribe it with life, love, memories, fears, voids, and unexpected reasons for being. A simple white object against a white wall, waiting. As always, yours.”¹

Together and separately, the works of Roni Horn and Felix Gonzalez-Torres address a possible horizon of existence. They don’t offer any solution or resolution, nor a *tabula rasa*. They arrange a place to inscribe past experiences, their proper stories, a counted time, but also a time beyond, un-indebted, open, tendered to the unpredictable, the unoccupied. An impossible yet reallandscape draws itself out,² laying in the shattering alliance of the in-between. Perhaps this entire exhibition is thrown headlong like this into that paradoxical temporality, addressed to all of you – or to you alone, since the English pronoun “you” suggests both the singular and the plural. Does this relationship, which is both intimate and public, not constitute the experience of the exhibition? Art historian Miwon Kwon speaks of

“intimacy-in-distance and distance-in-intimacy as a conjoined dynamic”³. Because it is also about this, in the double movement between here and there, between an anonymous formal address, plural, social, and the proximity of familiar address. To help mark this swing, sometimes the initials R.H. or F.G.-T., at times a simple first name, suffice. To mark the bond: “My Felix”, as the artist Glenn Ligon writes.⁴ Or at the antipodes to unfasten one’s grip. “The androgyny of my name had a deep influence on me,” writes Roni Horn. “I understood from when I was young that my gender was nobody’s business.”⁵

So then, let’s you and me call them Roni and Felix.

Roni is an epicene name. You and me are neutral pronouns. The dynamic of the you and the me suggests an “admirable theatricalization of the mystery of interlocutory pronouns”⁶. It produces no particular information as to gender, race, class, ability (even, with the English “you”, regarding number). No social identity. These are positions of discourse which, in a sense, are face-to-face, and in an incessant exchange, as though their lifelines met, crossed, inverted. This is how Gertrude Stein and her companion Alice B. Toklas played with them – their common grave at the Père-Lachaise cemetery is in fact the subject of a framed photograph by Felix.⁷ When the former writes *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), she changes places, the space of writing, with her partner (which allows her to claim without jabbering that she is a genius!).

It’s disturbing. In this you and me which, in a whirlwind, invert the languorous vertigo of a song,⁸ the contours of a dual, or triple identity are blurred and redefined: *Roni Horn aka Roni Horn*. The “I” becomes fleeting, liquid, vulnerable, as is the binary logic in turn under which our language is inscribed, calculated, included, excluded, since it circumscribes what one is by what one isn’t, reciprocally.

The exhibition weaves around a you and a me, the friendship between Roni and Felix⁹ between 1990 and 1996, the year Felix died of AIDS. I’m not writing it down for nothing: here HIV/AIDS isn’t only a context, but a horizon, inverting the temporal conventions just as Felix had done, asking Roni in 1995 to write a eulogy.¹⁰

HIV/AIDS is one of the agents of the network set up by the exhibition – in which not only Roni and Felix are active, but an accumulation of “actants”¹¹ gently ambling in friendship with each other, familiar or unknown, human or nonhuman, pieces or protocols, strict rules or “letting go, which is a process that never really ends because with that, we never really learn to let go”¹². That’s what’s important in the exhibition, and I believe in the art of Roni and Felix: the interest in what happens “after”, when the piece is made, fabricated, and in what it does later. This compilation of adding to or subtracting from one another literally *informs* the piece, rendering its presence both nomadic and temporary, prolonging it indefinitely. That is also a form. And in this form there are places that “make”. Paris is one of them. In fact, among the reciprocal dedications out

of which Felix and Roni construct the golden legend of their gifts and counter-gifts, there is one that was activated for the first time in Paris, in 1993, at Galerie Ghislaine Hussonot.¹³

