

**THE WORKS BELONGING TO THE EXPERIENCE DIFFER FROM THE ART THAT WILL MEMORIALIZE IT.**

# The Art of 9/11

by Arthur C. Danto

*Recall that after Schubert's death, his brother cut some of Schubert's scores into small pieces, and gave each piece, consisting of a few bars, to his favorite pupils. And this act, as a sign of piety, is just as understandable as the different one of keeping the scores untouched, accessible to no one. And if Schubert's brother had burned the scores, that too would be understandable as an act of piety.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

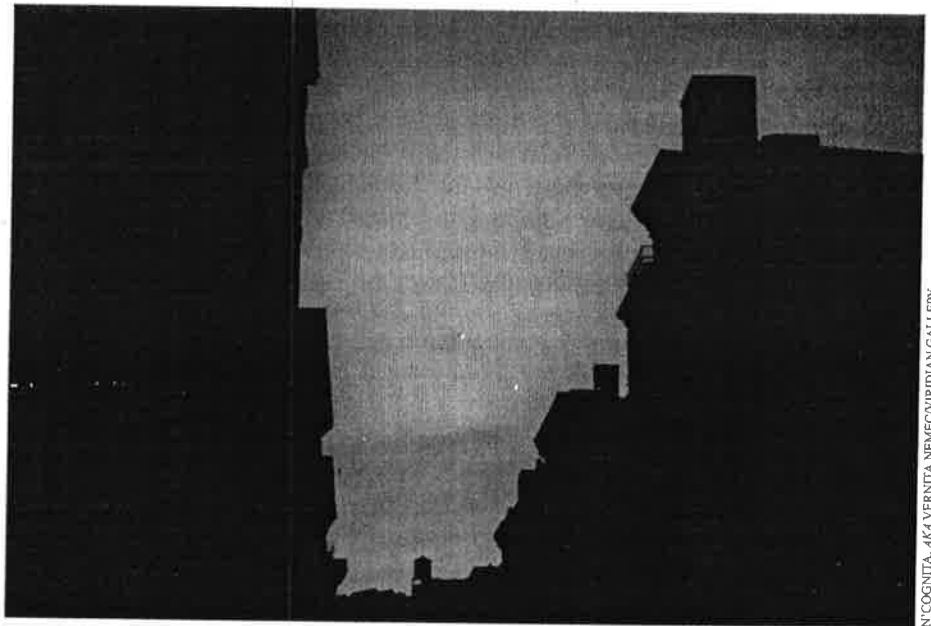
Announcements have begun to come in of exhibitions of art dedicated to the memory of 9/11. One of them, to be called "Elegy," had a September 3 opening at the Viridian Gallery in Chelsea, and its card in particular caught my eye. It displays a photograph by someone named N'Cognita, which embodies a mood of elegy with a remarkable specificity. It is a view down an unmistakable but anonymous New York street, taken in sharp perspective, with the buildings, most of their details obliterated, silhouetted darkly against an orange and lavender sky. They are vintage tenements, of the kind we all know, with heavy cornices and water towers, and the melancholy of the image is heightened by the absence of towers at the end of the street.

"We" refers, of course, to New Yorkers, for whom the view of emptiness at the ends of streets and avenues has been the nagging reminder of what we had more or less taken for granted as always there. No one loved the towers as much as everyone missed them—but it was not so much the erasure of the landmarks that tore at the heart as it was the inerasable memory of how they fell. That memory, however, belonged to the whole world, to viewers everywhere, who kept seeing, over and over, as in a nightmare, the planes, the black smoke, the flames, the falling bodies, unforgettable against the brilliant blue Manhattan sky. But it is the rubbed-out skyline, framed by the distinctive New York buildings, that is the constant reminder for those who lived the experience by being in New York when it happened, and whose visual habits keep it vivid through being thwarted. I was recently in Berlin, and I was struck by how my friends there keep seeing the absence of the Wall, drawing my attention to blanknesses that I, as an outsider, would otherwise never see as such. Those blanknesses now define the soul of Berlin, as these define that of New York.

I somewhat resist the idea of the anniversary, but at the same time acknowledge a deep wisdom in the way an anniversary marks a symbolic ending. The art that belonged to the experi-

ence of September 11 now constitutes a body of work that differs from the art that will undertake to memorialize it. The difference in part is this: One need not have shared the experience to memorialize it. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was designed by Maya Lin with supreme memorialist intuition, though she had no experience of the Vietnam conflict, having been too young when it tore the nation to bits, nor had she lost anyone who meant something to her in the war. But the art I have in mind could only have come from having experienced the event. Jan Scruggs, the infantryman who made it his mission to bring a Vietnam memorial into being, titled his book *To Heal a Nation*. That is what memorials should do, hateful as the events memorialized may be. That is the function of elegies as well. They use art as a means of transforming pain into beauty.

