

to my ghost friend's felix

I thought that it was easy for me to walk by Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work the first time I saw it, probably five years ago. I was wrong. It was a stack of paper and very ephemeral. It needed a lot of explanation. Felix does the kind of work that is hard to get to know. It works slowly. It is subtle, it keeps coming back into my mind. And it is compelling. I still don't know his art well enough, yet because I feel it somehow works well with my own, (we both waver between humor and melancholy), I was very excited when I found out that he was having a show the same time as me at the Guggenheim. We don't know if it is a coincidence or, "The Guggenheim Goes Gay." Anyway, I invited Felix over for lunch to get to know him and his work a little better.

Ross Bleckner

What kind of students come to your Saturday night session, your art class?

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

I have no requirements. My requirements are very lax.

RB

That's very generous, but you must have some requirements.

FGT

Vaporize. That's it. (laughter) Actually, Saturday night is a very quiet night for me.

RB

What do you mean?

FGT

Saturday night is one of those nights when I just don't do anything. I love Sunday mornings now, the flea market on 26th Street.

RB

That's become popular. I went to one in Massachusetts. In two hours, I was so irritable. It was July; it was dusty. The place must be the size of Central Park. Everybody whose store you've ever gone into in New York you see up there, because that's where they get it all. Brinfield, it's called.

FGT

I can't deal with ones that big because I know I'm going to miss a deal.

RB

You have to be very enterprising and foraging.

FGT

I like flea markets, their sense of mystery; I always wonder, always make a fantasy about who owned it, who lived with this thing. As you know, I collect things: I collect props and toys.

RB

I saw a picture of your toy collection. Lots and lots of toys.

FGT

Hundreds. Plastic and rubber toys with big eyes. And things that have been left unplayed with by kids.

RB

You like big eyes?

FGT

Big, buggy eyes. Because I have terrible problems with insomnia.

RB

Why don't you take a sleeping pill?

FGT

I was telling you this story, because 1990 and 1991 were very rotten years for me. I went to a flea market during this time and was looking through a bag of toys, and the woman said—I was looking at a Mickey Mouse—"You can have them all for five bucks." I brought them home, and they made me feel very good. So I figured if I had more, I'd feel better. It didn't really work that way.

RB

It usually does work that way, when you find something that makes you feel good. It's like drugs. People take drugs to feel good. If drugs didn't work, people wouldn't take them.

FGT

I took drugs, and I liked them. But not anymore.

RB

Me neither. But they still work. Anyway, why were you so upset, so miserable in 1991?

FGT

I was very lost. It was the end. The world was just closing in. And I was taking sleeping pills the way you take candy. Not just at night.

RB

Why?

FGT

I wanted to sleep for five days, six months, a year. I just wanted to sleep.

RB

Before I knew you I saw something ... You know what I'm going to say?

FGT

I dedicated a piece to Ross.

RB

Exactly. I thought, this is so sweet, I want to meet him. He dedicated this thing to me and I don't even know him. (laughter) It put me in the best mood. And then someone said to me, "You idiot, why would he dedicate something to you? It's his boyfriend."

FGT

(laughter) There's not too many people with that name, Ross. Where does it come from?

RB

Me? It comes from my grandmother whose name was Rose. Where did it come from for your Ross? What was his last name?

FGT

Laycock.

RB

How long were you together?

FGT

Eight years.

RB

What did he do?

FGT

He was a sommelier. He was about to finish his BS in Biochemistry with a minor in English Lit. He did everything; he was a Renaissance man. And gorgeous too, really gorgeous. Fucking hot! But intimidating, the first time around.

RB

Obviously you grew more comfortable, hopefully, in six or seven years ...

FGT

Like he said once to me, I'm a strange bird—I guess he liked that. He had these boyfriends who were Calvin Klein models and stuff like that.

RB

Calvin Klein models? (laughter)

FGT

Yeah, the boyfriend before me was one of the biggest models ...

