

**"UNTITLED" (THE NEVERENDING PORTRAIT)**

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I so often heard Felix say, "*If nothing else I will have had a life well lived.*" or, "*A life well lived is the best revenge.*" There was always something defensive, but more than defensive, an anxiety, a deep sense of unresolve, implied in the frequency and the emphatic way in which he would say these phrases. Revenge against what or whom? And what did "*if nothing else*" refer to? Although it would be the most obvious first interpretation, the frustration did not exactly seem to be embedded in the discrepancy between the many difficult conditions imposed on him throughout his life and the way he chose to live life; Felix had a way of maximizing every encounter, even transforming the seemingly irredeemable into a valuable experience. I think the anxiety transmitted in the expression of these phrases is the motivation at the very core of Felix' work, as well as his discourse. It occurs to me that the anxiety was about the difficulty in defining the framework of what is a "*life*". Is one's life the time between when you are born and when you die? Or is your life larger, longer, than that? If the goal is about a day to day life well lived then why make art?

At first it might appear that impermanency is the goal of Felix' work - for instance: candy pieces - artworks consisting of piles of candies of various colors and forms, heaped in a corner of a room or spread in large carpetlike landscapes, the initial weight usually referring to that of an average male or the combined weight of two. Here, the audience is invited to take pieces of candy, creating the potential for the artwork to disappear from an exhibition. Felix even spoke about his desire for the works to disintegrate:

*I wanted to make an artwork that could disappear, that never existed, and it was a metaphor for when Ross (Ross Laycock, Felix' lifemate) was dying. So it was a metaphor that I would abandon this work before this work abandoned me. I'm going to destroy it before it destroys me. That was my little amount of power when it came to this work. I didn't want it to last, because then it couldn't hurt me.<sup>1</sup>*

In another interview:

*Freud said that we rehearse our fears in order to lessen them. In a way this 'letting go' of the work, this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day right in front of my eyes.<sup>2</sup>*

In confronting Ross' death, Felix was also confronting his own, and with it the full extent of his desire for life. Disappearance was not Felix' final goal. Absence became a way of confronting the essence of longevity. It is extremely clear that Felix focused on creating systems to insure that the works did not disappear permanently; the candies always have the possibility of being replaced endlessly. What emerges is that the work is less about the self-aggrandizing implications of immortality than the desire for a continuation of life.

In this way it is clear that Felix' work is not about death. During his life, he made sure that it was not public knowledge that he was ill. He considered this knowledge not to be relevant, that it would have limited the possible readings of his work. It was not until after his death that people began to relate the intent of his work to his knowledge of his pending death or its cause. The idea of life lived to its fullest

propelled Felix. If, in the end, there was no continuum, or just in case time ran out before the work was able to get enough attention to be deemed important, or just in case he had missed the mark and was judged an unimportant artist, between his birth and his death, Felix made sure that his life and his work were vehicles and formats for an exemplary existence. This meant a generosity that was incomparable, a commitment to knowledge, an absolute appreciation for new experiences, a belief in travel as a vehicle for transforming perspectives, cultured impeccable taste in flowers and furniture and food, the ability to learn from others' talents and pleasures, the choice to be joyful, the ability to transform the most dire of situations and topics into humorous ones, total recognition for the rarity and preciousness of love, a fierce awareness of the true impact of democracy. Felix was a true lover of life, and his life was *"A life well lived"*. Felix was hesitant to express his desire for immortality but he was much less hesitant to verbalize his immediate program, *"I do have a very clear agenda and that is a desire to make this place a better place. I trust that agenda."*<sup>3</sup>

Felix' reference to the words, "a better place", immediately brings to mind "Untitled", 1990, (cat. no. 104) a double stack piece which was, literally, the centerpiece of his first exhibition in my gallery and, fittingly, the gallery's inauguration January 1990). Two stacks of white paper of identical size, each 29 inches by 23 inches by an "ideal height" of 26 inches,<sup>4</sup> placed next to each other with their longest side parallel and approximately 10 inches between them. In the center of each of the pieces of paper on each of the stacks is a text in Trump Medieval font, the typeface Felix was to use for the majority of his works involving text. The texts face inward, as if in dialogue with each other. One reads: NOWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE. The other: SOMEWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE.

Felix had often said that he did not believe in God or the trappings of redemption: *"Once we believe that there is no God, that there is no afterlife, then life becomes a very positive statement. It becomes a very political position because then we have no choice but to work harder to make this place the best place ever."*<sup>5</sup> So what did *"Somewhere better than this place"* refer to? Recalling this piece within the context of this essay, I realize that the hope was not so much about the possibility of a distant place of ethereal salvation but that the dialogue, the debate, between the two contrary texts, Somewhere... Nowhere... is one between the hope that one can achieve an eternal impact, impact as immortality, vs. the determination to work for the here and now. Felix was able to do both: immeasurably influence the world he inhabited and leave a lasting impact. His work is the vehicle and the manifestation - each person has the opportunity to experience the sculpture as Felix made it, taking with them the impression of this illusionary monument. Each person also has the choice to remove the papers. Their participation, while undermining the sculptures existing structure, also affords it a new and continued life. Like the candy pieces, the stacks can be endlessly reproduced, allowing the scenario to repeat itself endlessly.

Felix recognized fully the special and unique opportunities art possesses, namely that art objects can potentially continue to develop one's legacy beyond death. However he resisted the idea of his art works simply becoming monuments to his existence. It is generally assumed that permanency means immortality; that concretization is the goal. But for a life to have continuous impact it must remain open to change in order to ensure continued growth. In this way Felix was very particular about what he considered to be art objects and what he considered to be simply memorabilia or functioning non-art. Although he loved that allowing people to take elements of his work challenged the status quo, bringing in to question what is the art object, it is important to recognize that he did not consider each sheet from a stack to be an artwork. They serve their function without being considered art while the insistence that they are not art further illuminates our general inclination for possessiveness and monumentalization. Felix' work repeatedly confronts the desire for concretization and the limits of monumentalization. For example, rake his meditation on the monument to Theodore Roosevelt, (US President from 1901-1909). The monument makes up and is in some way indistinguishable from the entrance area and facade of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Yet the monument may be described as having two primary elements. The first element is a huge bronze sculpture of Theodore Roosevelt on horseback with a Native American Indian and an African American (as we would refer to them now) standing on either side of him. Unlike Roosevelt, these men are half-naked and their positioning implies a direct relationship between their hands and Roosevelt's boot straps. Perhaps when this sculpture was made in 1936 this

positioning was considered generous and *uplifting*, now it clearly implies a servile relationship. On either side of the statue is a wide, grand set of stone steps leading from the street to a landing; the landing is bound by curved stone walls; these walls become part of the construction of the building itself. The second distinct element of the monument is a series of words that are carved into the masonry of these walls, the personifications attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: Patriot, Historian, Ranchman, Scientist, Soldier, Humanitarian, Author, Conservationist, Naturalist, Scholar, Explorer, Statesman. But what is the relationship between the people pictured in the sculpture and the displays inside the museum, displays of *native* peoples and *savages* just down the hall from animal panoramas? ·what does it mean that *other peoples* share the exhibition hall with dinosaur bones while on the outside of the building, attributes to which we are all meant to aspire - the attributes of a straight white male - are carved permanently in stone?