Roni remembers the first encounter with Felix's work "*Untitled*" (1991) on 7th Avenue in New York, in the Village. Enlarged to the panoramic dimensions of urban billboards, repeated and disseminated along several of the city's horizons, a photograph is presented in black and white of an unmade bed whose pillows carry the hollow imprint, one imagines, of two heads having rested there. Marked, and nonetheless vacant. Roni sees there "a clearing",¹⁴ a clarifying, a big sweep. We are made to revise even what is understood by the notion of intimacy, its relationship to the interior, to domestic space, with what remains of the heat secreted by the double bed. But heat has given way to cold. The bed is at a public distance, emptied of inhabitants, expelled towards the exterior, towards uncomfortable urban outsides, an inhospitable homelessness, perhaps. All simplistic content, every given hypothesis has been cleaned out. The billboard is rid of its visually hegemonic discourse, not only the one that promotes capitalism through publicity, but also the protocols of representation of visual identity, like that of a creative or expressive hand, etc. Roni recognises in it a shared methodology.

The pieces by Roni Horn that are exhibited at the Bourse de Commerce all date from after Felix's

death.¹⁵ Just as the writer Hélène Cixous continues to speak with Jacques Derrida after the death of the philosopher. For decades Derrida read Cixous who read Derrida, exchanging literature and dreams, text by text. Cixous continues to read and to write him in the present. The conversation is infinite.¹⁶ It neither denies nor defeats death. It thwarts the terminal version, that of effacement. To hold on. To hold tight. "You are *my insister*, he says to me. [...] I can likewise turn it round on you. You too you are *my insister*. *My insisting*."¹⁷ Roni Horn's pieces partake of the same *insisting*, of a same insistent politics of friendship beyond linear chronology; Felix Gonzalez-Torres, especially in his portraits composed of significant words and dates (but still open to being exchanged in each of their presentations), always insisted upon overthrowing this timeline. Let's set the record straight: there is no world after, no world beyond HIV/AIDS. The pandemic isn't over, as poet, artist and activist Gregg Bordowitz writes, "the crisis is still beginning";¹⁸ it is but one of the links in a chain of zoonotic illnesses, including Covid-19, which have managed to cross the biological barrier between species, the one separating humans from nonhumans. The attacks against biodiversity, the intensification of human and commercial travel, the aggravation of climate change, the structural violence inherent in neoliberalism, comprise the conditions of the apparition of such pandemics. The "total social facts"¹⁹ of the Anthropocene affect not only our social organisation, but also our lives at their most intimate, in

their relationship to others and to themselves as well.

"After all, the world is around me, not in front of me."²⁰ It's this approach that the exhibition touches phenomenologically, while it infiltrates the solid architecture of the Bourse de Commerce. It deploys an emotional theatre, thanks to which the rooms are not only, and rather almost never, "before" you. This point of view, which philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty qualified as "monarchic", is circumvented by the display of the pieces. Not without some mean humour, they overturn a straight view, as does *Double Mobius v.2* (2009/2018), a lure to the eye that is made to make a U-turn in order to discover a gold strip revolving on itself indefinitely; or they drag it to the margins, as in "*Untitled*" (*Loverboy*) (1989), in which pairs of light blue curtains drape a window and an emergency exit. Or else they intimate a twist at the sovereign point of view, a torsion. Take for example these two pieces from the *White Dickinson series* (2006–2007). The two grey aluminium bars leaning against the wall, intimating an oblique, warped, disoriented perception of "letters, words, then a full sentence in white capitals, deciphered painstakingly rather than read smoothly."²¹ Excerpts from letters by the poet Emily Dickinson, another "posthumous collaborator" of Roni Horn, the lines are: "I GIVE YOU A PEAR THAT WAS GIVEN ME – WOULD THAT IT WERE A PAIR, BUT NATURE IS PENURIOUS" (*White Dickinson*, 2007) and "HE INHERITS HIS UNCLE EMILY'S ARDOR FOR THE

LIE" (*White Dickinson*, 2006–2007). Clearly, such lines inscribe in their snare homophonic and gender play. Transferred into monumental letters in moulded plastic slowing the pace of reading, miniscule fragments of the everyday thus capture "Dickinson's lyric, her syntax, her metaphorical force, the visible and hidden sense of the poems."²² It is in their transmutations that the pieces find, let's say it, their marvellous dimension.

