

inbetweenness

Exhibition Checklist

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
“*Untitled*” (*Loverboy*), 1989
Sheer blue fabric and hanging device
Dimensions vary with installation
Courtesy of the Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres
and the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
“*Untitled*”, 1991–1993
Billboard
Dimensions vary with installation
Two parts
Schenkung Sammlung Hoffmann,
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and Tate

Curated by Flavin Judd

Thank you to Andrea Rosen, Andrew Kachel,
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On Queer Brown Envy Josh T. Franco

Dear Felix,
I printed out a picture of you from the internet to meditate on as I struggle to write this letter. (Deciding this writing would be epistolary in the first place was itself a struggle.) Like any message to a person one never met and who died too soon, looking at a closeup of your face is a way of building a fantasy relationship. To some degree, imagining a relationship that can never be reciprocal describes the activity of every art historian and their chosen—or as in this case, proposed—subject. Yes, of course the artwork itself is the proposal, but let’s not pretend the desire to know the artist is not part of the equation. It turns out I have a lot to tell you, and it’s as uncomfortable as corresponding with a ghost should be.

First things first: your work sits at the end of my rope. Despite being an art historian invested in so-called Minimalism and its legacies, and art by U.S. Latino folks, I have always kept your practice at arm’s length. The reasons will become apparent shortly. Now, here you are in the form of your work, barreling into the home of an artist whose objects and stories I have examined closely for years. I have been an employee in this home, spending hours showing its details to visitors and exploring them for myself. After such sustained attention, I identify with this place to a certain degree, so even if it makes all the art historical sense in the world, I am still jarred by the thought of your presence here. I take back my description though; your work never barrels. It whispers, it arrives stealthily, it sneaks up on us. One might not even notice brushing up against a sheer blue curtain, whereas walking into the sharp edge of a human-scaled aluminum object can injure. In art, I like that potential hurt that your work refuses to give. I realize I am drawn to art with which I could physically brawl.

Your work does not injure, but it does cling;

I never know what to do with the sheet of paper an hour later, for instance. And it’s a minor annoyance to find candy wrapper trash in one’s coat pocket a year later when the weather turns cold again. I find myself exasperated by the stickiness of your ephemera. Of course, I had to take the sheet, had to pick out and unwrap the candy, to perform the museological transgression that proves “I get it” to whatever audience of strangers are in the gallery at the moment performing the same. For all of these reasons and others, it’s no wonder I have paid so much more attention to Judd, in addition to the fact that he became a Texan, whereas I’m not sure if you ever visited my homeland. The thought of you on the border is intriguing, but I imagine the form of your thinking looks more like archipelagos. (I wish we could explore this distinction. Were you still here, we could swap copies of books by Walter Mignolo and Édouard Glissant, two of the thinkers associated with these ideas respectively. We could trade notes in the margins.)

But these are formalist defenses and matters of taste. (And indeed, whether they bring me pleasure or not, your work is clearly successful as art, if success is marked by an experience that one cannot forget easily.) These are things an art historian can say, to avoid being fully human before art. What I do not want to acknowledge out loud (so here it is in a letter) is the special envy one queer brown boy can have for another. I hate to admit it. Do you know what I’m talking about? I am all but certain you do. This particular envy has to do with success and ascension in the historically white-dominated New York-centric art world that touches and touched both our lives. It is a sense of competition based on the implicit message that the space for queer brown artists is limited. A few of us are celebrated; too many of us are feared. A salient example is the Whitney Independent Study Program, in which you participated twice while I was rejected the same number of times. One almost certainly had nothing to do with the other in any practical terms, but the feeling is there nonetheless. Why do I feel a special envy toward your participation, but not toward the legions of other alumni? Because of that feeling that there can only be so many of us—queer brown boys—

in a given epoch. It does us no good to perpetuate such a notion, and I am eager to see what’s on the other side of this admission. So, besides the pettiness of holding envy for someone I’ve never even met, this also means admitting to being seduced by class and ethnic hierarchies that pervade our shared social world.

To shed the envy I have toward you, which is a result of these acquired desires, I am writing them out loud. This is a method of unlearning. I do so with hope that I can lead myself to something more important: leaving behind desires for whiteness and certain brands of artworld prestige in order to reach a place of solidarity with you in your afterlife. (In broader terms, I wonder how you would inhabit the increasingly solid and powerful Latinx presence in the same art circuits you traversed in your day?)

What if I consider my envy a legitimate starting point for knowing? Already, I find a more generative place to look anew at, for instance, “*Untitled*” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*). Any time I encounter this work, a frustration emerges that comes squarely from male-on-male desire. It is adolescent, but inevitable: I both want to be and be with the body dancing alone on the platform. Before I begin dwelling on my own physical shortcomings compared to the often jacked and beautiful dancer on the platform, I walk away. I never want to be reminded that I’ve lapsed at the gym, or that, were I to encounter the dancer at a club, he could reject me. And because the situation is your creation, my resentment ultimately lands on you. By even briefly acknowledging this here, however, I feel more prepared to do my job as an art historian the next time I encounter the work. I’ll put it in writing: I promise not to curse your name and run away again.

There is one envy that I don’t think is problematic in itself, but which raises other issues with which I want to imagine you are deeply familiar. This is the fact that you inhabited New York City at the same time as Donald Judd. In your daily life, it was possible for you to run into him, converse with him, develop a relationship, however minor. It’s possible that I also could have inhabited the same space as Judd, but time is also a factor: even if we had crossed paths in West Texas, I was only eight years old when he died, so any exchange would have been on very different terms. You could have met him as more of an equal than I ever could have, and I envy you that. I imagine you two downtown gallery hopping, eating with a crew, hanging out with your friends and doing it all in the proximity of 101 Spring Street. I wonder at what chance encounters might have occurred: did you ever turn the corner on Spring and find the other door open on to Mercer? Did you sneak into a party there? Did you flirt with white daddy, and did he know what you were doing? I like it when they play along. Clearly an insightful and observant man, I bet Judd was one who knew our game. I wish I had got to meet him. I wish it was my art displayed in his home, so he might walk by one late morning, bare-chested and thoughtful. To be a muscled go-go boy dancing in spectacular solitude on an aluminum object ... this human art historian’s ultimate dream.

What I must have always sensed in keeping your work at a distance is that were I to face it, I would fall apart, as has happened here. I can only hope someone wraps my pieces in shiny paper. Maybe that will be installed in this house I love in my own way; not like his son and daughter do, nor the orbit of friends and collaborators who knew him well, but as a member of a generation who takes up both of your legacies in ways neither of you might have predicted. In being ancestors who are never far from our thoughts, there is no distance between you two.

You will never read this letter. The point of it was to write through envy to reach a sense of something else, solidarity perhaps. I wrote this to inject queer brown backup into your legacy as you haunt many Daddies’ houses. However complicated my feelings for you, I hope to have conveyed this fact: You are not alone here.

Yours, Josh

C/S