Felix made a series of twelve framed black and white photographs that make up the piece, "Untitled" (Museum of Natural History), 1990 (cat. no. 107). Each of the photographs was of one of each of the carved words. By divorcing these words both from the immediate vicinity of the towering heroic sculpture of Roosevelt and the larger context of the institution, he prompted the viewer to reflect on their meaning, and in so doing, on the larger issues of how history is written. My point here is not to dwell on the particular perversities of this monument (although they are extreme), but to illustrate how Felix did not consider that bronze and stone constituted the kind of permanency he desired.<sup>6</sup>

Much of Felix' work from 1986 on, takes on the referential physical forms of monuments<sup>7</sup> [One of the very first stack pieces was even entitled "Untitled" (Monument), 1989 (cat. no. 67)]. He felt that it was most effective to illuminate meaning by emphasizing the breaks within a given known structure than to contrive new structures. *"I don't want a revolution anymore, it's too much energy for too little. So I want to work within the system. I want to work within the contradictions of the system..."*<sup>8</sup> This quote refers to Felix' greater agenda, to infiltrate the system, to use the existing power structure as a means of influencing change, as well as a reference to the way he directly chose to make works. So many aspects of Felix' work were groundbreaking that he felt that it was essential to house all of the innovation within the traditional model of the art object. That his works were part of the market place was anything but a compromise for Felix. Felix taught me to see the artworld as a place of exceptional potency, and the collector as a valuable mediator and assimilator. It is essential to recognize that without this true trust in the owner as perpetrator and future caretaker, Felix would have never felt the freedom to go so far. Although Felix had the clarity of intent to assume the bigger picture, to know his long term goals, Felix was of course human. He was not totally always free from his own desire to be concretized. He hated the idea that he, *the person* Felix, his happinesses, his fears, his stories about love, his perceptions of Paris ... would not be remembered. How difficult the struggle must have been for him, both wanting to indulge fully in every moment of life, wanting to be personally remembered, while at the same time creating constructs that acknowledge the ephemerality of those memories and experiences that are bound to be lost in the act of death, if not his death, then the death of the people he shared his life and ideas with.

There is a story that developed over many years of discussion with Felix around his personal relationship to the act of people taking sheets of paper from the stack pieces. This particular dialogue illuminates Felix' struggle between his commitment to the freedom he granted his work to have its own *life* (or the life to be determined by its owner), vs. his personal attachment to the work as a carrier of his human experience. One of his favorite snapshots was a picture that the Centro Cultural Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico City sent to him which was taken during an exhibition in which a stack piece was included. It is of a whole class of children in school uniforms, gleefully running out of the museum with rolls of paper. Although he sometimes wondered what people chose to do with them, and occasionally admitted that he was pleased to hear that people put them up or saved them, he usually insisted that he didn't care what people did with the sheets, that they could use them as dust pans if they liked. However, his love and pride for this particular snapshot seemed like evidence of his emotional attachment. One way or the other, he truly cherished the idea that anyone could simply take the work.

I only once remember Felix actively upset about the way the papers were handled. In 1989 Felix

was asked to participate in the inaugural group exhibition of a gallery (not to be named). The show addressed work that pushed the edge of politics and sexuality. For the opening the gallery had hired a number of beefy men outfitted in leather pants and Barbara Kruger T-shirts: some to serve drinks, some to greet the elevator, and two to roll up, put elastic bands around and pass out sheets of paper from Felix' stack, as if souvenirs of the event. Having not had a chance to experience the piece, and having not made the personal choice to take the sheets, many recipients threw the rolled pages away or simply left them in the hallway. When Felix arrived at the opening he was aghast to find them abandoned. I always thought that Felix was upset because the giving away of the sheets undermined the potential effect of the work that comes with the participants choice. Years later I would find out that that was not the whole story.

As time went on, a number of situations arose in which museums became concerned about the sheers being available to be taken during public openings. Museums, in order to fend off the possible elimination of a work before the exhibition had even officially opened, began to request that Felix grant them the permission to disallow sheets to be taken during the opening. Felix refused. This was an integral part of the work. But as time went on he began to comply. Felix was always so full of conviction, I was sure he had a specific reason for this change of heart. It was true that as time went on Felix became more and more accepting of the way things work. I assumed that his decision to comply was related to his desire to work within the system. That he most wanted to concentrate on the essential elements within his work that made it powerful, rather than trying to fight the system. This would be, literally, a waste of his precious time. So it came to me as a big surprise when, in 1995, Felix mentioned to me that he hated to be present to see people take sheets of papers from the stacks or candies from the piles. He felt that it was an invasion of his self, like the demise of his own body. He admitted that it was a relief when the museums asked him to not allow the sheets to be taken at the openings, since this was usually when he was present. Metaphorically there was an obvious physical corollary between himself and his work. I never realized how tangible it actually became to him. But at the opening of Felix' Guggenheim retrospective, (February 1995), people were able to take sheets and candies, even though he was present. In the end it seemed Felix always made the choice to put his personal struggle aside for the long term benefits of the work.

Within the process of change there is the risk of disintegration or elimination of the work, and therefore, Felix' impact. But the risk of annihilation breeds the possibility of perpetuity. Change becomes the vehicle but change also becomes the content of the work. It is only the judgment of others that guarantees the work's existence. Felix believed in the power of the audience to judge what is meaningful. "It could be an idea, an object, whatever. It could have been there for a long, long time hut it is only when culture feels that it is ready that this object or idea becomes important."<sup>9</sup> Who provides the continuity if not the audience? Is the work worth keeping, is it worth passing on to a new owner, a new caretaker? Will a museum, an institution developed to judge which works of art are worthy of preservation, choose to accept this responsibility? Is it worth replenishing the stacks, the candies? Is it worth it for the audience to take them? Is it worth renting billboard locations, reprinting the assigned images into billboard prints and reinstalling the billboard? Is it worth thinking of a way to install a simple strand of lights that has no presence until the owner chooses how to arrange it?

Every time Felix made a piece of work or developed a new body of work, he measured the work against these questions.

*"I need the viewer, I need the public's interaction. Without a public these works are nothing, nothing. I need the public to complete the work\_ I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in. I tend to think of myself as a theater director who is trying to convey some ideas by reinterpreting the notion of the division of roles: author, public, and director."<sup>10</sup>*

Felix embraced the influence many great theorist, filmmakers and writers, had on him - Benjamin, Althusser, Foucault, Godard, and Celia Cruz among them - but it was Brecht who Felix felt his own ideas of structure and means of impact were most closely formulated after.

*Brecht says to keep a distance to allow the viewer, the public, time to reflect and think. When you get out of the theater you should not have had a catharsis, you should have had a thinking experience. More than anything, break the pleasure of representation, the pleasure of the flawless narrative. This is not life, this is just a theater piece. I like that a lot: This is not life, this is just an artwork. I want you, the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved, and informed.<sup>11</sup>*

Felix was not all Brechtian. Felix often said he wanted his work to be *"tough and beautiful"*. I often thought that Felix' true aesthetic talent was the ability to transform the cliché into the exceptionally meaningful and touching. He wanted the audience to sense their responsibility but he also wanted them to feel moved, connected. He knew that the audience's ability to relate personally to his work gave the work its emotive and seductive force. But Felix was extremely clear about the roles the various parties played in his work. And they are all active roles. There is nothing passive about experiencing or owning Felix' work.

Responsibility is paramount to each role. The audience never has to feel like an innocent bystander. And the owner buys the right and responsibilities of becoming the mediator. As well as creating roles to facilitate his agenda of longevity, Felix wanted to construct scenarios that would act as test conditions, examples of how to transfer this idea of choice and responsibility to the rest of one's life. One can make the decision to overcome fear and complacency in order to affect change. Even the most simple of acts, i.e. each person choosing to take a single piece of candy from a pile, can have a meaningful effect. Felix was interested in raising the level of intent. An action with knowledge of intent is truly powerful. He was always amazed by the overwhelming desire most people have to create an arbitrary separation between the individual (themselves) and society. So much of his work addresses the constructs of *"private"* vs. *"public"*. What is public space vs. private space? What is public information vs. private information? Why do we detach ourselves from events that do not happen directly to us, i.e. why isn't the inauguration of a new president commonly considered a personal event to a citizen?

