IN 1996, the year Felix Gonzalez-Torres died, I made a version of his "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), 1987-88, by hanging two identical battery-operated clocks side by side on my living-room wall. I had always admired his work, and, like friends who had foil-wrapped candles sitting on their bookshelves or a sheet of paper from one his stacks pinned to their walls. I too wanted to live with a Felix. A decade later, I still have my Felix. It's hanging in my studio, and when I look up at it, I'm reminded of the economy, toughness, and beauty of his multifaceted practice. Its wit and generosity: its impact on us all. Now, I didn't know Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Felix Gonzalez-Torres wasn't a friend of mine. And I'm no Felix Gonzalez-Torres. But Felix is the artist that artists of my generation feel on a first-name basis with. It is his interviews and writings that we pass along to students; his work that we make pilgrimages to see; his passing that we most deeply mourn.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, rigorously and lovingly edited by artist Julie Ault (his close friend and sometime collaborator), is a giant step toward understanding the ongoing vitality of his practice and presents a new model for what an artistic monograph can be. The book is a mixture of newly commissioned essays and reprints: writings, interviews, and lectures by Felix; and texts by Bertolet Brecht, Marguerite Duras, and Susan Sontag, among others, that served as touchstones for his practice. All of this is standard fare for a monograph, but what makes this one so extraordinary is the heterogeneity of the texts that Ault has assembled and the visual and critical intelligence with which the material has been arranged. Now, for example, does one recollect Simon Watney's passionate claim that at the core of Felix's art are issues of "systematic remembering and forgetting," of memorializing and cataloguing gay men who have died from AIDS with Miwon Kwon's contention that the "consistent presence of intimacy-in-distance and distance-in-intimacy as a conjured dynamic" is "the key to FGT's overall artistic practice, a fundamental perception of his life, and the foundation of his politics?" By presenting seemingly divergent viewpoints in the same volume, Ault avoids the totalizing, summing-up quality that monographs of this scope often have.

Ironically, despite the multiplicity of voices in the book, Ault claims that it is not an anthology. She asserts that it is best read in a linear fashion, and its twists and turns, subplots, and Sterne-like asides give it the feeling of an exquisitely constructed novel, one in which the "story" of Felix is rendered as rich and complex as his life and output. By dividing the book into six sections with headings such as "Social Relations and Production of Meaning" and "Passion of Remembrance: History and Memory," Ault has forged the usual separation of artist writings and interviews from critical essays and other material in favor of a more conversational structure. The section "Perfect Lovers: Context and Romantic Union," for example, contains a synopsis of a film by Duras, an essay by Felix on the artist Roni Horn, a short story by Virgilio Piñera, letters from Felix to collectors and his dealer, Andrea Rosen, and an essay by bell hooks on "subversive beauty." Each text plays beautifully off the others, and together they present a rich meditation on the section's themes. The photographs of individual works and installations are extraordinary throughout, many of them showing the same pieces in different contexts, as well as the public's interaction with them. In addition, reproductions of clippings and other material from Felix's archive illuminate his thought processes and reinforce Ault's statement that "connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting Gonzalez-Torres's biography with his art practice" was a guiding principle of the book.

The journey in contributor Nancy Spector's words, from "the self-as-referent to the social-as-mirror and back again" is a motif that runs through a number of the texts, which commence with an efficient survey by Robert Storr and are followed by solid contributions from David Deitcher, bell hooks, Anne Umland, Rainer Fuchs, and Russell Ferguson, among others. It is Felix's interviews and writings, however, that convey the fullest sense of his intellectual and artistic gifts. His conversation with Tim Rollins (maddeningly excerpted) is one of the most wide-ranging, honest, and underline dialogues between artists that I have ever read. Similarly incisive, Felix's brief essay on Horn's sculpture Gulf Field, 1990-92, beautifully describes how art...
at its best, gives one a tool to see the world differently. In fact, his interviews and statements are so good that they point to a problem inherent in editing any book on Felix: He was more subtle, engaging, and intellectually nimble than most of his critical commentators. Many of the essays in the book adopt a hushed, awed tone toward his work and writings, a tone that he himself was at pains to deconstruct.

