

## *Untitled (Ravenswood)*

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For about five months in 1990, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Laycock lived in the same apartment building in which I live, the Ravenswood, while Felix was a visiting artist teaching at Cal Arts. Neither I nor my husband Christopher was aware that they were in the building until some time into their stay, when Christopher recognized Felix while riding together in the elevator (Felix says that he initially thought Christopher was from the I.R.S.). Our mutual residence led not only to friendship but to a unique insight into Felix's union of life and work, particularly through the special role that the building played, and continues to play, in both.

The Ravenswood is one of a small but distinctive group of late 1920s Art Deco buildings on Rossmore Avenue, just south of Hollywood. A few blocks from Paramount Studios, with a view of the Hollywood sign up in the hills directly to the north, the Ravenswood shares with its neighbors a rich past as home to many people who worked in the entertainment industry, both in front of the camera and behind the scenes. It is particularly known for its roster of former celebrity inhabitants, most notably Mae West, who lived there from 1932 until her death in 1980.

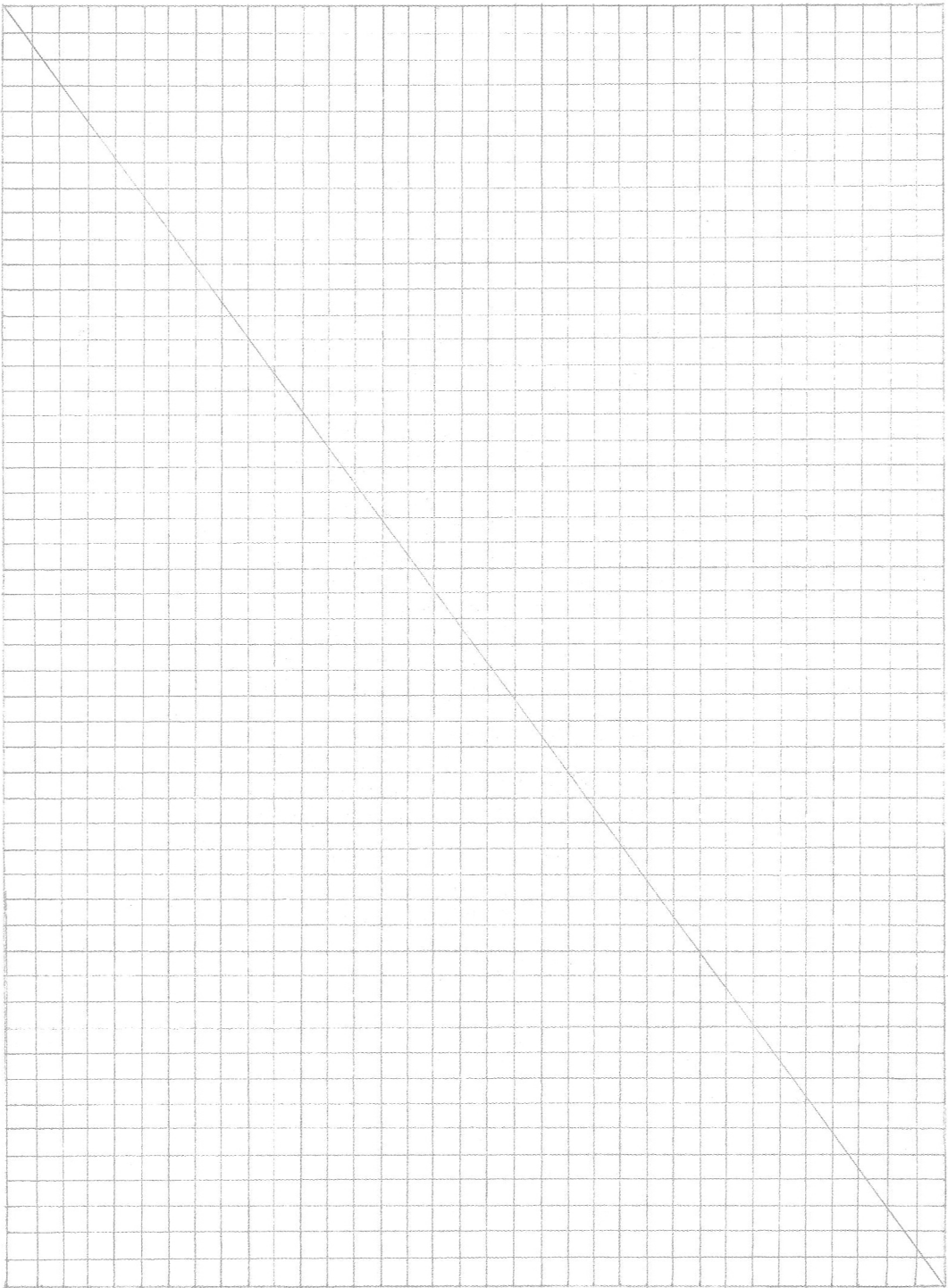
Now quaintly dilapidated, the Ravenswood is a seven-story building with nearly one hundred apartments. Like its neighbor the El Royale, the building has a distinctive rooftop sign. The Ravenswood sign is now missing its initial 'R' which fell off some years ago and has not been reattached. The facade features a subtle zigzag 'Assyrian' style design, while the entrance lobby, best characterized as eclectic, appears to have been last redecorated in the 1960s in a pseudo-Mediterranean style. Its features include an enormous crystal chandelier, generic paintings of Venice, a vast rust-colored carpet that almost entirely covers the original terrazzo floor, two notoriously erratic old elevators, and an adjoining sitting room with deep orange walls (now with some fierce post-earthquake cracks). Originally, the Ravenswood was a full-service apartment-hotel, complete with elevator operators, parking attendants, an in-house laundry service, etc. Today, the only remnant of its full-service days is a twenty-four-hour telephone switchboard and desk clerk. To the side of the building, situated on a plot of land at least as big as the building itself, is an unkempt pool and garden area with a glass cabana, a smattering of tropical plants, and tables topped with large yellow metal umbrellas.

