

Infra Objects: Tony Feher

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by Claudia Schmuckli

U.S. artist Tony Feher (1956–2016) used to joke that his most significant international exposure did not occur abroad but at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, thanks to its iconic art-destination status. There in 2006 he created three installations that flowed through the buildings and landscape of the former military compound Donald Judd had developed into a contemporary art center.

Chinati fittingly highlighted the site-specificity and reflexive minimalism to which he was inclined. But whereas 1960s and 1970s minimalism was concerned with the industrial prowess and hard materials at the core of U.S. infrastructural expansion during the Cold War, Feher prioritized the indestructible plasticity of the soft materials that characterize everyday logistics of consumerism.

Whether roaming the streets or scouring Home Depot, Feher privileged Styrofoam fillings, synthetic strings, straps and wrappers used for packaging and shopping bags, crates, jars, bottles, cups, and straws—things that are usually discarded after their (more desired) contents have been emptied. Accumulated into suspended clouds or blossoms; stacked into tentative towers, pyramids, or walls; or aligned to form spirals and waves, his work is both an archaeology of the materials that facilitate everyday consumption and an environmental project writ large. His art was not one of “poor materials”: he highlighted the lasting impacts of these *infra objects* with deferral of decay purposely built into their production, caught between short-term use value and long-term material conditioning.

Feher eschewed overt activism or the compulsive virtue-signaling so common on social media today. Instead he inscribed his concerns in formal strategies developed early in his career when faced with the double diagnosis of Meckel’s diverticulum and HIV at the age of thirty-three. Like H. G. Wells’s flower from the future—a reference he was particularly fond of when talking about the entangled clusters of intertwined plastic bags, netting, and twine in *Untitled* (1996) or *Untitled* (2002)—Feher’s sculptures announced the crisis of environmental devastation more than a decade before pictures of turtles and dolphins suffocated by plastic straws and strings went viral, and moldable polymers of all shapes and types had accumulated into a floating island the size of Alaska in the Pacific Ocean between California and Hawaii.

Despite the ready availability of his *infra objects*, Feher’s relationship to them was long-term. He would study them intimately, and with the same gusto with which he would explore an environment. Whether commissioned to work within a building or a landscape, he would make a point of inhabiting it, literally sleeping in it, to develop a nuanced understanding of its conditions: the movement of light, the changes in temperature, and the circulation of air. His investment in grasping the qualities of a place was so intense that it was not uncommon for him to disappear for “power naps” during installations, from which he would rise with a sense of purpose that would congeal everything into his calculated randomness.

He could never pass by a blank window in contemporary art settings without intervening: given a roll of blue masking tape, the most basic delimiting tool in construction work, also known as painter’s tape, he could imbue any space with the auratic quality of stained glass. While his work lived on many surfaces and planes, including floors, tables, and walls, he gravitated most eagerly toward airspace as a volume in between. Many of his most memorable works—both his sculptures and his spatial installations—share a sense of flow, or are literally afloat.

In Feher’s work everything is in plain sight. He would never force an object or material to do anything it wouldn’t naturally do: bottles contain liquids, strings are strung, crates are stacked, light materials float, heavy ones sink. Their properties aren’t so much transformed as accentuated with gestures so deceptively simple that they can cloak a discriminating

precision. Concerned with the vulnerability and ambiguity of life—both personal and planetary —his compositions of *infra objects* are flotation devices for meaning, enduring and adaptable, like currents of air or water responding to changes in temperature.

In a discursive climate conditioned by influencers, bubble filters, the automation of fake news, and targeted propaganda, I wonder if Feher's passing delivered another blow to the survival of the floating signifier—that ambiguous marker identified by Claude Lévi-Strauss as a magnet for our projections, of which Feher's work might have been a last example. With the world increasingly in the grip of shamans and myths that are not nearly as imaginative as the tribal narratives upon which Lévi-Strauss originally based his studies, one must wonder about the future potential for productive ambiguity.

The “death of medium”—most notably painting—as a consequence of the emergence of new technologies has been a familiar trope in art history for a couple of centuries now. Photography and its time-based twin, film, have recently experienced deaths through the dominance of the internet and the many imaging tools that feed on its propensity for virality, like memes or deep fakes. If the floating signifier is hijacked by ideology machines, automated misinformation, and psyops where anger and outrage capture our attention with the calculated randomness of slot machines, then the conversation is no longer about the death of a medium, but the death of an understanding of language.

Tony Feher (1956–2016) was born in Albuquerque and raised in Corpus Christi, Texas, with early stops in Florida and Virginia. He held a BA from the University of Texas, and resided in New York. Feher's work lives in important international collections, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Claudia Schmuckli is the inaugural curator in charge of contemporary art and programming at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Since the founding of the department in 2016 she has developed exhibitions and projects by Lisa Reihana, Alexandre Singh, Matt Mullican, Ranu Mukherjee, DIS, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Sarah Lucas, Urs Fischer, and Leonardo Drew, and the group exhibition *Specters of Disruption* drawn from the museums' holdings. Prior to that appointment, she was director and chief curator of the Blaffer Art Museum, Houston, starting in 2009 (she joined the staff in 2004). At Blaffer, Schmuckli developed more than thirty exhibitions, including solo shows dedicated to Matthew Ronay, Analia Saban, Slavs and Tatars, Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, Candice Breitz, Tony Feher, Johan Grimonprez, Gabriel Kuri, Chantal Akerman, and Amy Sillman. Schmuckli began her career in New York as a curatorial assistant at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art. She holds a master of arts degree in art history from the Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität in Munich.

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