In interviews, Felix often said that when the culture foregrounds something it is because that thing is needed, and one has the sense that he was the artist that everyone in the early 1980s was waiting for: articulate, bright, clean, and a nice-looking guy. Felix was the artist of color whom curators and critics buzzed into the corridors of power; while the angry, torch- and issue-wielding “others” were told to go around to the service entrance or to wait by the coatroom. To be sure, his work had “issues” too, but the discussion of them rarely leaves predetermined intellectual comfort zones. For example, while many of the essays in the book refer to Blanchot and Althusser, or to explore references to Minimalist and Conceptual practices, there is little discussion of Felix’s relationship to “multicultural” or “identity” art. Most of the contributors simply repeat that he was careful in his practice to avoid being “labeled,” without seriously considering the space that those supposedly reductive categories aimed to open up, to say nothing of Felix’s own complicated relationship to them. Only Ferguson’s essay, “Authority Figure,” begins to unpack what that moment was actually about. Similarly, in an interview with Joseph Kosuth, Felix talks about the importance of feminism to art production in the ‘80s, yet scant discussion of his work’s relationship to feminist theory appears anywhere in the volume.

There are a few pieces in the book, however, that engage Felix’s practice on equal footing or attempt to link it to different artistic frameworks. Kwon’s “The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Trace” is a brilliant investigation of the familiarity and unknowability that almost paradoxically coexist in his work, as well as a rethinking of the notion of community engendered by his candy spills, paper stacks, and billboards. Kwon also offers a fascinating reading of the certificates of authenticity and ownership that accompany these works as examples of how Felix figured “modes of exchange in the marketplace as integral rather than extrinsic to his work’s artistic meaning.” “The point of FGT’s certificates,” she writes, “was to work against the security of his own versions of the stacks of piles, sittings of light or bead curtains, as unchanging, original, and finite ideals for eternity, or for others coming after him must worship as inammorality better than all other versions.” The certificates continue a dialogue with the artist and ensure—even after his death—that the work evolves and becomes new again and again, thereby reimaging the responsibilities of ownership and the sanctity of his intentions.

Carlos Basualdo’s “Common Properties” covers territory similar to Kwon’s by investigating the notion of community based on shared ideas or experiences. For Basualdo, the community that Felix’s work produces is not bound by “dissonance” and “enigmatic and multiple reverse of meaning.” He takes a tough love stance, at one point admonishing him for adopting a “disordered arrangement” and advising him to return from his work. Basualdo writes, “The meaning of these images—the unmade bed, bed among the clouds, sequences of words and dates—is perhaps nothing but the enigma of its meaning,” and they reveal “the profound incommensurability that dwells in the very heart of meaning.” Like Kwon, he proposes that the community brought into being by the public projects is invested not on a shared understanding of their imagery, but on these images’ ultimate capacity. Such a model of sociability proposes a world of contemplation and resistance at a time when civic participation is equated with voting for a singer on American Idol or going shopping so the terrorists don’t win.

Another essay that differs in tone from most in the book is Gerardo Mosquera’s “Remember My Name.” In Ault’s preface, she details both how her intimate knowledge of Felix was crucial to structuring the book and how the use of that knowledge runs a risk, among others, of making him as the authority on all matters. Felix, Mosquera heros no such quails. With a casual familiarity that made me squirm, she writes, “Felix possessed an almost boundless knowledge of his Caribbean heritage and sense of humor... . . . He also set aside a good deal of time for his family and friends, a rather rare phenomenon in the huddled, careerist art world of New York. ‘There are times,’ he would tell me, ‘when you need your grandma’s black bear.’” “TM” (too much information!), I wrote in the margin, but I appreciate Mosquera’s insistence on the “loneliness” of Felix’s project and his linking of the artist to a trajectory including the likes of Helio Oiticica and Cildo Meireles (whose installations in Icological Circuits, 1970, Basualdo aptly relates to the strategies of circulation in Felix’s work).

At the end of his essay, Mosquera wryly notes that the accent marks in “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” as he insists on writing it, will probably disappear with the translation of the text from Spanish to English. One imagines that Felix would have seen the loss of the accents (and the gain of a hyphen between his last names) as the inevitable, even welcome, result of cultural in-betweenness, of the movement toward new spaces, of always being in process. This hybridity was not particular to Felix; it is something we all live with. Accents marks and hyphens in our names or not, we are all products of a historical moment characterized by an unprecedented mixing of cultures and the erosion of physical and psychic boundaries. What we might call “identity” or the “self” is a storage room with a busted lock: We go in looking for “me” and instead find “we.” In Felix’s work, the line between “me” and “we” is constantly put into question. His highly personal images and references act as devices that simultaneously bring us deeper into the work and thrust us back into the world. The magnificent achievement of Ault’s book is that it collects the models Felix presented through his art and life in a form that is complex, contradictory, and elegant. We all have the powerful fantasy that we’ll one day meet someone who will be everything, who will know us as well as we know ourselves. Sometimes that person is a lover. Sometimes that person is a friend. Ault has given us Felix as she knew him, and the result is the book I imagine Felix would have wanted for himself.

Gleam Ligon is a New York–based artist.