That already began, on September 11 itself, with the moving,



N'COGNITA, AKA VERNITA NEMECVIRIDIAN GALLERY

extemporaneous shrines that appeared spontaneously all over New York, and became inseparable from the experience, so much so that, appropriate as they were at the time, it would be a bad idea to re-create one as a memorial, say in a vitrine. There is nothing about Maya Lin's masterpiece that itself belongs to the event, the way, say, a helicopter would, or a mortar that had actually been used there—though the artist Robert Irwin once told me that sometimes a cannon on a lawn can be exactly the right solution, and I think I understand why. It is the grass that makes it right, which builds an image of peace into the emblem of war: "Green grows the grass on the infantry/at Malplaquet and Waterloo." I thought that artists could have done nothing better than the anonymous shrine-makers, who knew intuitively that the shrines should consist in flags, flowers, candles, scraps of poetry or prayer and photographs. But I have since thought about some of the things artists in fact did at the time, which came from the same impulse as the shrines—

Arthur C. Danto is art critic of *The Nation* and Johnsonian Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Columbia University.

and this work has a certain interest through the ways it, like the shrines, caught something of the experience it responded to.

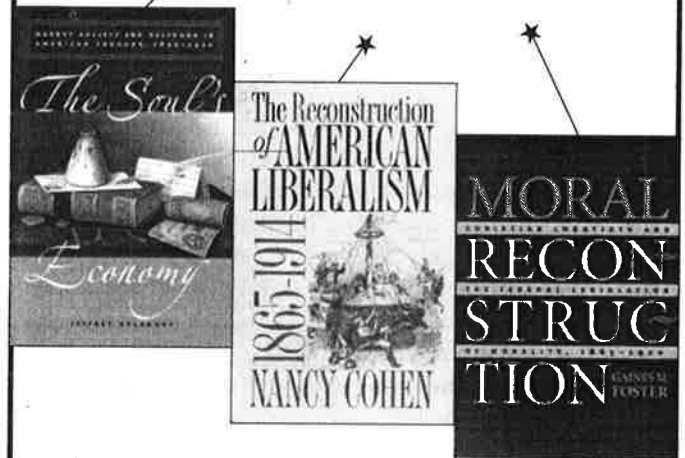
An artist I am close to wrote me, some weeks after the event, "I am fine, though it is hard to think about what kind of work to make at this point, other than decorative, escapist, or abstract. I suppose I'll explore one or all of these things." The work for which she is deservedly famous is so different from what it now occurred to her to explore, that it seemed clear to me that she was seeking something with the symbolic weight that the shrines had had, as signs and acts of what Wittgenstein speaks of as piety. A very deep piece of art history remains to be written about what New York artists did in those months when we thought or talked about nothing else, and the enormity of our shared experience flooded consciousness fully.

I single out "New York artists" mainly because I have the sense that the intensity of the experience depended very greatly upon whether one was here or elsewhere. A former student, at the time teaching in California, told me that he felt "impotent" in being away. He realized that so far as helping clear the rubble, search for bodies, bring in the supplies, he would have been redundant. The city had all the help it needed. But he felt, having lived and studied here for several years, that he had been injured in a way someone who was not a New Yorker had not been—and he felt the need to be here to share the grief. Not being here was internal to his impotence, if that makes sense, not that it would have made the slightest practical difference whether he were here or not. And I think being here meant that this grief was palpable, that it was like something one breathed. One mark of that feeling was the way everyone became very considerate of everyone else, as if each of us was due a measure of moral sympathy. The kind of art that began to be made was another mark, special to the feeling.

Lucio Pozzi, a performance artist who really cannot properly be described quite that narrowly, tells how a European friend, who managed to get a call through, said, "At this point one cannot carry on making art." Pozzi answered, "Today I have painted a little watercolor, and I shall paint another one tomorrow." He had painted a copy in watercolor of a watercolor of his own, from a photograph of it in one of his catalogues. It is of yellow fields. He did this three times. On the following day, he stood outside his downtown studio and photographed the smoke as it lay in the street where his studio is located. He took several shots quite rapidly, just seconds apart, and turned the images into Xeroxes, which he stapled together into pamphlets, to be mailed to friends. Someone might have thought the pictures so alike that they could have been the same shot, reproduced ten or twelve times. I have seen such sets of images used in psychological experiments, mainly to demonstrate how pigeons, whose visual acuity is far sharper than ours, are able to distinguish between pictures that humans tell apart only with great difficulty. In my view, the images did two things: They showed what everyone downtown would have recognized as how their streets looked, and they did this with the zero degree of art. The other thing was to show how it felt to be there, engulfed in a cloud of sadness that would not lift.

