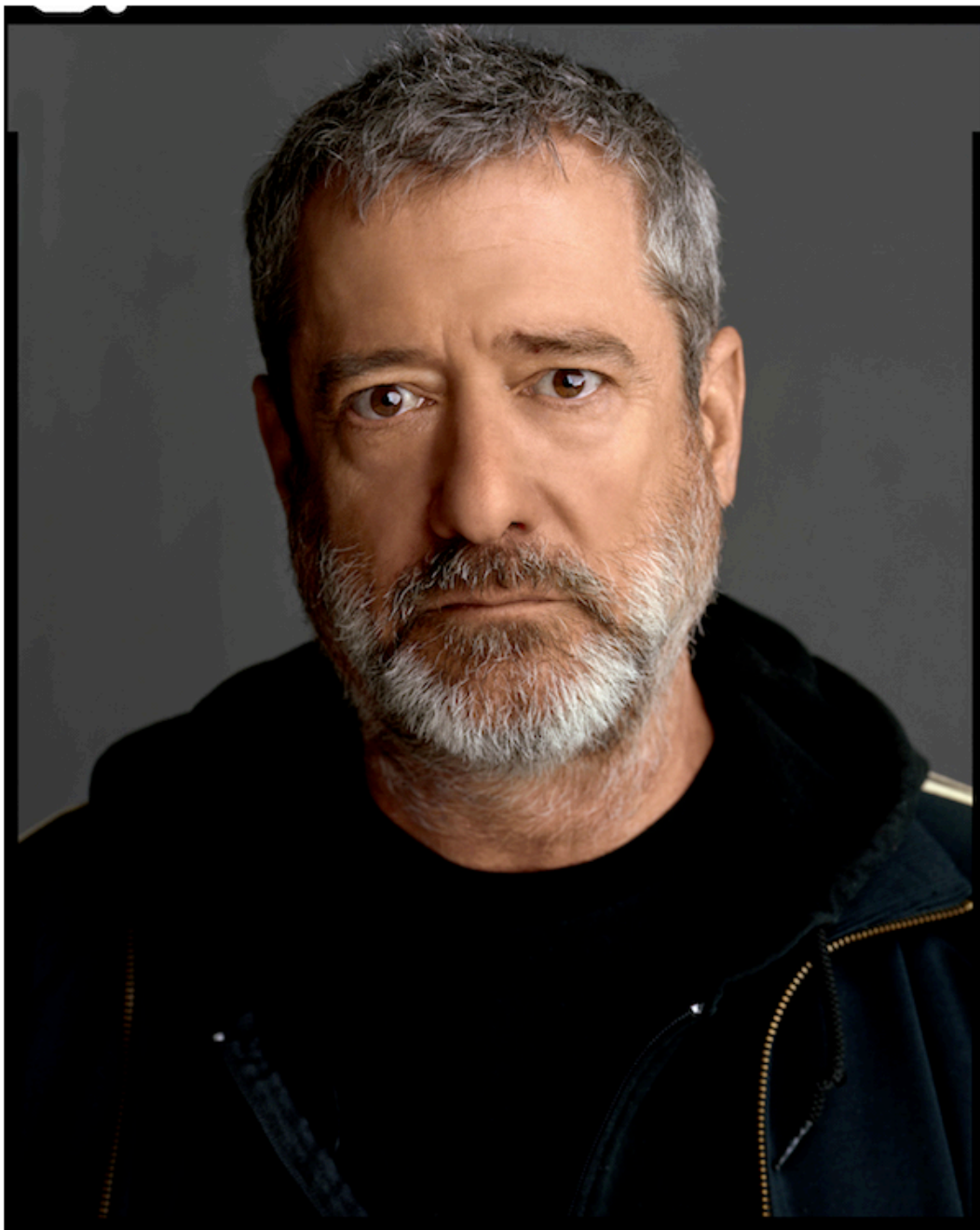


ARTFORUM

Tony Feher (1956–2016)

11.17.16



Tony Feher, 2010. Photo: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

MY FIRST COLLABORATION WITH TONY FEHER took place in the summer of 1995, in a group exhibition titled "Thresholds/Limiaries" at Fundação de Serralves in Porto, Portugal. The curatorial premise was for each artist—including Tony, Lewis deSoto, R. M. Fischer, Kristin Oppenheim, Paul Ramirez-Jonas, Diana Thater, Meyer Vaisman, and Millie Wilson—to present two works: one within the stately family house and the other in the surrounding gardens. When Tony explained to me that everything he needed for his indoor work would be in his checked luggage, that his total materials and production budget on-site would be approximately a hundred dollars, and that he didn't need any assistance on either one, I wondered—not for the last time—if maybe I hadn't fully grasped what his work was about.