RB

It's nice that people get bored with those kind of guys and go for strange birds, isn't it? Artistic types, if you know what I mean.

FGT

I saw a picture of this guy and I said, "Oh my God! Do I have to compete with that?" I look like a fucking snot with a jacket next to him. He was gorgeous.

RB

What did you think you looked like? A knot?

FGT

S-N-O-T ...

RB

(laughter) Felix, you're funny!

FGT

I always tell my friends, I feel like a snot walking down the street with a jacket on. I'm very insecure when it comes to looks.

RB

Well, a lot of people are ... Listen, anything can work to your advantage or to your disadvantage. You have to make these feelings work to your advantage.

FGT

That's how I always work: take your limitations ...

RB

And make them your strengths.

FGT

I was telling my students, "Your limitations should be your strengths." When I first started making art in 1987, I had no money. I had a little tiny studio smaller than this kitchen.

RB

The size of the studio is not particularly relevant to the work you do, Felix, is it?

FGT

That was a studio apartment, not my studio.

RB

I started out in a studio apartment as well, but I have fond memories of it now.

FGT

I've never been so happy in my whole fucking life.

RB

Me too, absolutely. I had a studio apartment with lots of furniture and over a period of about a year —this is when I was 20—every stick of furniture went out the door and that's how I became a minimalist. (laughter)

FGT

People would say, "Can I come to your studio?" And, I'd say, "Sure, but my studio is underneath my bed." I had one of those ugly captain's beds with drawers. Everything I made had to fit under that bed. I told my students, I made two bad decisions and it worked.

RB

Let me just get something straight, here. You started at the University of Puerto Rico as an art student and then you went to Pratt?

FGT

Right, to study interior design.

RB

So that's why you love going to flea markets now, that's a part of you.

FGT

I go to the flea market because it is full of small, hidden histories. Pratt Institute is the most banal, empty-minded, crass place you could think of.

RB

I'm sure they're going to want to look you up after they read this and get you to do a promotional.

FGT

They know. Spend your money on a car but don't waste it on Pratt.

RB

So you got rid of Pratt and then you went to the Whitney Program, where you were inspired by all of that theory. Except it paralyzed you for a number of years. So in those years when you re-evaluated everything, did you still want to be an artist or had you abandoned that idea?

FGT

In 1984, I went to the International Center for Photography at NYU Graduate School. I still wanted to be an artist, but I wanted to make ...

RB

Let me guess, you didn't want to make objects.

FGT

No, I wanted to know why I was making those objects; I wanted to know why I was going to take those photographs. At Pratt, they tell you to find a style. But you cannot find a style; you develop a style. You have a need to say something in a certain way and that becomes later what is called, "your style."

RB

(someone enters) This is Moses, say hello. This is Felix Gonzalez-Torres. So look at his eyes, Felix.

FGT

Beautiful eyes. Where are you from?

Moses Israel.

RB

Felix is having a show at the Guggenheim at the same time as me.

M He's an artist?

RB

Well, of course, what else would he be doing having a show at the Guggenheim?

FGT

Well, I could be a designer.

RB

Could be doing a musical.

FGT

Some kind of performance or something.

RB

That's true; I'm sorry.

M See.

RB

You asked a good question Moses; maybe you should help with the interview.

FGT

Ross, I hate interviews.

RB

Felix. This is not an interview; trust me.

FGT

Did David Seidner tell you how freaked out I was when he went to take my picture?

RB

David Seidner? You looked fabulous. Freaked out? I couldn't believe it! That picture in Harper's? That must be your favorite picture of you of all time.

M My grandma ripped it out of the magazine and put it on her wall.

RB

You looked like a sex god.

FGT

I wanted to cancel the article, because I'm shy, and it freaked me out.

RB

You're not so shy; don't kid yourself.

FGT

David said something about hands that stayed with me. He showed me a book of 17th-century portrait painting, and it's all about the hands.

RB

Your work has a melancholy to it. But you also have a humor in your work that I love.

