

ARTISTS MEET FRUSTRATION AT GROUND ZERO

ON EDGE • BY C. CARR

The Lost WTC Memorial

The demise of Mary Miss's project, *Moving Perimeter: A Wreath for Ground Zero*, would seem to be a cautionary tale about the intricacies of bringing art to the former World Trade Center site. Hopefully, that is the moral of this story, not that artists will be marginalized

during rebuilding. ¶ Remarkably, the process of creating a 9-11 memorial is only just beginning. This week, Anita Contini begins work at the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation as vice president and director of memorial, cultural, and civic programs. In due time, she will issue criteria for memorial proposals. Two thousand ideas have already come in, unsolicited.

New Yorkers have needed a memorial since day one. Indeed, by September 12, they were everywhere—those spontaneous heart-felt shrines. Miss and two collaborators, landscape architects Elliott Maltby and Victoria Marshall, found inspiration in those clusters of candles and flowers. They conceived of *Moving Perimeter* last October as a temporary piece, meant to address that need for ritual and a gathering place.

A well-respected public artist, Miss has lived and worked just blocks from the World Trade Center for over 30 years. The day of the attack, she was on her way to a project in New Jersey and watched the terrible scene from a train. As she learned later, people back in Manhattan were fleeing the city through South Cove, the park she designed at Battery Park City. By the time she got access to her loft again, days later, the city had established its moving perimeter, the border of police checkpoints and concrete barriers that moved from 14th to Houston to Canal to Chambers.

The three artists talked first about transforming that line, painting everything sky blue, then realized that by the time they could get an OK from everyone who needed to sign off on it, the barriers would be down.

But Miss couldn't shut out the emotional impact of the new landscape around her—the smoking ruins at the end of the street, the ugly makeshift fencing, and, finally, the insistent crowds. She is one neighborhood resident who does not malign the people flocking to the site. She sees it as a pilgrimage which a public art piece could make more meaningful.

"Everybody was coming to this edge, sticking flowers anywhere they could find. We

THIS DIGITALLY ENHANCED IMAGE SHOWS PART OF THE PLAN FOR MOVING PERIMETER.

thought, let's make a place where they can put them. Then people have a role to play. People were being treated badly. They were not allowed to come as mourners. They were coming as intruders.

"I felt that there was something important that needed to happen, that we couldn't wait five years or 10 years to be able to mourn at the site," says Miss.

Her work—like a demonstration wetlands in Des Moines, a proposed viewing area for the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles—has always been about creating aesthetic order in an existing landscape. She has no interest in proposing a permanent memorial.

The artists designed *Moving Perimeter* to fit ground zero's status as both construction site and hallowed ground. They planned to first paint all barriers and fences sky blue, then gradually replace everything around the 16-acre site. Instead of police sawhorses: rows of blue pipes (about three inches in diameter), weighted at the bottom with sand, open at the top to hold flowers and photos. Instead of plywood walls and chain-link fencing: slightly curved blue fences of steel mesh. Instead of concrete barriers: large planters with flowering trees. All would be modular elements, easily moved or adjusted. Blue lights atop the fences would make the site visible at night from the air.

The artists saw figure eights as their central motif, a symbol for a city reconnecting. They wanted to paint them on the streets at certain intersections. And even before the city installed a viewing platform, they had added "ramped overlooks" to their plan, also figure eights. They thought that when construction ended, all the modular pieces could be taken elsewhere and reassembled into a giant figure eight. In that form, the *Moving Perimeter* could even travel across the country.

By the end of 2001, the media had picked up on it, and thanks, no doubt, to Miss's track record, *Moving Perimeter* got more attention than most unrealized works of art—articles in the *Times*, the *Observer*, and *Art in America*, an interview on WNYC. The artists were building a base of support, getting endorsements from Community Board 1, the Municipal Arts Society, the Department of Cultural Affairs, and Creative Time. They compiled a long list of individual supporters from groups like the Families of September 11 and the Battery Park City Authority. They talked to Con Ed and Verizon and the people putting up fences at the site. New York Cares offered volunteers to do the painting. They went so far as to count and measure all the barriers around the perimeter so the artists could figure out how much paint to get.

In late March, Miss finally approached LMDC, getting what she calls "the royal brush-off." Of course, there was no one in place at that point to oversee the memorial process. That month, LMDC installed a temporary memorial at the Battery—the damaged bronze sculpture by Fritz Koenig that

once stood on the World Trade Center plaza. It also approved the *Tribute in Light*.

But the artists had focused on the everyday realities of ground zero. Says Miss: "What we're seeing is that there can't be time given there to the emotional layer, to things that have meaning beyond square footage and footprints."

Miss sees herself as someone on the front lines of the struggle to integrate art into the public realm, so while she gave up on *Moving Perimeter*, she never abandoned the idea that something more has to happen now. She issued a call to artists, designers, landscape architects, and architects, who are invited to propose temporary memorials on a site of their choosing anywhere in the metropolitan area. Miss, Maltby, and Marshall plan to organize an exhibition of the proposals and may be able to secure funding for the installation of these works.

The memorial process sits at the heart of the ground zero tug-of-war. Contini, the new appointee, seems well qualified to navigate between the art and business worlds. She founded Creative Time and worked most recently for Merrill Lynch. But the huge emotional investment here, among other things, will make her job a tough one—even if the proposed land swap of ground zero for city airports takes one of the major players, the Port Authority, out of the picture. And it all seems to be starting rather late.

Several months ago, LMDC's families advisory council formed two subcommittees to work on the memorial. Spokesperson Nancy Poderycki reports that one group is talking about "what qualities a memorial would embody, whether it would incorporate earth, water, light," for example. The other is focused on the process: "Would there be an international competition? Would there be a committee?"

Miss reports that in early meetings with the families, she heard talk of reflecting pools, eternal flames, weeping willows, names in stone, the tried and true. "Artists could show many ways to honor their loved ones," says Miss. "Artists could open the thinking." ¶

The call for proposals for temporary memorials can be found at www.marymiss.com. The deadline is August 30.