The billboard pieces certainly address many of these issues. As the Certificates of Authenticity/Ownership that accompany these pieces state:

The intention of this work is for the owner to reproduce the specific provided image as a public billboard. Regardless of how many times the image of the billboard is printed, (title of piece) is a unique work of art which has been purchased by (name of owner), the current owner thereof. The owner has the exclusive right to reproduce the billboard in public as often as they like, at what ever scale they like, at however many locations they choose ....

In the manifest work, a photograph taken by Felix, the rights to which he retained,<sup>12</sup> an image that had personal importance to him, is placed in the *"public"*, yet it is still clearly *"privately"* owned. Where is the line between public and private here? Once placed in the *public domain* does not everyone have equal access to the piece? What is it that makes this piece possessable? As the Certificate of Authenticity I Ownership also states (as do the certificates for the majority of the works): *"The nature of this work is that its uniqueness is defined by ownership, verified by a Certificate of Authenticity/Ownership."* Felix implied that the only real separation between public and private becomes ownership. The ability to experience an image in an outdoor location, accessible to all, creates a territory rich with content. Not only will the existence of an owner make it probable that the piece will continue to be reinstalled, the added element of private ownership in the public realm multiplies the meaning of the work. However, the importance of ownership goes far beyond making it more likely that the works will continue to be manifest. Ownership makes it possible to guarantee that the works exist whether manifest or not. This was the key to obtaining true permanency. *"They will always exist because they don't really exist or because they don't have to exist all the time. They are usually fabricated for exhibition purposes and sometimes they are fabricated in different places at the same time. After all, there is no original, only one original certificate of authenticity."*<sup>13</sup> The existence of the certificate equals the permanent existence of the work.

An owner is needed to issue the certificate. Unlike certificates which accompany the work of other artists, the certificates for Felix' work include the name of the owner.<sup>14</sup> The owner becomes the keeper of the certificate.

It was very interesting to see the evolution of the certificates. Felix was constantly fine tuning their content, the changes became records of Felix' increased ability to clarify his intent.<sup>15</sup> The contemporary art audience has now become accustomed to the idea of aspects of a piece being given away or available to be taken. However, I remember how shocking this was when Felix first started to make the stack pieces. Felix was purposefully pushing the issue of uniqueness to the edge of a new definition. However, at the beginning it was difficult to fully verbalize all of the ramifications of the works' disseminability and possible disintegration/rejuvenation. It seemed so threatening to the uniqueness of the art object that it was next to impossible to tackle all of the pertinent issues of manifestation at once. For instance: the earlier certificates stated that the works could not exist in more than one place at a time. Now the certificates for the stack, candy, beaded curtain, portrait, and in principle, billboard pieces, state that the physical manifestation of these works in more than one place at a time does not threaten their uniqueness since their uniqueness is defined by ownership. We can now except that as a possibility.

The certificates also reveal Felix' willingness to leave significant room for others' interpretation of the works' physical (re)incarnation. There is a very interesting balance between setting parameters and allowing freedom. The majority of the specific conditions stated in the certificates pertain to ownership and transfer of ownership. Being the keeper of the certificate means one becomes the interpreter of the rules and the holder of the right to assign the ability to interpret the rules to others. The vast majority of Felix' works are made with the most common of materials which are readily available. They are also produced by the most common of processes that are easy to repeat: standard lithography, objects made by cheap photolabs, billboards printed by the same mass production billboard printing companies that an advertiser would use... Felix used common materials and processes as a way of detaching *himself* from the work, as well as a way of exposing the mechanics of his pieces. Although, of course, the aesthetic choices he had made about each piece were purposeful and specific and even often essential to the content of the work, Felix did not want to be concerned with projecting whether these materials would, in the future, be available or these methods practiced. The Certificates of Ownership and Authenticity state that *"if this exact (paper or candy or lightbulb...) are not available a similar one may be used I substituted"*. This also implied but was not specified that if the methods of production changed so would the next incarnation of the work. Another issue that is not spelt out in the certificates but was a common practice of Felix' is that he sometimes determined the sizing of the works based on standards; i.e. paper may come in standard sizes of 23 x 29 inches in the United States (the size of most of the early stack pieces) and therefore the "ideal dimension" of the work followed. But this was just a guideline, an approximation. For instance, if the same piece was being reproduced in a country that used the metric system, Felix would prefer to use the closest standard size sheets available, or crop to the closest centimeter size instead of inches. The owner, who does not have this specific methodology available to them from the certificate, would have to come to their own decisions about how to reproduce the piece. The size of the candy pieces are indicated by their *"ideal weight"* in the certificates with no other specified dimensions other than *"size varies with installation"*. Within the certificates Felix left no clues about just how variable the dimensions could be. Even though the *"ideal weight"* of a candy piece may have directly related to Felix' weight, 175 lbs., or the approximate weight of Felix and Ross combined, 350 lbs., and even though the original installation of a particular candy piece was that of candies piled in a corner, or spread out in a line along a wall, or a large rectangular carpet, the owner can display as much candy in what ever formation s/he chooses. Of course this decision can be altered as often as the piece is installed. Not only is there the possibility of new interpretation of Felix' work over time, there is the possibility of a different visual resonance. A piece by Felix, like life, has the possibility of transforming itself because of the contingencies of life. It has the possibility of possessing a very different form one hundred years from now than it does today. I can think of no other work which not only encourages you to contextualize the past and be aware of your role in the present, but which also affords you the opportunity to imagine that things could be different in the future.

So, in his gentle and generous way Felix created structures that subtly but actively lead the viewer and, more particularly, the owner through the revelatory process of freedom of choice and possibility of influence through choice. Felix' "portrait pieces" are perhaps the best example of how his work acknowledges the desire for remembrance and structure, but become vehicles that address desire for this personal history, while also addressing how subtle shifts can transform the monument into a flexible and growing entity. The "portraits" create a very *personal* context in which to comfortably expose the benefits of the openness to change.

In 1989 Felix was asked to be a part of the Brooklyn Museum's series of one-person exhibitions to be installed in the museum's grand foyer. As Felix explained, the museum curator's intention was to blur the line between public space and exhibition space, making art an experience beyond the forced context of the exhibition halls. As a number of these exhibitions had preceded his own, Felix wondered if the foyer was still perceived as a non-exhibition space. So he insisted on addressing a space in the museum that was truly *marginalized* to public space, a drop-ceilinged corridor connected to the small annex for the elevators leading to the exhibition halls. Once inside an institution it is common to feel dislocated from a greater sense of place, hence it is easy to forget that the Brooklyn Museum is situated directly next to the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. Although this elevator lobby has a number of very large windows that look out onto the Botanical Gardens, these windows are usually covered by translucent shades. Felix made sure the shades were left open, and to break the austerity of this previously ignored white space, he had two large and very green potted plants placed in front of the windows, drawing attention to the usually invisible landscape of the gardens. Above these windows is a thin strip of wall that meets the ceiling. Felix had this strip of wall painted light blue and inscribed along its length in a single running line the words: *Red Canoe 1987 Paris 1985 Blue Flowers 1984 Harry the Dog 1983 Blue Lake 1986 Interferon 1989 Ross 1983*. The landscape, this piece, "Untitled", 1989 (cat. no. 70), marked the beginning of the portrait pieces.