FGT

I take my work seriously. I don't take myself seriously. Sometimes you have to look back and say, "Fuck, how was I able to make that shit?" And laugh about it and then move on. And then destroy the work. I've destroyed a lot of work; I'm not afraid of mistakes. I'm afraid of keeping them.

RB

Why are you afraid of keeping mistakes? What are you afraid is going to show? Everything's about mistakes in life.

FGT

Every time I have a show, I think it's the worst ever.

RB

After awhile, you stop being insecure, you get used to it. I'm used to my insecurities.

FGT

People ask me, "Are you happy with your show?" And I say, "I don't know." I need six to eight months to digest this work.

RB

Are you happy with your Guggenheim show?

FGT

I don't know.

RB

I think you are.

FGT

No, I really don't know. I have to ...

RB

Have you accomplished anything in your life so far, as an artist?

FGT

That's a very tough question. In a way, 'yes;' in a way, 'no.'

RB

Tell me in what way 'yes' and in what way 'no.'

FGT

I think with the stacks and with the candy spills and the light streams, pushing certain limits, like the limits of editions, the limits of the inclusion of the viewer, the collector, other people in the work. I feel very good about that.

RB

I think your show is going to look beautiful. I saw the little teeny, weeny installation.

FGT

Only at the Guggenheim, only these people. When they told me that the show was going to be you and me, I thought that's a very good combination—a painter with someone who does installation. It can be pretty tough for people to go from one area to another, but at the same time ...

RB

Well, that's not our problem, is it? That's number one. Do you think everyone's going to say, "This is the Guggenheim going fag?"

FGT

No, 'cause no one has ever said "This is the Guggenheim going straight."

RB

No, but they will say that it's going gay.

FGT

I think people are past that.

RB

Oh really! They won't write it but they'll say it. You know what I mean? They're politically correct until they get home.

FGT

The way it works is that the press tells you there's going to be an art show at the Guggenheim and that's all they say because it's a straight, white male show. But if it's somebody else, some other, it's a show with two gay artists at the Guggenheim. And that is very damaging because when someone is labeling you it's for the purpose of justification which is always defensive. I'm gay. But I don't make work about being gay ...

RB

You don't make work about being gay?

FGT

No. You just include it ...

RB

I don't either. Although you make work about being ...

FGT

In love with a man ...

RB

In love with a man, what it means to be alive today, what you think, how you feel ... Do you think that gets at all sentimental?

FGT

Not at all. On the contrary, it's very political. Because you are going against the grain of what you are supposed to be doing. You are not supposed to be in love with another man, to have sex with another man.

RB

Do you think that anybody cares about that at this point?

FGT

Walk down the street holding hands with another man and I'll tell you a story. We're talking general culture.

RB

Yeah, but we're not talking about the general culture. We're talking about artists.

FGT

No, we are talking about our own culture because artists come from the general culture, and the public is the general culture.

RB

That's true. More so than we imagine.

FGT

That's what I've been doing with the work, and you have been doing that with your work, too, being an infiltrator.

RB

Do you think your work is sentimental?

FGT

It is sentimental, but it's also about infiltration. It's beautiful; people get into it. But then, the title or something, if you look really closely at the work, gives out that it's something else.

RB

Oddly enough, I think that my work does have a certain sentiment to it, but I am not sentimental at all.

FGT

All great art has sentiment.

RB

And all great work has ruthlessness. Not that I'm saying your work or my work is great. Just in general, great work has sentimentality and ruthlessness in the appropriate balance.

FGT

I see it more as a heroic gesture. And I'm not talking about size, it could be a small gesture. But it has to be totally extreme to be heroic. Something about ideology and about shows that are always labeled ...

RB

By giving it a label, by saying "gay artists," it's a way of being dismissive ...

FGT

It's also a way of keeping us bogus by giving the center such an importance. Because that center is always there, it's art by straight white

RB

Do you love them?

FGT

Some of them I do.

RB

Which ones?

FGT

I love Robert Ryman, Carl Andre ...

