Bichos: Pay the Piper

JORGE MISIUM

Trouble finds me easily every time I get back to Dallas. Institutional attendants nervously keep me apart from the art. I may be coming from the wider art world where we don't touch the art by implicit agreement. The local art scene has meanwhile dictated draconian restrictions: at least three feet away from the art. Houston is thankfully a chill one foot. Mama MoMA? An arm's length.

Prepare to argue with a Black Knight.

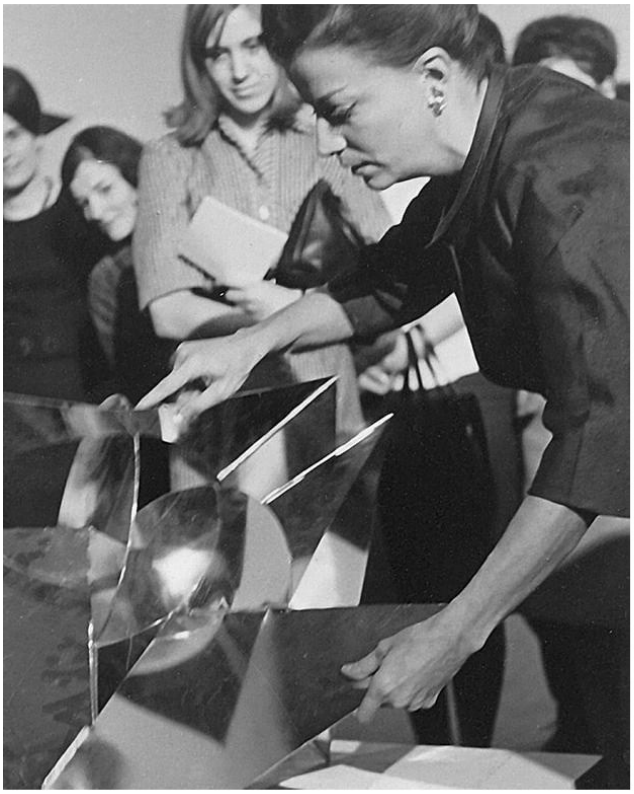
Thankfully, we can still touch and be touched by art. And for a lot longer than the average eight seconds we spend looking at it/her/him. The pronoun doubts resonate with Bruno Latour in the 90s: "for there are neither subjects nor objects." Back in 1957, Lygia Clark typed eleven pages that quietly redefined our relationship with art. She didn't call it a manifesto, but a proposal to herself: "The work must demand immediate participation from the spectator and the spectator must be thrust into it/she [*dela*]."

Clark then animated her propositions by unleashing nearly seventy works, which she named "bichos." T Magazine recently listed the series second among 25 sculptures that define the modern age.

A typed diary entry from 1960 adds: "For me, it [bicho] is a category within sculpture […] The important thing is that it/he [ele] exists. […] José is playing with the 'bichinho' invertebrate. What joy he feels, for I can hear him laughing by himself. Forgive me, laughing with the 'bichinho'..."

Down in América, bicho playfully mingles critter, bug, and beast (bicho: from Latin *bēstia*). We even call each other bichos with endearing, pejorative, and even admiring nuances. My little sister would scream, Bicho! And by the time I arrived to rescue the provoking critter, she would have dispatched the spider/bat/roach with a broom.

Mamãe Clark would go on to furiously defend her artistic progeny from institutional restraint (mamãe is an affectionate form for mother in Brazil). Clark arrived for the opening of her first solo exhibition in Europe in 1964 to find nearly all her Bichos hanging from nylon threads. "Like Calder mobiles!" She found scissors, freed them, and placed "everything on the ground." She also recalled that "everyone, without exception, constantly manipulated the Bichos."





Lygia Clark manipulating a Bicho at the opening of *Lygia Clark: Variable Objekte*,
Studiengalerie, Studium Generale, Technische Hochschule Stuttgart, February 4, 1964.
Photos: Elisabeth Walther-Bense. Estate Elisabeth Walther-Bense, ZKM. Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe.

We will use "Bicho" when referring to Clark's artworks, but keep her broader use of bichos as a "category within sculpture." We will let the ripples expand further, so bichos are forms that possess or provoke agency. The objects/subjects that seek to be.