This sense of wonder comes with the emancipation of any full and unique identity – the piece's, and the one to whom the work is addressed. It leads to a renewed experience that Roni describes as an "accumulation", far from a notion of series, multiples, or repetition. *Well and Truly* (2009–2010) composed with ten moulded blocks of glass set down on the floor, exacerbates contradictory sensations. The distinct hardness and weight of all these masses of glass come with the vulnerability and dependence induced by each of the same glass blocks, which appear bare, solitary, base-less, statue-less, with no cover to warm them. "Surrounded by Stockholm",²³ as Roni puts it, the exhibition also presents a cumulative experience, with twelve rows of 42 electric bulbs traversing each room of "*Untitled*" (*For Stockholm*) (1992). These are very simple elements: each bulb is screwed into a socket mounted at regular intervals on a wire equipped with a "tail" of several additional metres. Nonhuman, the bulbs nonetheless have a limited life span which is renewed each time a display is required and the lender has temporarily ceded

their rights – in other words, the installation parameters.²⁴ This form of circulation indexes the bulbs firmly to the routine task implicated in their process of industrial production, while redirecting their use value towards that of the exhibition. And, all of a sudden, the insistent glow of the lit bulbs evokes another time than the one of reproductive normativity, distilling the precarious excitement of a festive activity, the lighting of a ball or a party, aligning the everyday to the extraordinary, organisation to the affective. Where does “*Untitled*” (*For Stockholm*) end? Felix never tired of sowing contradictions in his instructions; is not giving his pieces an “ideal weight”, producing an “ideal size”, also, in fact, giving them a configuration that is also indefinite and limitless?

Where are the boundaries of *Well and Truly* that Roni placed on the ground? Do they not integrate the spaces that enter into it, the surroundings, the breaths that circulate, the contingencies of light, the season, meteorology, the time of day hour, which substantially modify their effect, their shade, their dullness or their brilliance? Especially given that the mass of glass, an amorphous substance, has received its liquid form from a mould, a container, and the cooled blocks that result from it are therefore negative forms. Volumes replace a void, in a sense calling to the incompleteness in their form which retains the process of leading their liquid state to solid. Immediately it is understood that nothing in the installation can be approached in a blink of an eye,

in other words, in the unicity of a sovereign instant. This is exemplified in the vision of *Dead Owl*: two dead stuffed owls, reified, identical and yet the movement from one to the other dissolves their identity, which becomes “de-naturalised”. To qualify this moment, without conceptualising it as a fissure or break-in, Derrida offers the word “différance”.²⁵ Not a difference that establishes a hierarchy, an order of precedence; just a desynchronisation, an interval that is the very fact of similarity and repetition. The two contiguous identical clocks of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) (1987–1990) have been set at the same hour, minute, second even, but their synchronisation ensured at the beginning of the presentation will gradually become dislocated – and perhaps one of them will stop – opening a time between them. There is no privileged instant, something will always be missed. “The time is out of joint”, says Hamlet in the formulation lent to him by Shakespeare (Act 1, Scene 5). He is designating that disarticulating force of a time that undoes every possibility of a simple identity of one’s own. *a.k.a.* (2008–2009). The thirty paired self-portraits undo the bind that operates in photography between the visible and the legible: cropped of all context, the decontextualised photographs have removed the social language that enveloped them, as well as their story encapsulated in the caption. Which face precedes the other? Which is the most “resembling”? The dimension of loss is opened by this gaping. As with the two mirrors embedded in the wall. “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*) (1991). Two times

Orpheus: the time it takes to turn around to see Eurydice, the one he wanted to bring back, after her death, to life on earth ... and once again she has disappeared.