RB

You do? I can understand why you love Carl Andre, but let me ask you something about him.

FGT

I don't know anything about him. I never met the man.

RB

I'm not talking about the man. But I'm very interested in an idea about the work. I noticed that he was recreating a piece that he made in 1964 for a recent show. But he hasn't done anything since that piece.

FGT

He has. There's always some new work at the back of Paula Cooper.

RB

His work has basically not moved or changed. Nor has Flavin's, nor has a number of those minimalists'. Nor has Robert Mangold's.

FGT

Well, I respect that. They were signature works.

RB

I love their work, by the way, but I want to know how come, if your work or my work doesn't change, everybody is hysterical. These guys keep making one little tile piece on the fucking floor for forty years; everyone thinks: genius. You tell me what that's about.

FGT

Waiting lists.

RB

That's from the market point of view, but I don't think so.

FGT

These artists are very dedicated. I really think this is all about survival and life-time dedication to finding some answers in a very narrow niche. They go for that, and they investigate that. Carl Andre has many permutations of those pieces. Ross, most artists only have one great idea and then they keep doing it. One I can think of with a few great ideas is Jeff Koons.

RB

He has different ways of working. In the end, the idea might all be the same, Felix, we don't know that, yet.

FGT

His work is brilliant, brilliant. That's what I call different bodies of work—I always think, "Who made it? It's like five people, which he probably does have helping him. But it's true, if you and I don't change every six months, if we don't produce the new spring collection or the winter collection, if there's no difference, people think, "Oh, they sold out; they're just lazy people."

Gonzalez 03 Body

Felix-Gonzalez Torres, Untitled, 1991, billboard, location #22: 504 West 44th Street; size varies with installation. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Projects. Photo by Peter Muscato.

RB

Have you been reviewed in the New York Times?

FGT

Never.

RB

How many shows have you had?

FGT

In New York? At least five one-person shows.

RB

And you've never been reviewed?

FGT

In the Times, no; I've been very lucky.

RB

If you were reviewed at the Times who would you least like to talk about your work?

FGT

That's a very awkward question to answer, Ross.

RB

I love it! Let's put it this way, now that you're having a show at the Guggenheim the chances are highly likely ...

FGT

That they will bash me.

RB

Which writer do you think would do the least bad job.

FGT

The least damage, I think would be done by Carol Vogel.

RB

I like Holland Carter because he's sweet and soft. But Carol Vogel is basically the person I would like, as well, to do reviews.

FGT

As we know, every fool that flies into town and has a show gets six, eight inches of the Times.

RB

I think that the art writing, to put it mildly, is slightly out of touch. And I would say that's generous.

FGT

We're strong enough to be generous. If you're weak, pussy-footed, you cannot be generous. You have to be very constricted and constipated about everything you own. But if you're generous it shows you're strong.

RB

Exactly. So are you in love now?

FGT

I never stopped loving Ross. Just because he's dead doesn't mean I stopped loving him.

RB

Well, life moves on, doesn't it, Felix?

FGT

Whatever that means.

RB

It means that you get up today and you try to deal with the things that are on your mind.

FGT

That's not life, that's routine.

RB

No, it's not.

FGT

Oh, yes, it is.

RB

A lot in life is about routine, and hopefully we can make our routines in life as pleasurable as we know how. Because we connect to our work in a way that's satisfying and we have some nice relationships. After that, how much more can you ask?

FGT

That's why I make work, because I still have some hope. But I'm also very realistic, and I see that ...

RB

Your work has a lot to do with hope; it's work made with eyes open. That to me is very important. Work made with eyes open.

FGT

It's about seeing, not just looking. Seeing what's there.

RB

Do you look to fall in love? Do you need that as a situation? Does it inspire your work?

FGT

How can you be feeling if you're not in love? You need that space, you need that lifting up, you need that traveling in your mind that love brings, transgressing the limits of your body and your imagination. Total transgression.

RB

You feel like you had that with Ross?

FGT

A few times over.

RB

How long were you with him?