Over sixty years later, we are still grappling with the same question: How do you let bichos be?

Proposal to myself: Touch bichos and be touched by them. Good luck? Well, I have spent hours sketching from Goya's notebooks at the Met archives. A Bicho quickly surfaced! Lygia Clark, *Bicho–Em si*, 1962. Promised gift of Deedie and Rusty Rose to the Dallas Museum of Art, PG.2011.6. I fired off an email to the DMA's contemporary art curator asking to visit with the Bicho held by one of the collections "gifted" to the Dallas Museum of Art in 2005.

A 2007 exhibition, *Fast Forward*, showcased that "gift to Dallas." I had just finished my MFA, and I was blown away by the collectors' magnanimity. The press release for the exhibition repeatedly uses the unqualified word "gift" (or gifts, gifted):

> *the Hoffman, Rachofsky and Rose families, who together gifted their private collections and future acquisitions to the Museum in 2005. […] Through this extraordinary gift, the Dallas Museum of Art has become one of the few major encyclopedic art museums in the world […].*

After a few weeks without replies to my local inquiries, I reached out to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), where I had seen Bichos at their seminal 2004 *Inverted Utopias*. Five minutes later, the chief curator put me in touch with the inverted show's stewards. Their Bicho is on view, with clear exhibition history and provenance: not a gift but purchased directly by the museum with donated funds. I asked:

How do you *animate* the "Bicho" under your care?

I also contacted over a dozen other institutions asking similar questions. Surprisingly, I found a moving 2025 Christie's post where they release a Bicho before auctioning her off. They are even lyrical about it: "A living, ever-changing entity — Lygia Clark's modular sculpture, 'Bicho' or 'critter', demands viewer engagement and activation." And honest: "Experience 'Bicho' and more seminal […] artworks […] before they go under the hammer."



Lygia Clark, Bicho, 1960, shown in multiple configurations.
Video still from a Christie's social-media preview, New York, 2025. Courtesy Christie's.

The Walker Art Center chose to briefly and casually animate a Bicho in 2009:



Twenty cropped stills from *Bicho by Lygia Clark*, Walker Art Center, 2009,
showing curator Peter Eleey manipulating Clark's Bicho, 1960.
Video: Andy Underwood-Bultmann for Walker Art Center.

Yup, a curator must be a gloved performer at times.

The catalog for *Fast Forward* captures interviews between its curator and the benefactors:

"Tell me three or four works from your collection for which you feel a special fondness."

Marguerite Hoffman: "[…] Our Rothko and Kline always take my breath away because of their gravitas and sheer power. And, of course, for very personal reasons, the Richter double candle painting [Two Candles] is an exceedingly important painting for me."

That Rothko was sold in 2007 for $17.6 million while still on the show's walls, and the buyer resold the painting three years later, for about $31 million. Ironically, the failed attempt to keep the transaction private and the ensuing litigation produced an unusually detailed public record: "All parties agree to make maximum efforts to keep all aspects of this transaction confidential indefinitely." "In May 2010, the Red Rothko appeared on the cover of the Sotheby's catalog."

And that Kline? According to Hauser & Wirth, it also left the Hoffman collection for a "private" one in 2015.

Richter's *Two Candles* was reproduced on the exhibition poster and pictured in a 2025 interview. My inquiries about its current status and whether it remains an unliquidated anchor of the promised gift are still unanswered.

In the dialog with the Rachofskys, the curator asks about the "house in the gift" that she found "very moving." Their response ended with "It was your idea after that to say—" [CR] "and, we'll throw in the house while we're at it." [HR] The house in Dallas was listed for $23 million in November 2025.

Bicho House meets Femme Maison.

Are we playing yet? Some have. Art collections have sporadically let visitors interact and experiment with bichos, as at the 2012 Lygia Clark retrospective at Itaú Cultural in São Paulo. Later, MoMA and the Pinacoteca de São Paulo displayed untouchable Bichos while inviting visitors to animate replicas. These gatherings recreate the murmuration of bichos. Replicas also create a paradox: The frozen Bicho is preserved; the replica can move. So, which is alive?



Lygia Clark, Bichos, 1960, installation view, *Lygia Clark: A Retrospective*, Itaú Cultural, São Paulo, 2012. Photo: Edouard Fraipont. Courtesy of Associação Cultural O Mundo de Lygia Clark.