It was not until two collectors contacted Felix to request a particular commission that the second portrait piece—the piece that defined the parameters of these works—developed. The couple from Los Angeles had seen one of Felix' puzzle pieces, "Untitled" (Me and My Sister), 1988 (cat. no. 46). Felix would take photographs to his local photo lab, in the same way as someone, anyone, could have taken their *personally meaningful* snapshots to the lab, to have transformed into *memorabilia* jigsaw puzzles. Between 1987 and 1992 Felix chose sixty-four photographs out of thousands to be *transformed* into these enigmatic puzzles. All together, the images become a selective but complex diary:

"Untitled" (Cold Blue Snow), "Untitled" (Cold Blue Snow), "Untitled" (Venezia), "Untitled" (Loverboy), "Untitled" (Madrid), "Untitled" (Love Letter from the War Front), "Untitled" (Klaus Barbie as a Family Man), "Untitled" (Me and My Sister), "Untitled" (Self Portrait with Sister), "Untitled" (Warm Water), "Untitled" (Paris 1989), "Untitled" (Paris), "Untitled". (Last Time), "Untitled" (Waldheim and the Pope), "Untitled" (Oscar Wilde's Tombstone), "Untitled" (For White Columns), "Untitled" (Shield), "Untitled" (Lover's Letter), "Untitled" (Lover's Letter), "Untitled" (Album), "Untitled" (Vancouver), "Untitled" (Lover's Letter), "Untitled" (1987), "Untitled" (Cold Blue Snow), "Untitled" (Lover's Letter), "Untitled" (Paris), "Untitled" (Vida), "Untitled" (Last Letter), "Untitled" (My Soul of Life), "Untitled" (Dream), "Untitled" (Last Letter), "Untitled" (Wawannaisa), "Untitled" (Ross Scuba Diving), "Untitled" (Ross and Harry), "Untitled" (Bloomie's), "Untitled" (1980-1992), "Untitled" (Chief Justice's Hands), "Untitled" (Fainted), "Untitled" (1980-1992), "Untitled" (David Souter's Home), "Untitled" (David Souter's Home), "Untitled" (I Love NY), "Untitled" (Key West)<sup>16</sup>

The images range from landscapes abstracted by the speed of the car from which they were taken, to images of Ross and his dog Harry, to movingly posed photographs of two empty chairs, or two shadows cast in a park, to images culled from the newspaper or printed matter: Waldheim taking communion from the Pope, children in a catalogue for mail-order survivalist gear, Mickey and Minnie Mouse romantically eating an airline meal. And then there were puzzles of sections of love letters Ross

had sent Felix, photographed by Felix after Ross had died, knowing he would never allow himself to read them again, trying to preserve them, concretize them, make sense of them in a new way. And there were also re-photographed images of almost forgotten childhood settings such as the previously mentioned "Untitled" (Me and My Sister), 1988.

Touched by this piece, which reflects the common desire to be memorialized by a happy childhood picture, the collectors asked Felix if he would consider making puzzle pieces of each of them using photographs from their childhood.<sup>17</sup> Felix was hesitant and responded that it was too easy to hide these portraits away in a drawer. They could go out and make this themselves. Asking: what role do I play? Why is this a commission?

Felix was also hesitant about the role a photograph played, although deeply invested in the impact of the photographic image.<sup>18</sup> Felix saw most of his work as being photographic in some way: the photostats, the puzzles, the billboards, the photogravures, of course the framed photographs, and even the stack pieces, since lithography is a photographic method. However, he was interested in methods that questioned the accepted premise of the photograph, for example, the implication of a reproduction being true, and therefore taken for granted; the desire to stop time, to possess time by capturing a moment. There is a clear line that runs through all of Felix' images and that is the elusiveness of the most typical of fleeting moments: a bird in the sky, footprints in the sand, flowers on a grave, Ross' shadow... Felix also often spoke about the powerful social implications of the reading of an image in relation to language. In contrast to photographic images, the word portraits address many of his concerns.

*In culture we can only 'read' photographs, or let's say a traditional portrait, in two ways: the denoted and the connoted. The denoted is that which we as a culture can easily identify - a man or a woman, long hair or short, a dress, no dress, a background, a black and white photo, or a color photo, a photo or a painting, etc. But it is the connoted that I consider to be the most intriguing, and exciting. The elements that give the portrait its 'meaning'. What we, because of our social I cultural I gender I economic background can 'read' into the picture. Is that dress a Dior or just a T-shirt? Is the car in the background a Toyota or a Citroen? Is the place Hanoi, Havana, or Bordeaux? As we know, according to Roland Barthes, photographs have no index, they can tell us about almost anything (that is why captions are so important, not just for newspapers). Every image in culture only exists within language. I then in these portraits, go the other way around: I give the viewer a very coded work, image, moment, and I hope the viewer will be able to provide, then, an 'image'. Almost as in a collage, in which the construction of the image, or portrait will emerge.<sup>19</sup>*

So, after much deliberation, Felix offered the collectors in lieu of image-based portraits (puzzles), to work with them to create a portrait piece similar to the one he had installed at the Brooklyn Museum. The so-called *portraits* would become Felix' only commissioned works and he considered them to be collaborations with the prospective owner. They developed in the following way: the owner had to choose events in his/her life that s/he considered to be formative experiences and their concurrent dares. (In the beginning these numbered approximately twelve entries, and later Felix liked the pieces to be longer.) Felix loved when couples did their portrait as one shared life. He also imagined institutions or corporations creating portraits, (which did happen later<sup>20</sup>). Sometimes people sent him long letters explaining why they chose specific events; others were more private, only listing the words they felt encapsulated the event, purposefully cloistering of meaning in the chosen word(s). I know, having done my own portrait, that it is a very difficult psychological exercise to recount and isolate the experiences, both good and bad, that you imagine influenced the formation of your character. Knowing that it will be installed for others to see whether in your home or on loan to an exhibition, you can't help but think about how you want yourself to be presented, or *remembered!* Does this knowing potentially influence one's choices?

Once Felix received the material, he decided on the order of the events. Given the heterotopic nature of memory, Felix felt it was important that the portraits were not chronological. He also added



certain events that he felt completed the portraits. As he knew that people were inclined to choose "private" events such as weddings, births, deaths, first loves... He wanted to illuminate the fact that we are equally formed by, so to speak, "public" events. Again the issue of the arbitrary separation between the public and private arises in Felix' work. He felt that by including historical events he would be able to illustrate that our *portraits* are equally inflected by events that, for instance, happened before our birth, or in places we have never been to. As Felix wrote to a collector who had just completed his portrait:

*When we think who we are, we usually think of a unified subject. In the present. An inimitable entity. This is a mistake that happens, according to Lacan, during our misconception when we at a very tender age discover our image in a mirror "the mirror stage", and think of ourselves as one a-historical phenomenon. We are not what we think we are, but rather a compilation of texts. A compilation of histories, past present and future, always, always, shifting, adding, subtracting, gaining.*

He wanted us to begin to sense our connectedness to the rest of the world. By acknowledging the effect that the world has on us, it would illuminate the effect we too can have on the world, emphasizing the power of our subjectivity, a call to exercise our democratic rights and a realization of our responsibilities.

The portraits are painted directly on the wall, ideally just below where the wall meets the ceiling, "ideally" in silver lettering in the preferred Trump Medieval Italic Bold typeface against a background color of the owner's choice. It is a very different experience for collectors to choose to display their own portraits, to reveal themselves, then it is to pass on ideas through the display of a discrete art object. Part of why Felix wanted these works to be considered in some way collaborative was so that the owner could experience what it was like for an artist to expose themselves, to use their own subjectivity as an exemplary gesture.