FGT

Eight years, more or less.

RB

How long into the relationship did he get diagnosed?

FGT

The last three years.

RB

Did he know he had HIV?

FGT

No, the year before he got the diagnosis of AIDS he had his appendix removed and they tested the blood and it was HIV positive. But he was a fucking horse. He was 195 pounds, he could build you a house if you asked him to. It's amazing, I know you've seen it the same way I've seen it, this beautiful, incredible body, this entity of perfection just physically, thoroughly disappear right in front of your eyes.

RB

Do you mean disappear or dissipate?

FGT

Just disappear like a dried flower. The wonderful thing about life and love, is that sometimes the way things turn out is so unexpected. I would say that when he was becoming less of a person I was loving him more. Every lesion he got I loved him more. Until the last second. I told him, "I want to be there until your last breath," and I was there to his last breath. One time he asked me for the pills to commit suicide. I couldn't give him the pills. I just said, "Honey, you have fought hard enough, you can go now. You can leave. Die." We were at home. We had a house in Toronto that we called Pee-Wee Herman's Playhouse Part 2 because it was so full with eclectic, campy, kitsch taste. His idols were not only George Nelson and Joseph D'Urso, but also Liberace.

RB

That's a very nice combination.

FGT

Love gives you the space and the place to do other work. Once that space is filled, once that space was covered by Ross, that feeling of home, then I could see, then I could hear. One of the beauties of theory is when you can actually make it into a practice.

RB

What do you mean by the beauties of theory? What kind of theory are we talking about?

FGT

We talk about Marxist theory. We talk about Brecht.

RB

Your basic Whitney Program reading list.

FGT

Which is a great reading list.

RB

So Felix, I'm curious to what degree the involvement with your work and with gay life, having a lover who's died—I know that's effected your work tremendously in the billboards.

FGT

It's also about inclusion, about being inclusive. Because everyone can relate to it. It doesn't have to be someone who is HIV positive. I do have a problem, Ross, with direct representation, of what's expected from us.

RB

Why?

FGT

What I'm trying to say is that we cannot give the powers that be what they want, what they are expecting from us. Some homophobic senator is going to have a very hard time trying to explain to his constituency that my work is homoerotic or pornographic, but if I were to do a performance with HIV blood—that's what he wants, that's what the rags expect because they can sensationalize that, and that's what's disappointing. Some of the work I make is more effective because it's more dangerous. We both make work that looks like something else but it's not that. We're infiltrating that look. And that's the problem I have with the sensational, literal pieces. I'm Brechtian about the way I deal with the work. I want some distance. We need our own space to think and digest what we see. And we also have to trust the viewer and trust the power of the object. And the power is in simple things. I like the kind of clarity that that brings to thought. It keeps thought from being opaque.

RB

And deluded.

FGT

I was visiting in Miami where I saw this beautiful video about someone dying. There was an image of someone swimming underwater and the sound was this very heavy-duty breathing, like someone couldn't breathe, actually. And that for me would have been more than enough. But then of course they will not trust the strength of that imagery, the combination of imagery and sound. They had to add text to it and flack it up.

RB

You know what I want to ask you? How long do you think you're going to live?

FGT

That's a very rude question. I want to live until I do all the things that I want to do.

RB

So you don't know the answer to the question.

FGT

It's not about time. It's about how life is lived. I have had a very good life. I have lived this life well. Very well. And I'm an atheist. I'm 100% atheist. How many years, I don't know. I want to experience a few other things ... I want to go back to Paris and I want to go back to London.

RB

How long do you think all of this would take?

FGT

I have no idea. Whatever it takes. Maybe a year, two years, six months. One month. That's what I want to do.

RB

So you would be happy.

FGT

I want to be on the runway for Comme des Garçons.

RB

Oh, really? Is that an ambition of yours?

FGT

I'm just kidding. You did it. That was fun, huh?

RB

I like everything.

FGT

Ross, rephrasing the question—how long did it take you to make those new paintings?

RB

All my life.