



## Frieze

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Fan Letter /

# Wayne Koestenbaum on the Sculptures of Tony Feher



By Wayne Koestenbaum

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‘His work resembles a world from which the humans have departed; all that remains are the mute plastic things, marked with purposeless love’

- ***Part of frieze magazine’s 200th issue. Read more from the landmark issue here.***

In the bruising 1990s (what decade is not bruising?), Tony Feher’s sculptures helped me understand that I could make sense of my world by returning to valueless found objects. I didn’t need to seek a representation of my world, or to explain it: I could simply rearrange it, reduce its elements – never to prove a point, never to limit someone else’s pleasure, never to determine the proper way to produce art.



Tony Feher, *Untitled*, 2007–09, cardboard boxes and spray paint, 128 × 36 × 30 cm. © Tony Feher Estate. Courtesy: Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco

I needed to see that someone else of my generation was relating to the junk of our earliest life with a measure of irony but a strict limitation on rebuke's intensity, creating communities of related, nearly identical objects.

His work taught me how to respond to the world by arranging its debris, by not abusing it or asking it to change, but simply respecting the cathexis I already felt toward it – a certain 'gay' or 'queer' (that's what we called it) delight in what was already here for the taking. The world, we learned, would offer us not every object but only a few scant elements; we would need to pervert or reinterpret those shards to make them our own.

When I was a kid, I collected paper-towel cores, bottle caps and back issues of *TV Guide*. Until I saw Feher's work, I didn't understand how the wish to collect the same – the not valuable same – was a social urge and not just a personal desire. The wish to collect the same told a story about human relations – attachments to the block, the city, the landscape.

Fidelity to the found object means that you don't alter or disguise it, and that you want to show your toys to the caretaker, babysitter or snooper. You want gawkers to see but not to demolish your collection. You won't brag about the profundity of your keepsakes. You want to be left alone with full sovereignty over them, and you want the patterns in which you assemble the bits to serve as amulets, spells you forge by fastidious arrangement.

After a catastrophe – let's call childhood a catastrophe – the first step toward repair is to figure out whether you genuinely loved anything in your earliest world. Did any mundane tools allow you to remain in your own proportions? Back then, did any nearby domestic elements respect your sovereignty? Perhaps the dumbest objects respected you the most; and so, as the first step toward recalibrating your relation to the world, you turned again to those original, tawdry monoliths – the ones that left you alone, that didn't invade. From them, you created a simulacral village. You had an ethical responsibility not to alter the movable parts because they had done you the kindness of not altering you. They left you unmolested; reciprocating, you would leave them whole. Your love for them would emerge not from how you transformed them but from how you let them remain themselves. And we might thereby learn that our best aspect was not what we were taught to say or do in school. Our deepest characteristic, our weirdest and most unexterminable trait, was the silent fascination that overcame us when we looked at and handled certain ordinary household appurtenances – useless objects that once had a minor purpose but weren't worth worshipping. These trivial, unforbidden touchstones fascinated us because their unimportance meant that we, too, could have a relation with them. Other people might find our love for these objects funny, and we would need to disguise our devotion or make light of it because our tenacity was unfashionable. Our tenacity was pointless, and we would exhibit our tenacity as well as the objects themselves. We would display our tenacity as a gesture of repair – a token of our ambition to reconstruct all the bonds that tie the many selves together, including the kinship between mere objects. Feher's work now resembles a world from which the humans have departed; all that remains are the mute plastic things, now marked with the purposeless love that the vanished humans bestowed on them. A world without humans is not necessarily a world without affections. Feher now resides in the sturdy objects he gathered and assembled. His love for resourceless remnants persists in the relics themselves; they contain and perpetuate his tenacity, care, faithfulness.

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TONY FEHER

ENTHUSIASM