"Art like this is out of our system to some degree — a troublesome, radical thing. The physical touch the work demands remains a call most institutions will not answer." [2020 SFMOMA].

Have fun! The Uffizi did answer my call a few years ago and let me into their vaults to search for and ruminate over drawings made by women from the 1500s. Not easy because the database is unindexed and we had to try every conceivable woman's name for the period.

Yearning for a touch, I went down another bicho trapdoor: Félix González-Torres's green candies ("Untitled" (L.A.), 1991). That's a bicho, no doubt, in our rippling scheme. MoMA drops another stone by having their own candies and Bicho lead the "participatory art" category.

Picking up candies at the Rachofsky house was a fave, as in the 2005 show *Selves*. That title already hinted at bichos in the house. And the moment you passed the gates, you found them ready to bite you: Koons' balloons, Fontana's egg, Bourgeois' Cell…

Selves' text for FGT's work made it clear: "his [FGT's] candy sculpture—a kind of surrogate self-portrait from which viewers are invited to feed, and which curators and owners are obliged to keep materially and spiritually 'alive'—subverts (in the most generous way) the usual hierarchy between deified artwork and beholden viewer, between Culture and culture."

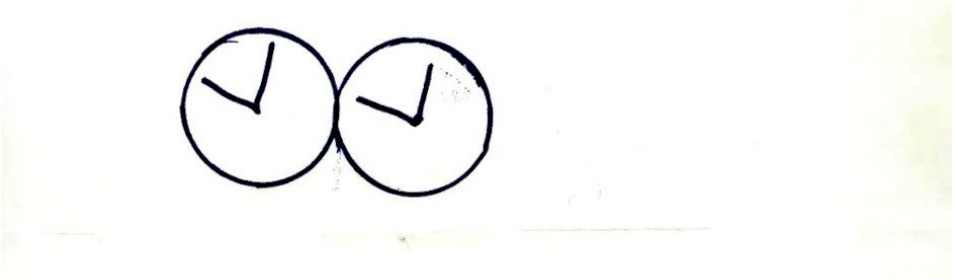
Don't die!

Félix, Félix, the collection still lists your candies! I email the long-term Rachofsky curator, and he writes, "the candy piece is no longer with the collection." I do some research and write back, "Got it. Thank you. I was confused because the work still appears when searching The Warehouse website, but I now see it does not say that it belongs to the Rachofsky Collection."

More research unveils that FGT's certificate authorizing the giveaway of candy went for about $8 million to the Waltons. And many other foundational works are not attributed to the Rachofsky Collection anymore, including Fontana's egg, Bourgeois' Cell, Richter's Abstraktes, and…

No! No, no, no. The Warehouse no longer credits FGT's "Perfect Lovers" to the Rachofsky Collection or the DMA, and I cannot find the work in the DMA's online collection.

A "pivotal artwork" from so many perspectives. And personal. I cried for a while. This is a work that we replicated in our family and still sits high on the wall with Félix's typed note nearby.



Lovers, 1988

Dont be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous to us. We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain space. We are a product of the time, therefore we give back credit were it is due: time.
We are synchronized, now and forever.
I love you.

I rushed to The Warehouse and asked about "Lovers." Answer: "It's no longer in the collection."

Why are our bichos vanishing?

Dispersion may follow a "promised testamentary pledge," as Sotheby's described Fontana's egg going under the hammer. Think of several farmers bequeathing their holdings to us. We shouldn't expect to get every critter we love twenty years later. Now, if the farmers had geese that laid golden eggs, we should ask about any plans to kill them.

The loss of a handful of "trophy pieces" can wildly decrease the value of a collection. A collection of hundreds of artworks valued collectively at $400M would retain $200M in art if its

ten trophy pieces sold at their estimated values averaging $20M each, or $100M if they averaged $30M each.

Nostra culpa. For we have praised the "gift to Dallas" for most of this young century: "But the work of *Fast Forward* is here to stay." [2007] "Two decades later, however, those collections have grown substantially, both in value and in size, as the patrons continue to acquire art." [2026] The Dallas Morning News did sound an alarm in 2015 with its 'Refine and edit' article: "Ah, semantics. What the DMA and the donors have since taken pains to tell us is that 'irrevocable' refers not to individual pieces but to the bequest as a whole."