It was by chance that Felix found the Ravenswood. Driving around the city looking for a place to live, he came upon Rossmore Avenue and immediately was drawn to the name of the street: ROSSmore. Impulsively, he decided that the street was where he and Ross would live, and quickly rented



apartment number 407 at the Ravenswood, which looks down upon the adjacent pool area through the top of a cluster of tall bamboo trees and, in the distance, at the illuminated green neon sign atop the more elegant El Royale.

For me, the Ravenswood





was my home and the bedrock of my private life; I had been drawn to it through its distinctive architecture and New York-style scale, its sweeping city views, and its strong connection to an earlier era, particularly the aura of late 1920s Los Angeles and the early days of Hollywood. For Felix and Ross, it became much more than a characterful, temporary place to live. It was at once a joyous and painful interlude in their eight-year relationship — and a culmination. The Ravenswood marked the first and only time and place that Felix (who lives in New York) and Ross (who lived in Toronto) actually lived together. Ross, who was already quite ill from the effects of AIDS, died in Toronto in January 1991.

That short period of time served not only as the foundation of our friendship, but also helped to crystallize my understanding of Felix's work — although at the time we rarely spoke about it. I write about it here not to include myself in his history, and not just because of the profound, indelible presence the building maintains in Felix's life and work, but because of the nature of his work in general, which subtly yet emphatically intensifies one's own self-awareness, subjectivity, and sense of personal history. In effect, his work insists upon the inclusion of the complexities of those areas most precious protected or deeply repressed — it sets up a conflation of 'public' and 'private,' and the personal with the professional. As David Deitcher has described it, his work "ensures the evocation of a complex 'everyday,' one that weaves together public and private, political and personal, present and past, conscious and unconscious, intellectual and emotional, familiar and unknown, systematic and unpredictable."<sup>1</sup>

Felix's work possesses the ability to invest the abstract and the mundane with emotional content. He can extract the tangible from the intangible, and vice versa. His materials — stacks of printed sheets of paper, strings of light, wrapped candies, as well as words and dates describing statistical, historical, or personal events — are vehicles for meaning, directed, but never overarticulated, by the artist. His work taps into the underlying power of the cliché without succumbing to sentimentality, distilling from it its orig-

inal impulse in shared desires and common experience.

While Felix has not referred explicitly to the Ravenswood in his work, there have been two pieces, both made after Ross's death for exhibitions in Brussels and Los Angeles, that have invoked the name of Rossmore Avenue. The first work, *Untitled (Rossmore)*, made in 1991, was a fourteen-foot line — like a street — of bright green wrapped candies. The other work, a single string of lights also titled *Untitled (Rossmore)* was made a year later in fall 1992. Recalling the joyful moment when Felix and Ross made a personal connection to Rossmore Avenue, Felix, after Ross's death, used the name of the street in these works to remember Ross, and the memory of optimism.

In an interview with Robert Nickas, Felix stated: "Meaning is created once something can be related to personal experience."<sup>2</sup> While his works stem from his own specific experiences, they transcend autobiography and manneristic expression through the use of common points of reference. As Jan Avgikos has written:

Aided by synthesizing allegorical structures that interweave public events and private moments, he works against the expressionist model, based on an expressive self and an emphatic viewer who receives preconstituted meanings, by proposing a collective social and psychic space in which the beholder actively participates in the construction of meaning. Though his work is informed by autobiographical elements specific to his homosexual identity, its intent is to extend subjectivity to all participants.<sup>3</sup>

Although I have written about a personal connection to his life, it is not necessary to know Felix personally to understand or participate in the work. The process by which the viewer becomes a participant is a result of an open and dynamic form that is deeply generous. Whether it is a sheet of paper that can be taken from a stack, a piece of candy that can be enjoyed, or the recognition of a common experience, the work offers the viewer the opportunity

to draw one's own intimate experiences into the construction of its meaning.

Felix buried some of Ross's ashes in the grounds of the Ravenswood, at the base of the bamboo trees that stretched up to their living room windows. Now, four years after he and Ross lived here, the Ravenswood remains a constant reference point in Felix's life. The intensity of my own memories and feelings of attachment to that time has been further heightened not only by this shared experience but also by its complex incorporation into Felix's continuing body of work. It is as if Felix has created another work, *Untitled (Ravenswood)*. Through it, I link his experience to mine, and reflect upon the life that Christopher and I have shared in this building, and how Felix and Ross are part of our past, and our future.

<sup>1</sup> David Deitcher, "The Everyday Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Stockholm: Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, 1992), n.p. When Deitcher was invited to teach at Cal Arts, he also chose to live in the Ravenswood, and he, too, was offered, and chose to live in, apartment 407.

<sup>2</sup> In Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (November/December 1991): 87.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Avgikos, "This Is My Body: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Artforum* 29, no. 6 (February 1991): 82.

