You Can Take It With You

The public life of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

December 1, 1998 By Carl George

December 1 marks the 10th anniversary of Day Without Art, an event that commemorates the life and work of hundreds of artists killed by AIDS. One was New York-based artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose public billboards and take-home prints forged a charged connection between public dissemination and private ownership, popular discourse and rarified art theory, between the daily lives of gay Americans and the right-wing maelstrom sweeping the country in the epidemic's early years.

The last time I saw my friends Felix and his lover, Ross Laycock, together was in a huge pile of candy on a museum floor in New York City. The total weight of the thousands of shimmering, silver, foil-wrapped candies was equal to that of the two men combined. Visitors to this installation that Felix created for the Whitney Museum's 1991 Biennial Exhibition were invited to take pieces of the candy, and as they did, the pile slowly dwindled -- a metaphor for the gradual dissipation of two lives. "I wanted to make an artwork that could disappear," Felix said in 1995, a year before his death. Much of his artwork addressed this simple idea -- the multiple prints that museum-goers carried away, the candy spills. Felix called these, along with his text-based "portraits" made up of names and dates, "informational fragments," "private revelations in a public context."

The first time I saw Ross and Felix together was at a cocktail party in Manhattan in 1983. The two had met a week before and were already deeply in love. It was obvious that Ross, an inseparable friend of mine since our teenage years in Canada, had finally found a man of substance. Ross and Felix's intense relationship played itself out during the Reagan era, a time of great difficulty for many, in particular gay men and lesbians. It was also, for some of us, a time of great creativity and profound personal change, of vibrant activism centered on a seemingly uncontrollable epidemic. Of his art, Felix defiantly stated, "This work is about my rejection of the imposed and established order."

I remember marching with Ross and Felix in the 1989 New York Gay Pride parade -- Ross by then thin and fatigued, Felix screaming at the Christian Coalition counterdemonstrators and me running to find bottled water for Ross's medication. As the marchers spilled onto Christopher Street, near the Stonewall Bar where riots 20 years earlier had signaled the launch of the gay rights movement, we passed under a massive billboard that Felix had installed as a commemoration. The sign placed our lives squarely in a long history of struggle against misunderstanding and aggression.

Ross died a year and a half later. He asked to be cremated and to have his ashes separated into 100 sealed plastic bags. That way Felix could leave bits of Ross, his “only audience,” his “public of one,” wherever he traveled.

Felix scattered traces of Ross throughout his artwork in the ensuing years before Felix, too, succumbed to a barrage of AIDS-related illnesses in 1996. Ross appears as one of a pair of synchronized wall clocks whose batteries will expire at different times; as a single light bulb on a cord titled “March 5,” Ross’s birthday; as a billboard photograph of a clean white bed with two pillows bearing the impressions of lovers’ heads.

Felix stated that “each of us perceives things according to who and how we are at particular junctures.” In Felix’s work, his personal history is inextricably linked to a shared gay one. His art represents stolen lives, lost friends, uncaring political leadership, but it also conjures up two robust and beautiful young lovers, walking together in the snow on a cold Canadian winter day or fighting over sections of the Sunday *New York Times* and laughing hysterically -- always laughing.

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