Should hype and flip permeate art institutions?

Memo to the DMA:

The 2005 "gift to Dallas" has undergone extensive "refine and edit" from its benefactors.

Will the DMA seek a written commitment that the subject of the *Fast Forward* poster, potentially the most valuable unliquidated work in the gift, shall belong to the museum?

Gerhard Richter, *Two Candles* (*Zwei Kerzen*), 1982. CR 512-3. Marguerite Hoffman Collection.

[sent]

To The Warehouse:

Could you please confirm the current ownership credit for Sigmar Polke's cycle *Der Traum des Menelaos I–IV*? Is "The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas" still accurate, or is there a different credit line you would prefer?

[sent]

Once, the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice cordially let me be with *Vitruvian Man* long enough to doubt what we have been told the Renaissance was about.

Two years ago at Seville's General Archive of the Indies, doubts drowned me when, gloveless and by chance, I handled dozens of calligraphed Royal Licenses for slave trading.

How could we have objectified others so catastrophically?

Fast forward: We must recognize the agency and power of others, humans or not. If we don't, markets (lately metastasized into private equity) will remain dominant arbiters of value.

I am often touched, even rescued, by art. And occasionally disillusioned by the art scene.

In the summer of '25, I called SITE Santa Fe International a beast (bicho!) innumerable times. After a day of many openings, I smoked a joint before sleeping with Celeste (my stealth camper van) by an adobe church, where we had boarded a shuttle to a benefactor's reception nearby (SITE's preview package included a cannabis-shop coupon).

While Celeste filled with smoke, I launched into a professorial monologue on art funding.

I praised public funding, thinking of how it propels documenta's extraordinary scope, backed by a budget approaching $50 million. Then I remembered that afternoon's conversation with a formerly imprisoned Pussy Riot founder about governments dictating the arts.

Private benefactors were next. The Meadows paid for my MFA and fully gifted Rothko and Kline paintings to the DMA. "Museum purchase funded by Mr. Burns" would be a blessing on wall labels. But then I envisioned ticking gifts appearing at the gates and taking the art hostage.

Corporate support? I relived lunch with the creative director of a Venice Biennale Partner: substantial funding, apparently without strings attached. Then Nan Goldin's museum die-ins against the Sacklers and Purdue Pharma killed the easy optimism.

I inhaled deeply.

Wrong question all along!

Who calls the tune?

What matters is where the power, the agency, the soul resides. Benefactors should live up to what the word itself implies: giving without expecting anything in return. And art institutions should keep not only visitors but also benefactors away from the art.

As usual, when I got to the thick of it, I started singing. The Paid Pied Piper of Hamelin came to mind. So, I sang badly about piping pitiful pests; the penny-pinching patricians and penniless plebeians provoking the piper; and the unpaid piper who purged their progeny.

The next morning, the racket of musicians arriving for early Mass woke me. I joined them, made an anonymous donation, was absolved, and took communion.

Will today's children go back to the forest?

Will they listen to what art has been saying all along and not follow their parents' traced destiny?

Pay the piper. Or they may lure your children out of town.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

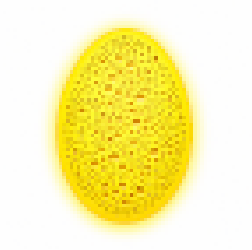
JORGE MISIUM

Jorge Misium is an American drawer who has opened as an inventor, Zen Gorilla, Juana Luna, and recently as JRM to deliver *Cosmic Bubbles* and *Sowing Intentions*. @cosbubs / misium.com

Author's Note: In a tragicomic replay of questions about agency and institutional power raised in this essay, Glasstire originally published it on October 20, 2026, with an unapproved editorial addition presented as though it were written by the author.

The published essay has now a footnote:

Update October 20, 2026: Glasstire originally published this article with the addition of a sentence that had not been reviewed by the author. The piece has since been updated.