Perhaps the most important aspect of these portrait pieces is that the owner has the right to add and subtract events to and from their portrait at will. Here are pieces that are permanently painted on the wall, reminiscent of historical friezes-again, the formal reference to monuments-yet they can change. After all, hopefully one's history is not stagnant. And with this one decision, Felix' instruction suggests that one "is allowed" to change one's view of one's life. It is in the simplest of alterations that make Felix' work so expansive and influential. How Liberating and generous a gift it is to know that you can change your *self image*. The ability to add events encourages the hope of life's continuum, the possibility of a brighter future. Here, the idea of subtracting events-the liberation of letting go of or moving beyond an event which at one point you considered to be intrinsic to your being becomes a tangible example of how out and our *loss, forgetting*, becomes beneficial. The act of losing a memory or forgetting becomes a vehicle for the benefits of growth. Recently Elaine Danheisser gave her *portrait* to the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The act of giving an elusive portrait as a tangible gift to a museum is interesting to think about. And even more interesting is that the certificate states that the *owner* has the right to add and subtract events at will. Does this mean that the MOMA now can choose to add to or subtract events from Elaine Danheisser's portrait?

Even though the concepts are so dear, it was very difficult for Felix to make these pieces. It took him months and sometimes as long as a year to reach a final version. I think it was not so much about his struggle to figure out what to add to the piece, but rather that he was overwhelmed with the magnitude of someone or a couple's life. He also found it hard to reflect on the long and complex Lives the owners had as they were reminders of his own ebbing life span. At different periods Felix decided that he could not make portrait pieces as they were simply too painful. And then someone would ask again, and he would be so touched by their enthusiasm or the magnitude of their life, that he would agree. It was fascinating to look back at all of the titles of the portrait pieces and realize that almost half of them were gifts he gave to his friends. Felix did give so many people a new perspective on their lives.

Felix' own portrait changed and took many forms over the time from its inception in 1989 to the last version made in November of 1995, to be installed at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporaneo, in

Santiago de Compostela, one of the traveling venues of his Guggenheim retrospective exhibition. I am sure he knew it would be the last he would choose:

*Red Canoe 1987 Watercolors 1964 Paris 1985 Supreme Court 1986 Blue Lake 1986 Our Own Apartment 1976 Rosa 1977 Guaimaro 1957 New York City 1979 Pebbles and Biko 1985 Ross 1983 Civil Rights Act 1964 Mariel Boatlift 1980 White Shirt 1984 Julie 1987 An Easy Death 1991 CNN 1980 Black Monday 1987 Berlin Wall 1989 Great Society 1964 Venice 1985 Wawanaisa Lake 1987 U.N. 1945 Mother 1986 Myriam 1990 VCR 1978 Dad 1991 Bay of Pigs 1961 D-Day 1944 Interferon 1989 Jeff 1978 Silver Ocean 1990 H-Bomb 1954 The World I Knew Is Gone 1991 Bruno and Mary 1991 Madrid 1971 MTV 1981 Rafael 1992 may 1968 Andrea 1990 Twenty-fourth Street 1993 LA 1990 Placebo 1991 George Nelson Clocks 1993 A view to remember 1995*

In 1993, in lieu of a standard biography/bibliography, for the monograph published by A.R.T. Press, Felix chose to insert a very different version of his portrait:

*1957 born in Guaimaro, Cuba, the third of what would eventually be four children 1964 Dad bought me a set of watercolors and gave me my first cat 1971 sent to Spain with my sister Gloria, then went to Puerto Rico to live with my uncle 1979 returned to Cuba to see my parents after an eight-year separation 1981 parents escaped Cuba during Mariel boat lift, my brother Mario and sister Mayda escaped with them 1978 met Jeff in Puerto Rico 1976 Gloria and I moved to our own apartment-small, but full of sunlight 1977 Rosa 1976 met my friend Mario 1979 moved to New York City 1980 met Luis at the beach 1983 received BFA from Pratt Institute 1981 and 1983 attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program 1987 received MFA from the International Center of Photography and New York University 1983 Ross at the Boybar 1985 Jeff gave me Pebbles and Biko, two Lilac Point Siamese cats-hardly able to support myself, and now with two cats to feed, only Jeff 1985 first trip to Europe, first summer with Ross 1986 summer in Venice, studied Venetian painting and architecture 1986 blue kitchen, blue flowers in Toronto - a real home for the first time in so long, so long, Ross is here 1987 Wawanaisa Lake: beavers, wild brown bears, Harry retrieved every buoy he sees, New York Times every morning, duck cabin 1986 Mother died of leukemia 1990 Myriam died 1991 Ross died of AIDS, Dad died three weeks later, a hundred small yellow envelopes of my lover's ashes-his last will 1991 Jorge stopped talking to me, I'm lost - Claudio and Miami Beach saved me 1992 Jeff died of AIDS 1990 silver ocean in San Francisco 1992 President Clinton - hope, twelve years of trickle-down economics came to an end 1990 moved to L.A. with Ross (already very sick), Harry the Dog, Biko, and Pebbles, the Ravenswood, Rossmore, golden hour, Ann and Chris by the pool, magic hour, rented a red car, money for the first time, no more waiting on tables, "Golden Girls", great students at Ca/Arts, Millie and Catherine, went back to Madrid after almost twenty years-sweet revenge 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall 1991 Bruno and Mary, two black cats Ross found in Toronto, came to live with me 1991 the world I knew is gone, moved the four cats, books, and a few things to a new apartment 1991 went back to L.A., hospitalized for 10 days 1990 first show with Andrea Rosen 1993 moved to 24th Street 1987 joined Group Material 1991 Julie moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan 1992 the forces of hate and ignorance are alive and well in Oregon and Colorado, among other places 1993 Sam Nunn is such a sissy, peace might be possible in the Middle East 1992 started to collect George Nelson clocks and furniture 1993 three years since Ross died, painted kitchen floor bright orange, this book*

When I was approached to write this text, the particular territory I believe I was meant to cover was that of a *biographical* text, expounding on the direct experiences and discussions I had with Felix over the years. Perhaps I was meant to fulfill the belief that if we could simply record all of the anecdotes and events in someone's life that we would not lose them, the events nor the person. Here, the portrait pieces act as an example; not all events need to be listed; a portrait is not created only of events between one's birth and one's death; and history is never stagnant nor linear. Like the various versions of Felix' own portrait, history is always and only written from the perspective of the moment. At it's best, it is always changing. I was, therefore, pleased that the texts would be separated from the body of the

catalogue raisonné. To try and write a definitive biography would not only be impossible in terms of Felix' total agenda, but totally counter-productive.

Felix insisted on the work speaking for itself. He consistently refused to have his photo taken for the press, insisting that it was the work that should be reproduced, not his image. Felix made sure to leave a very specific and purposeful legacy. *"I do not have a studio, I have a desk,"* Felix adamantly stated. During school and early on, Felix did not have a studio because he could not afford one, but later, not having a studio seemed very purposeful. Felix' work habits were all about rigor and discipline and research: a constant culling of information, reading, digesting, filtering. *"As cultural producers we should be very aware of what the culture is doing. We must read the newspaper, we should watch the news, we should be finding out what is new, because even if we don't take them on as issues that stuff will affect us one way or another."*<sup>21</sup> For Felix, books and the newspaper were invaluable sources while television encapsulated public perception. The photostat pieces, made between the years of 1987 and 1992, are small works, varying in size according to how the photostat lab chose to print out the paper, averaging 8 x 10 inches, consisting usually of two lines of white text, words and associated dates, in Trump Italic Bold typeface, pushed to the bottom of the black shiny surface of the photostat paper. These works are always framed. The surface itself becomes referential to a television screen. The blank, black space allows room for the viewer to project into the screen, while the words (clearly the precursors to the portrait pieces) mimic the random, non-linear, non-discriminatory emanations of massmedia information, i.e.:

*Patty Hearst 1975 Jaws 1975 Vietnam 1975 Watergate 1973 Bruce Lee 1973 Munich 1972  
Waterbeds 1971 Jackie O 1968.*

or

*Alabama 1964 Safe Sex 1985 Disco Donuts 1979 Cardinal O'Conner 1887 Klaus Barbie 1944  
Napalm 1972 C.O.D.*

This is the real world; there is no separation between the news and the commercial. And there is no separation between the TV audience and his audience. Felix was not interested in a studio that would act as refuge from the world but rather created his works in the world keeping the past, present and future in the foreground.