In a Nicaraguan oral tradition, narratives called *cuentos de camino* (tales from the path) require one to cross magical or unexplained phenomena and to encounter characters with clinking skeletons. “*Untitled*” (*Blood*) (1992) stands as a necessary passage to proceed along your path. Of course, as the title parenthesis suggests, the crossing helps perceive “the attraction of and subsequent exposure to a shower of crystallized liquids symbolic of sex and death”.²⁶ Concretely, the red-and-white bead curtain engages a body in performance, the moulding of a character or maybe better, of a way to walk. Like the swishing and dry bony gait of La Calavera Catrina from Mexico, a skeleton vested in rich clothes. This is how you hear, or better listen to *Dogs’ Chorus – Let Slip Until the Cows Come Home* (2016). The work on paper disseminates the silent concert of barking dogs: “Let slip the dogs of war”: the phrase, borrowed from Shakespeare, from *Julius Caesar* (Act 3, Scene 1) has been decapitated and shredded with a scalpel into an innumerable plurality of fine strips. Some pieces were assembled with others, coming from other “plates”, or have been similarly disfigured from other idiomatic expressions having risen to the surface from the collective memory of clichés and commonplaces: “Until the cows come home” is such a one. Cut up again and reconfigured, these language rushes produce a deluge

of information, illegible for the most part. It is their colliding dance that expresses itself loudly at an inaudible frequency that marks our flesh.

To my mind, this marking is what the theoretician Raymond Williams calls “structure of feeling”. What does this signify: how do you give a “structure” to a “feeling”? “Feelings” are complicated, disorderly and aleatory, whereas “structures” seem to imply reason and logic. It is in this paradox that alternative modes of thought can be articulated – disordered and logical. Such is exactly the effect the two pairs of pale blue sheer fabrics falling to the ground have on me. “*Untitled*” (*Loverboy*) (1989) sets the room at the blue hour without obturating the outside light. The blue hour is that moment when “night animals fall asleep and when day animals are not yet awake ... when nature is, for the only time in the day, completely silent”.²⁷ Like the bluish-greenish-greyish-turquoise surfaces of the glass blocks in *Well and Truly*, the curtains condense, as Felix said, the “memory of a light blue. For me if a beautiful memory could have a color that color would be light blue.”²⁸ You and I understand the ghostly theatre that is played out when we lie awake and turn our heads to the curtains; when we stand still, head twisted with the *White Dickinsons* lying in the oblique; when you bend over a stack of sheets of paper with no qualities, no status or statues (white pages, original paper size 60 x 60 cm, accumulated to an “ideal” height of 10 cm (“*Untitled*” (*Passport*), 1991). By embodying questions as fundamental in our social world as mobility, expression,

warmth and health, the encounter between Roni and Felix unfolds its motions. They each stand as counterpowers to the array of bio-political control on bodies, subjectivities and representations. The central, sovereign point of view has thus been replaced by matters of orientation.²⁹ It is an orientation that the exhibition gives to my head turning towards light blue, or turning around towards the golden flow of the *Double Mobius v2*, both double and inseparable.

The poet Anne Carson writes to Roni.³⁰ With regard to *Double Mobius* she is reminded of the myth of Castor and Pollux: twin brothers, one of whom, an immortal, was so sad that the other was mortal that he bargained with Destiny such that alternatively both would be one and the other. “Of course,” adds Carson, “[it is] mathematically and metaphysically daft: you can’t divide an absolute thing in half.”³¹ And yet what fascinates me in this exhibition, with my head turned towards it, is the temporal horizon that the myth fashions for two bodies – Castor and Pollux – and for two discursive positions – Felix and Roni. You and me, perhaps. Impossible? Idiomatic? No doubt. It is this horizon that I want nonetheless to cruise in this exhibition. Following the theoretician José Esteban Muñoz. Cruising utopia, for him, is to dream of other spatiotemporal coordinates, “to step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present”, “to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now”,³² including the text you just read now.

1 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Letter to Andrea Rosen”, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), p. 160.