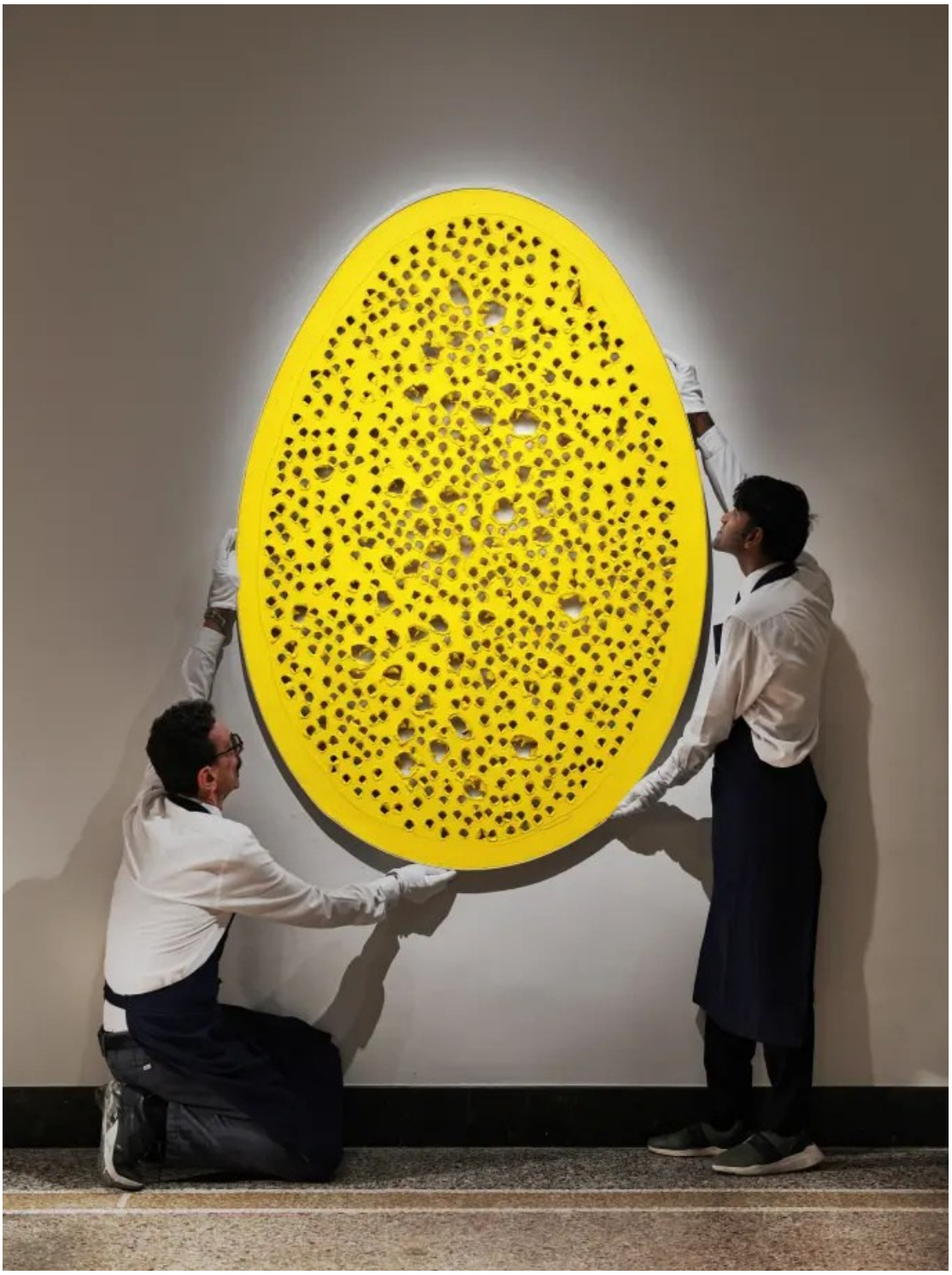


Bichos' Tails

This inquiry will remain alive, much like a bicho, by tracking the unending work of animating and touching artworks, and of being animated and touched by them.

CULTURED [March 2025]: What key artists or works marked turning points in your approaches to collecting?

Rachofsky: […] The pivotal artwork that jump-started that exploration was our acquisition of Félix González-Torres's *Perfect Lovers*, I believe in 2000. This work touched the emotional nerve but also visually enhanced the minimal aesthetic mandate in an atypical way.



La fine di Dio