*"The gallery becomes my studio, I never see the completed work before they are installed."* And when it came to installing the work, Felix was totally prepared, usually there were few changes. *"I think about the work and the installations for a very very long time. I lose sleep over these things."*<sup>22</sup> I believe his work process was analogous to preparing to speak in front of a large audience. (Felix also prepared rigorously for oral presentations, always writing completely new texts for each engagement.) Putting the work in the public immediately allowed him the opportunity to sense if he felt confident about his decisions. From time to time Felix would decide that he did not feel strongly enough about a piece to have it remain a work, even if it had already been exhibited. *"I am not afraid of making mistakes, I'm afraid of keeping them."*<sup>23</sup>

It was also typical for Felix to change the title of a work a number of times. From an outside perspective, someone might imagine that he was indecisive and fickle. But Felix knew that, unlike the change that could go on and on in the portrait pieces, there would be an end to his existence. He therefore put most of his energy into the subtle and essential details. In this way Felix was very precise and extreme about final decisions. His favorite saying and guiding rule was *"When in doubt leave it out!"* He knew that the only control he had was in choosing what he left behind. Felix was very particular about this freedom, this intrinsic *"right"* of an artist to say *"this is a work of art and this is not, this 'represents' me and this does not"*. He was also very clear that he did not consider support material to be art: *"I don't want people to be involved in the insecurity that comes with making these, things." "They're just there to help me through [to] the final piece, which is what I want the public to really be engaged with. The voyeuristic idea that what ever the artist sketches or does is interesting, is not interesting to me. That's stuff for People [magazine]."*<sup>24</sup> Without this important freedom to decide what he would leave as his oeuvre, he would have not felt the liberation necessary to leave so much space for interpretation.

The titles of Felix' work set a particularly interesting framework. Felix was extremely precise about the way a title was written. Embedded within these choices seems to be the clear delineation of importance Felix placed on the work being open for interpretation, the animation of the work to go on to have it's own incarnation, vs. the inclusion of his subjectivity: both his desire to be personally remembered and as an example of the power of one's subjectivity. All of Felix' work, without exception from 1988 on, and with few exceptions previously, are entitled: "Untitled", the quotation marks indicating an insistence that the work is *"not accompanied by a caption"*. There is no predetermined language connected to the work, that might limit the flexibility of the works reading, or at least not within the *official* title. However, about three quarters of the works have parenthetical titles, clearly and always situated outside of the closed quotation, marginalized, Felix' personal interjections, i.e.:

"Untitled" (Golden), 1995, "Untitled" (USA Today), 1990, "Untitled" (Portrait of Dad), 1991, "Untitled" (Placebo), 1991, "Untitled" (March 5th) #1, 1991, "Untitled" (Revenge), 1991, "Untitled" (NRA), 1991, "Untitled" (Orpheus Twice), 1991, "Untitled" (Silver Beach), 1990, "Untitled" (The End), 1990, "Untitled" (Bloodwork Steady Decline), 1993, "Untitled" (Passport), 1991, "Untitled" (Loverboys), 1991, "Untitled" (Double Fear), 1987...

Strung together like this, they seem to clearly relate to a portrait piece.

For those of us that knew Felix, the parenthetical titles are like small gifts left behind: remember when we spoke about this, and remember how I felt about that piece, and remember when we went there ... These gifts are very welcome, but they are also reminders of just how much one forgets. Do I really know what all of those words meant to Felix? Felix recounted stories to me on a daily basis, stories which were essential to him, often stories were generated by his decision to include or change a particular parenthetical title. They were about defining what was necessary and which memories were infused with meaning. Often the conversations were about re-addressing a slant of an article he had read in the New York Times, his *"greatest source of inspiration"*. Or there were many conversation about his perspective on historical events. It is clear that the portrait pieces are not simply distant metaphors, they are manifestations of exactly the way Felix developed his own narrative.

Felix often repeated the same story, adding more information or changing the slant or even the details. Sometimes these changes were the key to an illuminating new insight. However the variations from one telling to the next also underscores the realization that there is no one truth, no single biography. I'm sure there were many facts Felix purposefully altered or deleted in order to emphasize a point, knowing he would only have a limited time to develop a history. There were days when I listened to Felix, not just out of pleasure or the desire for intellectual stimulation from him, but because I was acutely aware of his ebbing life span, conscious of the futile desire to store every memory I could, conscious of the gallery's responsibility as an archive. And then there were days in which I would allow myself to forget these responsibilities, or to simply acknowledge that these were Felix' memories which I could never possess as fully as he did.

Felix' work was a form of dialogue by which he could touch endless numbers of people. Personal dialogue, the ability to directly transmit ideas and attitudes, a way of Felix knowing immediately that he could make an impact, was also crucial to him. He needed this kind of feedback. However, he also knew how much time it took to keep up a real dialogue. Since trust in the audience was so essential, he also wanted to control his level of possible disappointment, so he had to make sure to be selective. Considering the intensity of his life, I was awed by Felix' ability to maintain such prolific written correspondence with so many. Amongst his friends he was known for sending small notes on the backs of snapshots, sometimes closely related to images in his work (seagulls flying in the distance of a cloudy skies); characters from his collection of rubber toys: arranged into loving couples (for example, Eddy Monster and Snoopy rucked in to bed), or in party groups interspersed with tropical fruits. Even though Felix and I spoke every day, I received letters from him sometimes as often as once a week and at least once every month or two. While these notes and letters are not art works, they are tangible physical

remnants of Felix' dialogue with others. He also left his correspondence with Ross to an archive. Of course, Felix could not escape the basic contradiction between his insistence that value not be placed on background and source material, that aggrandizing of memorabilia, even though personally meaningful, undermined his extreme efforts to liberate himself from concretization, and his very human desire to insure that his love letters-clearly also source material-did not disappear.

The desire for a dialogue extended beyond his friends. Deep personal relationships developed through discourse with a handful of dedicated collectors. The forum of public lectures and teaching were also essential. *"Teaching for me is a form of cultural activism, a form of creative change at a very basic level."*<sup>25</sup> Felix cherished his educational work within the context of Group Material<sup>26</sup>, and making time to teach courses was imperative. At New York University, the curriculum described his class as "Urban Photography," a class designed to teach students how to take photographs in an urban setting. Felix transformed this class into "The Urban Landscape", a theoretical class in which he emphasized the importance of developing methods, the importance of the process that brings you to *make the choice* to be an artist. He would often describe his classes, his teaching methods, how he would perpetually recontextualize information, for example, by reading excerpts from the New York Times while "Jane Fonda's Workout" tape played in the background. He didn't want to be one of those teachers who dictated passé ideas and personal aesthetics to his class. Parallel to the owners of his work, Felix did not want his students to see him as the authority. *"You try to give them the ability, the tools to see for themselves what is important, what is needed, what is moving, and what is not."* "I see myself as an instigator, someone who questions not only the function of the art object and the practice but also the act of teaching art."<sup>27</sup> The opportunity to learn from the next generation, to readdress his own agenda, and to instill expansive ways of thinking was so important to Felix that he often considered taking long periods of time off from making work so as to concentrate on teaching. As he could never really find the time to do everything he would have liked to do, the freedom to concentrate on teaching only came once.

