

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## A Personal Remembrance of Sculptor Tony Feher

Nina Felshin June 28, 2016



Installation view of Tony Feher at Wooster Gardens (now Sikkema Jenkins & Co.), New York, September 11–October 9, 1993 (all work © Tony Feher; all photos courtesy of Anthony Meier Fine Art, San Francisco, and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York)

I will never forget [Tony Feher's](#) first, jewel-like solo show in the fall of 1993 at Wooster Gardens. It was intimate, smart, and poetic. Unwittingly, perhaps, it also commented on a relatively new phenomenon in the art world: high production values that all too often were being used to camouflage an unimaginative use of materials and the absence of real content. Inherent in that first solo show were the hallmarks of Tony's output for the next 20 plus years: imagination, poetic eloquence, humor, a uniquely inventive use of materials, and a wonderful ability to encourage the viewer to project her own experience onto the work.

I met Tony around 1986, when we both worked for the sculptor [Scott Burton](#). A few years later, he was working for Scott's dealer, [Max Protetch](#), so our paths continued to cross. It was always a pleasure to encounter his warmth and humor,

but it wasn't until his Wooster Gardens show that I became acquainted with his work.

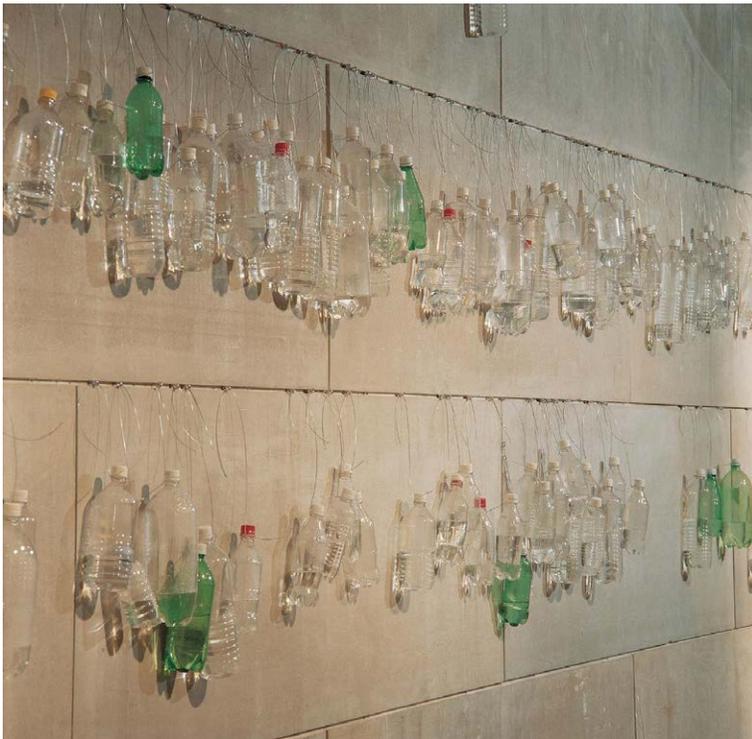
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Tony was one of the first artists I invited to do a site-specific installation when I began my curatorial tenure at Wesleyan University's Zilkha Gallery in the fall of 1996. I loved the way he thought about things. I felt certain he would figure out a way to make the majestic, raw, and challenging architecture of Zilkha's huge main gallery an integral part of his work. And although Tony had done nothing of this nature or on a comparable scale at the time, I trusted he would work his magic in the space.



Installation view of 'Tony Feher: Siempre Contigo' at the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, October 29–December 14, 1997 (photo by Kirk Winslow) (click to enlarge)

His project would open in the fall of 1997. He visited on a number of occasions, hanging out in the gallery for hours at a time by himself. The air circulation system relied on intake vents running along the perimeter of the floor. Tony soon figured out that by sitting on the floor against a wall, he could smoke weed in the gallery and hardly leave a trace. He was also very generous.



Tony Feher, "Siempre Contigo, Wallis's Wall" (1997), bottles, water, wire (detail, west wall), Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut (photo by and courtesy R.J. Phil) (click to enlarge)

What Tony discovered in the gallery was the presence of thousands of anchors and screw eyes. This observation was the basis of *Siempre Contigo*, which came into the world nine months later. Tony attached approximately 1,000 plastic bottles, each filled with "three seconds of water," to the screw eyes and anchors accumulated from past exhibitions in Zilkha's limestone block walls, reinforced concrete, and ceiling. By acting as magnets for the refraction of natural and artificial light and atmospheric condensation, the

bottles poetically retraced the gallery's 24-year exhibition history. The ephemeral, poignant quality of this work also evoked the loss and the vulnerability of human life, a reading that was underscored by the resemblance of the suspended bottles to hanged men and IV bottles.

The installation's title, *Siempre Contigo* (or "always with you"), spoke also of natural cycles, adaptive reuse, and survival. The evaporation and condensation that occurred inside each bottle microcosmically mimicked the universal cycle that produces rain. Plastic bottles come around again, too, through recycling. His use of existing screw eyes and anchors recalled mammals, birds, and insects that take advantage of existing shelters in their constant struggle to survive.

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I remember one Saturday morning in Chelsea in the late 1990s. As I was walking west on 22nd Street, Tony was getting out of a cab in front of D'Amelio Terras, his gallery at the time. He was looking very handsome in dark blue jeans, a beautiful brown leather jacket, and a plaid flannel shirt, with thick dark brown hair and nails brightly polished red. Irresistible.

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Tony Feher, "It Seemed a Beautiful Day" (2002), plastic bottles with plastic caps, water, food dye, wire, rope (photo by Adam Reich)

In 2002, I was invited to curate a show, *New Work/New Work*, at the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire. Tony was among the 25 artists I invited. It was one year after 9/11, so we decided to include "It Seemed a Beautiful Day" (2002), a poignant tribute to that event, an arrangement of clear plastic bottles partially filled with tinted light blue water. Wire twisted around each bottle cap. The bottles were strung together on a piece of rope and hung high in the space. While 9/11 had indeed been a beautiful, clear day, the twisted wire was a poetic reminder of the hideously mangled metal and loss of lives that ensued. Artist Elana Herzog, who also was in the exhibition, reminded me a few days ago that when Tony was asked if he wanted to come up and install his own piece he said, "Yes, but I charge \$2,000 a day." He came anyway and graciously accepted the going rate.

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Tony Feher, "Untitled" (2003) at Ventana244 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The last time I really got to hang out with Tony was last summer and fall on the occasion of *self contained*, a group show I curated at Ventana 244 in Williamsburg. I will never forget our studio visit in the South Bronx several months earlier, which lasted seven hours. It didn't take us long to figure out that an untitled piece from 2003 would work well in the context of the show; 12 years after finishing it, the piece reminded him of refugees fleeing by land or by sea. And then we talked and talked and talked and talked about everything under the sun. His various collections of what he himself described as tchotchkes got just as

much attention as a permanent outdoor commission he was working on; Tony had the gift of gab. During preparations for the Ventana show, he regaled all of us all of the time, despite the fact that he had just been diagnosed with cancer.

Like those mammals, birds, and insects that take advantage of existing shelters, Tony's memory will take up residence in so many of our hearts. Siempre Contigo. Always with you.

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