2 “This was an undiscovered ocean for us. It was impossible, yet it was real, we saw this landscape.” Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “1990: L.A., “The Gold Field””, in *Earths Grow Thick* (exh. cat. Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1996); see p. XX of this catalogue.

3 Miwon Kwon, “The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce”, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 283.

4 Glenn Ligon, “My Felix”, *Artforum* (Summer 2007): p. 125. On the same subject, see Joshua Chambers-Letson, “The Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres”, in *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), p. 123.

5 Roni Horn, letter to Paulo Herkenhoff (2003), in *Roni Horn AKA Roni Horn. Subject Index* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2009).

6 Hélène Cixous, “you”, in *Roni Horn AKA Roni Horn*, p. 193.

7 “Untitled” (*Alice B. Toklas’ and Gertrude Stein’s Grave, Paris*), 1992.

8 Several, in fact, interpreted by The Turtles, B. B. King, Doris Day, Guillaume Grand, and more

9 Their friendship, also, with Julie Ault, with whom Felix and Roni have ties, each and together. .

10 See pp. 150–153 of this catalogue.

11 The concept of the “actant” was developed as part of *actor-network theory*. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

12 “Interview: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Hans Ulrich Obrist, 1994,” <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/attachment/en/5b844b306aa72cea5f8b4567/DownloadableItem/5fb82a0d5fc138093dccc0e1c>. Letting go is also expressing oneself, or losing one’s cool.

13 “Untitled” (*Placebo – Landscape – for Roni*), 1993. This story is told numerous times beginning in 1995 and continuing over the lifetime of both artists. See Nancy Spector in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres – Roni Horn* (Hamburg: Sammlung Goetz, 1995), and in this volume see Caroline Bourgeois, pp. XX–XX.

14 Roni Horn, interview with the author, 30 December 2021.

15 The oldest, *Dead Owl*, is from 1997, and the more recent ones, *Double Moebius v. 2* from 2009–2018 and *Dogs Chorus – Let Slip Until the Cows Come Home*, from 2016). Conversely, all of Felix’s pieces are dated 1989, 1987–90 for the earliest, or 1992 for the most recent.

16 Here I am using Maurice Blanchot’s title, *L’entretien infini*. Paris, Gallimard, 1969. (*The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.)

17 Hélène Cixous, *Insister of Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 52.

18 Gregg Bordowitz, *Drive: The AIDS Crisis is Still Beginning: A Collection of Essays, Dialogues, and Texts Surrounding Gregg Bordowitz’s Films Fast Trip, Long Drop, and Habit, and His Exhibition Drive* (Chicago, IL: WhiteWalls, Inc., 2002).

19 The “total social fact”, an expression used by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss in 1925 to characterise exchanges of obligatory gifts. See *The Gift*, trans. Jane I. Guyer (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2015).

20 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Carleton Dallery, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 138.

21 See Marjorie Micucci, “From One Reading to Another: What Has Emily Dickinson Made Me Experience ...”, trans. Antoine Cazé, *Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin* (May–June 2016): p. 13.

22 Ibid.

23 Roni Horn, interview with the author, 30 December 2021.

24 The lender cedes, for the exhibition, the right to interpret the protocol of the work. Thus this protocol, whether or not it is delivered in the work’s acquisition agreement, must be respected but at the same time can in part be changed, explains Andrea Rosen, president of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

25 See notably Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1982).

26 Robert Storr, “When This You See Remember Me”, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 25.

27 Éric Rohmer, “L’Heure bleue” in the film *Quatre aventures de Reinette et Mirabelle*, 1987.

28 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview by Tim Rollins,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. William S. Bartman New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993).

29 See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University, 2006). The orientation aspect frames queer philosopher Sara Ahmed’s engagement with phenomenology.

30 Dated June 9th, 2019, it is part of the installation of 406 elements by Roni Horn, *LOG (March 22, 2019–May 17, 2020)*.

31 From the poem dated 9 June 2019, which is part of the installation of 406 elements by Roni Horn, *LOG (March 22, 2019–May 17, 2020)*.Ibid.

32 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 185 and 22.