

ARTFORUM

Tony Feher (1956–2016)

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Tony Feher, 2011. Photo: Ellen Labenski.

WHEREVER HE WENT, Tony Feher transformed space, not only through his work but also through his presence; nothing ever felt or looked the same once he had his way with it. He was compelled to leave gifts, whether he was invited as an artist to create or show work in a museum setting or simply as a friend to spend time at someone's home. He couldn't help seeing and seizing opportunities to make his mark and leave it up to his host, institutional or private, to decide whether to keep these small treasures once he or the show moved on.

We conceived of our work together as the planning of a midcareer survey, too early in his lifetime to register as a retrospective, which was still a thing of the future. A future that we talked about a lot, mostly over great food and wine because Tony detested nothing more than a mediocre meal. During our travels, we spent hours seeking out the right restaurant for our physical and intellectual nourishment, celebrating accordingly when the quest was successful and complaining endlessly if it failed. (Sorry, Akron, it was a struggle.)

The last time I saw Tony in New York, we met at Wallsé for dinner, the first to arrive and the last to leave, carrying our conversation onto the sidewalk after shutting down the restaurant until we nearly froze to death and decided that it would be wise to go home. I wish we had continued no matter how cold or late. The feeling of loss is so acute that I often prefer to shove it aside. But here is what happens if I don't: I find myself speaking to others about his insatiable lust for life and love; his breadth of knowledge on seemingly any subject matter; his talent for conversation with people from all walks of life, which made him so beloved by so many; his filthy, blush-inducing sense of humor confusingly countered by his impeccable Southern manners; his generosity of spirit (often disappointed); and, of course, his ability to find beauty and meaning where others saw none or found little.



Tony Feher, *It Seemed a Beaujggul Day*, 2002, plastic bottles with plastic caps, water, food dye, wire, rope, dimensions variable.

No stranger to illness, Tony took his cancer diagnosis in stride and found love and support in his expansive circle of chosen family and friends, who were there for him every step of the way. His departure, while predicted for the near future, was nonetheless premature, cutting short the time he was promised. For those who cared for Tony, his absence leaves a gaping hole. But, of course, he knew this feeling only too well, having dealt with the death of friends and peers for so many decades. Loss has been a central subject of his work since the late 1980s, and as I am trying to come to terms with his, it is his work that offers the greatest solace. Laced with hope and optimism, it is a paean to survival and a glorious and hopeful place to anchor feelings of grief.

During the years we toured the country, Tony would disappear for periods of time to take power naps during installation. Museum staffers, including myself, kept stumbling on him in a state of slumber underneath desks or stairs, in corners of staff lounges and conference rooms, or tucked away in closets and storage spaces, wondering when (if) he would awaken but in the meantime going to great lengths to protect his sleep.

That uncanny feeling when you look at someone sleeping and wonder whether she or he will wake up again, that brief moment where the fear of it not happening grips you and you are suddenly confronted with the possibility of the person's loss—we all have experienced those moments. Usually, they occur in the privacy of our homes, but Tony made these moments public. Their memory has been etched on my brain, and ever since learning about his death, I have had visions of him reemerging with a bellowing laugh from some unexpected place of temporary rest, as he did so many times before. I know he won't, but it's an image worth holding onto.

Claudia Schmuckli is the curator in charge of contemporary art and programming at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and former director and chief curator of Blaffer Art Museum, where she organized the exhibition "Tony Feher," a twenty-year survey of the artist's work. It was presented at the Des Moines Art Center, May 11–September 2, 2012; the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, October 13, 2012–March 31, 2013; the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, May 24–September 16, 2013; and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, October 6, 2013–February 14, 2014.

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