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When You Cry, I Only Love You More

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Felix Gonzalez-Torres once said in an interview, “I’m still proposing the radical idea of trying to make this a better place for everyone.” I wish I could assure him he has indeed made this a better world to find. In times such as these, he has given us all an invaluable gift: something to cling to. As we all stumble through the months and years ahead grasping for that something, it is reassuring that there are still moments worth holding on to. Many things have quickly receded into the haze of life, and rightly so, but I was comforted to know that the moments I had always valued as changing my life still retained that value. One of those moments was when I discovered the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

I never knew I would have to speak about Felix’s work under the weight of such tragedy; it is a testament to him that I can. It amazes me that his work can so amorphously adapt to any pain or joy that enters my life. His work already had a significant part in holding me together everyday, but now it is truly intertwined. I don’t want to know a world without it. If art can be anything anymore, then it must be this.

To say Felix has opened me up to the little things of life is a given, but to say he has helped me understand the truly big, complicated things in life is something more valuable in a way. Things we all take for granted as knowing, such as being an artist or a human, the power of metaphor and context, or of love and abstraction. It is a bit embarrassing to suggest talking about love, for example; as if there was anymore to say that didn’t resort to cliché. You get the feeling from Felix that he wasn’t afraid to be embarrassed, and, with regards to love, there were still some strange unresolved areas. The sort of you-make-me-sit-alone-by-the-telephone-and-I-don’t-mind

kind of love. Felix always wore his Achilles heel on his heart. I suppose in the spirit of this issue I should be willing to be a little embarrassed also.

As I reflected on his work for this essay, I wasn't sure I would be able to focus on just one piece. I so quickly fall into the illogical fandom category when I think about his work that to dare place one piece over another is tantamount to sacrilege. I don't care about "early" work and "mature" years with him; I want it all and I want it now. It is not an exaggeration though to say that to fully understand his work you have to appreciate how each piece is intricately linked and gently nudges on the next. You have to soak in the aura of his project as much as any specific piece. With that said, I was surprised when I actually focused on it that I did indeed have a favorite, number one Felix piece. It is simply entitled, *Untitled, 1991*, or what I have always referred to as his billboard bed piece.

The piece is simple enough: a soft white and muted gray photograph of an empty bed. A couple's bed caught in that moment fresh in the morning, when body indentations and wrinkles in the sheets from embraces the night before have not had time to smooth themselves out. It is as delicate an affirmation of our existence as I have seen. This moment of intimacy was then enlarged as a billboard and originally displayed in 24 locations around New York City in 1992.

I must admit, when I first came across this piece as a young student I didn't make much of it or the rest of his work. It was a nice enough photograph, but I was missing something. With conceptually based art and his work in particular, it is never anything you can immediately put your finger on and no one can blame you if you just walked away. But I decided not to walk away. In those early days of my art education I needed to know why. Why was this interesting and could be called art? Felix was about to teach me a lesson he has repeatedly through my artistic life: the role of context and obligation. My obligation as a viewer did not end at simply observing the object but with engaging with it; searching out for those fragments of information that enrich the work. An empty bed hovering above the city skyline was just begging for an

engagement.

No one would argue that Billie Holiday's music isn't more poignant once you know her life story, or the social conditions from which it was birthed. Nor would Felix's work be able to transcend the fact that it is just a bed, or just a pile of candy, if not for his personal story or cultural moment. This was one of those life changing moments when I realized that the level of commitment and dedication that would be required of me to understand this man's work was unlike any I had previously known. The trickle down effect of such a moment is quite significant. I realize these ideas of context and obligation may seem so obvious now, but do you remember when you first realized them? Do you remember the day you truly understood the power of metaphor? I do. It was because of Felix.

Heartstrings begin to break and context displays its full potency when you learn that Felix's lover and companion, Ross Laycock, had just recently passed away in 1991 of AIDS. Felix himself would succumb to the disease only a few years later. And only 5 years before the creation of Felix's piece, the Supreme Court, in its infamous Brown vs. Hardwick ruling, had decided that consenting adults had no protection from government intrusion into the privacy of their own bedrooms. They were basically upholding the right of the state to prosecute gay men and lesbians who participated in certain sexual activities.

Here was the magic of Felix's piece; he could in one gesture so delicately say goodbye to his love and what he must have known by then was his own impending goodbye, and yet there is a bristling anger and protest to the piece. A justified anger at the invasive tactics and moral judgment placed on his being, and anger at the disrespect shown to thousands as they slowly deteriorated to a disease that our government and society could not come to terms with.

What needs to be stressed here, and which I feel can't be overstated, is the way in which Felix chose to address this anger. There is a real strength and integrity to it, but he never let his anger turn him into that which he was so critical of. He never chose to give in to shock tactics when so many others did. He knew that shock could never encompass the subtlety and nuance of what was an equally complicated and nuanced anger. Under the delicacy was pure romantic aggression. It is a Trojan horse of a piece, sneaking inside the heart only to burst from within.

Felix was a master at the use of ambiguity as a poetic and critical device. Choosing the ambiguous "Untitled" for virtually every piece, and because his personal story was not readily available to the thousands who saw these billboards, you would think he was avoiding the personal and political issues his work is known for. Felix simply recognized the value of self-discovery. It is there if you want it and open ended enough that each of us could personalize it, but this ambiguity should never be mistaken for a non-position. When you peel away the layers, much is at stake. When you consider the fact that Felix has chosen one of the most public of advertising vehicles, such as a billboard, to magnify an intimate private space between two individuals whom the state has deemed as engaging in illegal behavior, and then post this image across the city, it is hard not to realize positions are being claimed. It is not ambiguous but real and concerns all of our lives; heterosexual, homosexual, faithful, faithless, we have all slept under Felix's sheets, adding our wrinkles as personal totems.

I will never forget as a young art student the moment the full weight and consequence of Felix's billboard crashed down on me. I remember how unnerved but excited I felt at the political and social capabilities art had, and how impressed I was with what seemed his brazen handling of topics such as love and romanticism. The cynicism and pessimism that permeate our post-modern moment have not allowed for a real re-investigation of love and romanticism, concepts that are difficult to raise even now. Of course, Felix rejected this from day one. That was what I needed to hear at that moment in my life more than anything else, and it is something we all need to hear today. Love doesn't have to be petty or bogged down in cliché, love is subversive and romanticism can again be a critical tool. Felix knew this, and set a standard for all

of us to aspire to. It is something I grapple with to this day.

With the empty bed it was as if he was daring us all that sometimes the most radical gesture in art is simply telling someone you love them, and you miss them when they are gone. The rebellion here is called sincerity. Irony, distance, and sarcasm simply don't apply when your lover is gone. This has never seemed more relevant than today as thousands, in a flash, will lie in an empty bed.

Felix's romanticism, though, should never be confused with Hollywood sentimentality. There is no self-pity or wallowing in sadness; to want to pour your heart out in an intelligent way is quite a radical desire in our age. I can tell you from a generation whose main criticism is disenchantment or slackerism that Felix's message rings true. From the vantage point of dead consumerism his message is one of hope, that there are still possibilities within the limitations of everyday life, and a billboard for a moment can convey something other than a sale.

The secret to love, he seems to be saying, is just paying attention. Melodies can be pulled from the dissonance, lullabies can still be found among the static, and sometimes meaning can reside simply, and magically, in the empty pillow next to you. We all need something to cling to and Felix knew this. I wish with all my might he was back in his bed tonight clinging to what he cherished most.