In the fall of 1990 Felix spent a semester teaching at CalArts, in Los Angeles. It was also an opportunity to invite Ross to spend time together. For the majority of their relationship they lived in different cities, Ross in Toronto and Felix in New York. This only seemed to strengthen their dialogue. Felix often said that Ross was his ideal audience, his "audience of one". These few months they spent together were rich with inspiration, generating many works, many memories worthy of being embedded in the parenthetical titles of the work. Relative to the oeuvre, there are a large number of pieces that refer directly to these months, all seemingly joyful (even though at this point Ross was quite ill), still seemingly full of hope and light: "Untitled" (L.A.), 1991 (cat. no. 123), a line of bright green candies; "Untitled" (Ross in L.A.), 1991 (cat. no. 119), a stack piece with a shining silver rectangle the size of a snapshot on each sheet; "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991 (cat. no. 168), a bright multicolored candy piece with an ideal weight of 175 lbs.; "Untitled" (Rossmore), 1992,<sup>28</sup> (cat. no. 200) a lightstring piece; "Untitled" (Rossmore II), 1991 (cat. no. 131), the only other brilliant green candy piece; "Untitled", 1994 (cat. no. 268), two photos of the chandelier in the entranceway of their building, as if two people were looking up at the same chandelier from their own slightly different point of view; "Untitled" (Placebo, Landscape for Roni), 1993 (cat. no. 251), a very Large rectangle of gold-wrapped candies, an homage to a Roni Horn's piece Felix and Ross had experienced together, and which to them had the same magical quality as the light in L.A. at dusk. It is impossible to interpret the whole of Felix' intent from the abbreviated information of the parenthetical titles. It is clear that pure language and dialogue was essential to Felix. But the parenthetical titles are a resignation to the fleetingness of imbedded meaning. Already it is hard for me to remember all of the stories that pertain to each of the titles, or more likely, I could have never known the meaning they had for Felix.

For instance, "Untitled" (March 5th) is a title that appears more than once. It is the title of a number of pieces that refer to perfect lovers, Lifemates. The very first lightstring piece Felix made, around the time of Ross' death, was a multiple of this title. Simply, it consisted of two white electrical cords, approximately 140 inches in length each (cat. no. 118). On the end of each of the cords is a white porcelain light socket holding a forty-watt bulb. The two cords are meant to be knotted together about ten inches away from the top of the sockets. A nail is placed on the wall at the allotted height of 113 inches,

on which the cords hang from the knot. Hence, as the piece appears installed, two independent, but closely situated, white cords run up the wall, meet 113 inches up the wall in a knot, then the bulbs hang back down the wall approximately 14 inches, intertwined. Perfect lovers, glowing together, with the implication that one bulb can burn out before the other. Even though the bulb can be replaced, the thought is agonizing. Like most of Felix' work, this piece transforms totally banal material into something hopeful and beautiful as well as realistic and tragic. Although I have referred to this title: "Untitled" (March 5th) countless times, it is a piece I own, perhaps one of my favourite pieces, I had to stretch myself to remember that March 5th is a reference to Ross' Birthday. Felix must have known that the exact meanings of the parenthetical titles would be lost. Yet he purposefully decided that each of the lightstring pieces would be accompanied by a parenthetical title. The lightstring pieces, in particular, become evidence of Felix' desire, albeit sometimes marginalized desire, to instill himself in the work.

Felix decided to never make more than 24 lightstring pieces. There are two multiples, "Untitled" (March 5th) #2, 1991 (cat. no. 118) and "Untitled" (Last Light), 1993 (cat. no. 246), in which the entire edition constitutes one of the twenty-four piece. Eighteen of the twenty-two unique lightstring pieces are virtually identical in construction.<sup>29</sup> There are only two conditions that define the difference between each piece. The first rests with the owner who has the right to install the piece however s/he likes; the second resides in the titles. In limiting the number of lightstring pieces Felix devised a challenge for himself: What are the 24 most important events or concepts I would like to memorialize?

"Untitled" (March 5") #2, 1991, "Untitled" (Tim Hotel), 1992, "Untitled" (Petite Palais), 1992, "Untitled" (Miami), 1992, "Untitled" (Toronto), 1992, "Untitled" (rue St. Dennis), 1992, "Untitled" (Rossmore), 1992, "Untitled" (For Stockholm), 1992, "Untitled" (America #1), 1992, "Untitled" (America #2), 1992, "Untitled" (America #3), 1992, "Untitled" (For New York), 1992, "Untitled" (A Love Meal), 1992, "Untitled" (Silver), 1992, "Untitled" (North), 1993, "Untitled" (A Couple), 1993, "Untitled" (Lovers-Paris), 1993, "Untitled" (Arena), 1993, "Untitled" (Strange Music), 1993, "Untitled" (Last Light), 1993, "Untitled" (Leaves of Grass), 1993, "Untitled" (Summer), 1993, "Untitled" (Ischia), 1993 "Untitled" (America), 1994

I've come to realize that Felix' desire to insert himself in these titles is not about some futile wish that his particular experiences would be remembered. It was simply imperative to include *himself*. Within Felix' living dialogue, the most essential message and his most fervent desire was to instill in everyone the awareness of the power of one's own subjectivity. Felix, the person who lived an exemplary life, desired to make works that would continue to encourage his audience to be aware, to be optimistic, to be courageous, to acknowledge that individuality is the only quality that all human beings share, and to take responsibility for the world around you. Society doesn't happen around you, you are society.

*"I'm a person who lives in this society and I'm a product of this society and this culture. I'm not only a reflection, I'm that culture itself..."*<sup>30</sup> Felix knew and saw how frightening it can be to claim your rights and responsibilities. But he also knew from experience that if one is able to make the leap of faith, so much can then be accomplished. Felix kept a postcard of *Saute dans la Vide / Leap into the Void* (1962) - the image of the artist Yves Klein leaping, arms spread, from an open window - on his desk as a constant reminder and inspiration: *"Leap into the Void"*.

Felix was certainly not naive or blind to issues of inequality, having frequently experience it himself. However, he believed or wanted to believe that if he did not alienate himself, he would not be alienated. In this way, Felix refused to buy into the stereotypes of Gay representation as he also refused to buy into the stereotype of the Latino artist:

*I will not wear the grass skirt. It's very easy to say, 'Poor little me.' It's just too easy to feel sorry for yourself; that's what some folks want us (minorities) to do. They want us to roll over. The only thing they want to hear from us, through our art, is how difficult life is for us, the 'other'. Hawaiians had to wear grass skirts in Hawaii Five-0 to make white folks happy.*<sup>31</sup>

Felix believed that stereotyping only creates fuel for the fires of racism, homophobia and extreme political conservatism. He did not want to make work that was an analysis or explanation of his identity. *"Multiculturalism is not about numbers, it's about inclusion, about opening up the terms of the argument... who dictates and defines quality"*.<sup>32</sup> for Felix it was much more powerful to assume that the gay and straight audience was the same audience, that being a Cuban born American is the same as being an American. And being American was something he was extremely proud of.

Felix' belief in the power of the American melting pot did not mean, however, that he denied the flaws in the blind pursuit of the "American Dream". So many of his titles directly questioned the oppressive influence of the power structure: "Forbidden Colors", 1988 a reference to the Israeli law that forbids Palestinians to combine the four colors of the Palestinian flag together in any way; "Untitled" (New Supreme Justice), 1989, "Untitled" (God Bless Our Country and Now Back to War) , 1989, "Untitled" (NRA) - National Rifle Association, 1990, "Untitled" (USA Today), 1990, "Untitled" (Death by Gun), 1990, "Untitled" (Welcome Back Heroes), 1991, "Untitled" (The New Plan), 1991, "Untitled" (Party Platform-1980-1992), 1991, "Untitled" (Public Opinion), 1991, "Untitled" (1980 - 1992), 1991, - the twelve years of Republican rule in the United States, "Untitled" (Waldheim and the Pope), 1989, "Untitled" (Chief Justice's Hands), 1991, "Untitled" (David Souter's House), 1991, "Untitled" (Republican Years), 1992.