Besides his clothes, all Tony brought with him to Portugal were a few coin rolls and a half dozen carefully wrapped empty glass jars and bottles that were the models, he explained, for the size and texture of the examples he would be looking for in Porto. Even before the official start of the two-week installation, he'd begun industriously spiriting away empty bottles from the roast-chicken joints we'd frequent at lunchtime, and pocketing every spare coin he could get his hands on. (I turned my smaller-value *escudos* over to him on a regular basis.) Within a week, his serpentine arrangements of bottles and coins—similar to what I'd already seen of his work—began to take shape on the Casa Serralves's downstairs floor, and I was partly reassured. Then one Saturday, he led me to a tiny general store downtown, to show off a nondescript display of plastic buckets in pink, cobalt, and orange that he steadfastly proclaimed was "the greatest thing I've ever seen" (a phrase I would hear repeated on future occasions). He'd had his eye on the long rose arbor that lined one side of the gardens, and within a few hours of our errand, the core of *Journeys End Just Begun – Porto* was in place: two dozen buckets, spaced widely apart, each suspended a few inches off the ground by an identical length of rope, catching the summer breeze in gently sashaying currents. The precise verticality of the ropes as they mirrored the arbor's pillars and shadows, and the discordant play of color between the buckets and the surrounding flowers, was astonishing to me, not least of all because of the breathtaking modesty of his means and the realization that he really hadn't done much, and yet everything had changed.

Tony and I would go on to collaborate on several exhibitions, traveling to Beijing, Istanbul, and Mexico City together, and we soon became close personal friends, sharing the seasonal rent over several consecutive summers for a small house, dubbed "Night Lily," in Cherry Grove on Fire Island, New York, where he would amuse himself for days on end puttering in the garden, digging in wet sand, or exploring the adjacent woods. Some evenings we talked at marathon length, and I began to appreciate how the refined taste he inherited from his grandmother and his extended period of ACT UP activism were equally present in his decision to abandon painting altogether and turn the city into his own private *Pearl Paint*. He combed the streets for scraps of material culture to be dragged back to his apartment or studio and wait their turn until he'd found a use for them. Along with rejecting traditional materials, Tony kept the techniques of sculpture at arm's length. Everything had to be stacked on top of, put into, laid alongside, or tied to something else, but it could never be nailed, fused, soldered, glued, welded, or even taped. If the full integrity of each ingredient within his pieces was not maintained in the works' final state, then the search would simply have to continue until something else fit something else.



Tony Feher, untitled, c. 1991–92, glass bottles with metal lids, found objects, 6 x 10 x 21".

One thing I recall vividly from those long, leisurely summers was Tony, regardless of his apparent activity, as he endlessly measured and tested all the spaces and materials in his surroundings for possible incorporation into a future artwork. Many artists do this, of course, but because his artistic identity was so aligned with the rejection of art conventions in favor of the found, discarded, and recycled, it seemed that for Tony there was never a time when he wasn't playing and working simultaneously. As a result, my attention would keep returning to the boundaries between a work by Tony Feher and something that isn't art at all or could be easily misperceived. When the house in Cherry Grove finally needed to be sold by its owners and our insiders' rental arrangement came to an end, a circular blue-tape piece Tony had spent days arranging in the front window three summers prior became a selling point for the realtor, who had become a fan of Tony's work in the meantime and assured the new owners that the blue tape would increase in value much faster than the house itself.

Tony and I were to have worked together one more time on a site-specific installation, for "Impermanence," the Thirteenth Bienal de Cuenca, Ecuador, but he passed away while still making preparatory studies for his installation at the future Museo de la Ciudad (we'll show finished works instead). Thinking about it now, my curatorial theme seems like a reflection on the slow but undeniable evolution that his work has imposed on my idea of what constitutes art, and the role of the curator in shaping and refining that understanding for everyone involved. Tony's fleeting, situational, and sometimes abject art might or might not portend a future of increasingly personalized approaches to art, but it does continue to expand the boundaries of what one curator believes constitutes meaningful art, and why.

Dan Cameron is a curator based in New York.

The Thirteenth Bienal de Cuenca, Ecuador, opens November 25 and runs through February 5, 2017.

Two memorial shows for Tony Feher open today: "Map For A Journey Not Yet Taken," at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, through December 16; and "It Didn't Turn Out the Way I Expected" at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, through December 23.