Within his work and sometimes within their parenthetical titles, Felix included his identity as a example for others: Cuban born, homosexual, a person who went to the Whitney Program, a son, a brother, a lover... and so on. He relished his identity. Both the titles of the work and the form are imbued with personal meaning and intuitive decisions: a color, a number, a childhood memory; all are encapsulated in Felix' work. The light blue that appears in much of his work represents, Felix said, not baby blue for boys or sky or heaven or water, but pleasure: *"If a beautiful memory could have a color, that color would be light blue."*<sup>33</sup> His decisions about the heights of works, or the number of billboard locations, or the number of lights on a strand, were often based on dates that were meaningful to him: birthdays, anniversaries, deaths.

*I do like certain uncanny numbers. Things happen to me around certain numbers: 5, 24, 12. Those are the numbers that sometimes determine the height of a stack. If the piece is about something that is very distant to me, then numbers like 17, 35, 21, sound perfect because they are numbers that I would never use for anything except for a piece that is very uncomfortable.*<sup>34</sup>

As time went on I realized just how much of Felix' visual index was developed through his childhood in Cuba. Intertwined in Felix' stories were details about the importance of photo albums in his parents' home, how he remembered the doorways to small stores lined with strings of light, the pervasive presents of vultures...<sup>35</sup> Felix' works are not just metaphors, they are embodiments. As if through his work, Felix is saying: I was a person that had very specific likes and dislikes. My subjectivity gave me the strength to express myself. My history was important to me. My place in the world mattered. I knew my history and I knew my place within it. Yes, everyone may interpret these works differently but I want to leave a mark that *"I existed"*.

Robert Storr opened an article he wrote on Felix which appeared in the January 1996 issue of Art in America, the month Felix died, with a particularly moving story, I would like to end with it:

*A shimmering silver carpet stretches along the institutionally white floor. It measures some 6 by 12 feet and is made of hundreds of foil wrapped candies. Entering the room under the watchful eye of their mother, two young boys race toward the rectangle mirage and fill their pockets without restraint. From beside the door through which they have come, a uniformed guard steps forward and admonishes them to take only one. Just as they are about to surrender their next to last pieces of treasure she winks, letting them know its all right to hold on to an extra few.*

*At this point the guard turns to the mother, who tensely awaits a reproving look or comment, and*

*delivers instead a detailed explanation of how the amount of candy spread out at their feet represents the combined weight of the artist- about whom she speaks with familiarity and his dead lover. The piece, she informs the mother is called ""Untitled" (Placebo), and it refers to the AIDS epidemic and the lack of a cure or even care that so many suffering from the disease must face. Thus, one morning at the Hirshhorn museum in Washington DC within walking distance of the House and the Senate chambers where hysterical condemnation of "Obscene" art are routine spectacle, a black civil servant and a white mother of two preadolescent males entered comfortably into a conversation about art, and death, and public policy.<sup>36</sup>*

It matters little that in fact the ideal weight of the piece was actually one thousand pounds, and that Felix did not consider the piece to be specifically about AIDS. This short account embodies so much of Felix' achievements and goals. Imagine all the times any one particular work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres has been, or will be, installed, and in how many different possible ways, in how many different contexts and countries. Imagine all the individual sheets or candies taken from each of these constantly replenished installations, imagine all the possible billboard locations. Imagine all of the possible interpretations, and one begins to develop a picture of how his work travels and disseminates meanings.

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1. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Robert Storr: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Etre un espion* (interview), in: Art Press, January 1995, p. 32.
  2. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 13.
  3. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 28.
  4. "Ideal height" refers to the possible changing status of the work's height. As the audience is invited to take individual sheets of paper from the stack, the height of the stack may vary. Felix determined an ideal height for each stack piece, and an ideal weight for each candy pieces. However the owner or institution exhibiting the work is not obligated to maintain the work at this height or weight. The "ideal" is only a guideline or a reference to the works initial installation. The exhibitor is free to interpret this, information as they see fit. I.E. if the ideal weight of candy piece is 350 pounds, the owner or exhibitor can choose to install 2,000 pounds if they like. Or if a work is installed in an installation and all of the material is taken from the piece by the audience the exhibitor may choose to not replenish the piece, leaving the space empty for the duration of the exhibition.
  5. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 29.
  6. It is interesting to note that both David Hammons and Mark Dion have also made works that refer directly to this monument.
  7. It is clear that the higher stacks refer to pedestal like monuments, while those with low ideal heights directly refer to the scale of tombstones.
  8. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 27.
  9. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 19.
  10. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 23.
  11. Gonzalez -Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 10-11.
  12. It is important to realize that, although nor directly stated in the certificate, the owner only has the right to reproduce this image as a billboard. This does not mean they own the rights to the photograph. Felix owned the right to the image, and in a number of cases the exact same image used for a unique billboard piece was also used in other forms of his work (puzzles, framed photographs).
  13. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 22.
  14. The Certificates of Authenticity/Ownership for the stack pieces, candy pieces, billboards, lightstrings, portraits, beaded curtains all indicate the owners name as an important and intrinsic of the certificates. Certificates of Authenticity have also been issued for works of Felix' that have multiple parts, i.e. bloodwork drawings and painting, multiple part photographic works, "Untitled"(Perfect Lovers), (the two-part clock piece) ... These certificates issued to indicate that the works must stay together as a group. These certificates do not include the collectors name. There are also Certificates of Authenticity for the majority of the multiples by Felix, nor do these certificates indicate the owners' names.
  15. Therefore, there are many inconsistencies between certificates of like works. Some of the certificates, Felix would have even considered to now be outdated.
  16. All works entitled "Untitled" have not been included.



17. It is interesting to note that when asked to choose the illustrations for a book the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, published in 1990 entitled "Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture", Felix chose to illustrate the book only with the twelve images from "Untitled" (Museum of Natural History) (cat. no. 272) and childhood photographs of each of the contributors to the book. When the most obvious choice may have been to illustrate a book on marginalization with photos of impoverished minorities, Felix chose to use images that appear to be optimistic but addressed marginalization through the guise of the norm. Felix often spoke of how powerful it was to disguise your agenda in the costume of the master narrative.

18 He received his MFA in photography from the International Center for Photography, New York in 1987.

19. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 22.

20 "Untitled" (Portrait of Austrian Airlines) 1993, "Untitled" (Portrait of the MOCA) 1994 (cat. no. 263) – Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, "Untitled" (Portrait of the fabric Work Shop- a gift to Kippy) 1994, and "Untitled" (Portrait of Cincinnati Art Museum) 1994 (cat. no. 262).

21. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 20.

22 Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 9.

23 Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 8.

24 Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 9.

25. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 23.

26. Felix was formally a member of the artist's collective, Group Material, from 1987-1991.

27. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 28.

28. Rossmore is the name of the street they lived on in Los Angeles, the same building that Mae West had lived in.

29. The multi-string pieces, i.e. "Untitled" (North), 1993 (cat. no. 232), - 12 lightstrings, "Untitled" (America), 1994 (cat. no. 270), - 24 lightstrings--that is made of black rubber, able to be installed outdoors as well, and "Untitled" (couple) (cat. no. 273), 1993, - two strings, and a piece he had for me "Untitled"(Silver), 1992 (cat. no. 219), - in which the sockets and cords are silver).

30. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 19.

31. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 29.

32. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 18.

33. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 15.

34. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix and Tim Rollins: (interview), in: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1993, p. 8.

35. The very last piece Felix made was called "Untitled" (Vultures), 1995 (cat. no. 274). He had always photographed seagulls, but in the end he began to photograph vultures who had mysteriously begun to migrate to Florida.

36. Storr, Robert: Setting the Traps for the Mind and Heart, in: *Art in America*, January 1996, pp. 70/71.