I was struck by the fact that as with the photographs, Pozzi's watercolors looked alike. If I were to curate a show about how New York artists responded to 9/11, I would certainly include his series of photographs, and all three copies of the watercolor. And

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I would include several of the watercolors I mentioned in an earlier column, by Audrey Flack, who felt the despair of impotence my student spoke of, and went out to Montauk to paint the sunlight on fishing boats. Audrey does monumental sculptures. I have greatly admired her immense figures of powerful females, for the feminist symbolism of course, but also for their masterful execution. She had been at work on a new colossus, intended to stand in the water off Queens. It was to have been of Queen Catherine of Braganza, after whom the borough of Queens was named. It was a brilliant concept, brilliantly executed, and Audrey modeled two airplanes, one for each of Catherine's pockets, standing for the borough's two airports. The reason the work was never completed belongs to the unedifying story of racial politics, but I mention her colossi here for the vivid contrast they point to between her sculptural ambitions and the water-and-sunlight aquarelles that met her needs after the terrible event. They are not in the least monumental. They are daringly ordinary, like skillful enough paintings by a conventional watercolorist, with nothing on her mind except to register how the world looked. The real world needed to be affirmed, and these are perfect examples for the art history of 9/11.

Had Queen Catherine stood, like the Statue of Liberty, when 9/11 took place, the two airplanes would certainly have been read as portents. But I cannot imagine airplanes in my 9/11 show. Tom Kotek, a graduate student in fine arts at Hunter College, told me how he and some fellow students visited an art school somewhere in New England not long after the event. They saw a work consisting of some cardboard towers and a toy plastic airplane. Wittgenstein tells of ways of expressing grief symbolically that we all understand and accept, even if it would not have occurred to us to do things that way. But there are certainly ways that would strike us as wrong or odd. Kotek and his friends thought that the installation they saw was not at all like something they would have made, having been in New York when it happened, and still tasting the grief. In fact, none of them had done anything they would consider 9/11 art yet, and weren't sure they would. There was nothing exactly wrong about the little plastic-and-paper crash-site. It was the kind of thing that might naturally have occurred to artists who had not been in New York, and were given an assignment. But genuine 9/11 art, as my examples suggest, had to find ways of embodying the feeling rather than depicting the event, and is inevitably oblique. An artist I spoke to who happened to have been in Australia on 9/11 showed a drawing she had done of the Sydney Opera House. Her thought was that the terrorists would have taken out the most important building in whatever city they struck. So the Sydney Opera House symbolized the World Trade Center towers, like a substitution in the language of a dream. But I cannot imagine a 9/11 New York artist drawing the great opera house as a way of conveying what it felt like to have lived through the event.

I have been gathering ideas for my imagined 9/11 show, and asking artists whether they have done anything in particular that might be included if I were to have gone forward with it. Here are a few more examples of what I consider true 9/11 art.

I spoke with Robert Zakanitch a week or so after 9/11, and he

told me he was painting lace. Readers may recall an essay I devoted to an ensemble of huge paintings by Zakanitch a few years ago, which he called the *Big Bungalow Suite*. He had made his first reputation as an Abstract Expressionist, but like many, including Audrey Flack, felt that he wanted to produce something more meaningful, having to do with life. He became part of a movement in the late 1970s called Pattern and Decoration—"P and D"—which attracted a number of artists disaffected with mainstream art. *Big Bungalow Suite* refers to the wallpaper and slipcover designs of his *Mitteleuropa* grandmother's house in New Jersey, where his family worked in factories. He associated that profusion of decorative motifs with the comforting femininity present in what was a sanctuary for him. Lace made a lot of sense, given this background, even if he might have painted lace if 9/11 had not happened. But it had a particular meaning for him because 9/11 had happened.

The sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard was born to peasant parents in a labor camp in Germany, and her work is an effort to create a

world she never really knew. Her immense wooden sculptures refer to a primitive form of life in primordial worlds. One of her main forms is that of the bowl—she did a huge bowl for her last show at the Neuberger Museum, in Purchase, New York, which was eighteen feet across. They are made of milled cedar beams, stacked, glued and shaped with power tools. They feel as if they were made with giants in mind. Interestingly, von Rydingsvard sometimes carves lace. But her first work after 9/11 was a crisscross, fence-like structure that she titled *mama, build me a fence!* A fence, like lace, is, as Wittgenstein would say, understandable.

The idea of an edge or a boundary also suggested itself to Mary Miss, whose studio is situated just north of Ground Zero. Miss is sometimes referred to as a "land artist," and her work is public through and through. Her most recent installation is a kind of "acupuncture" transformation of the Union Square subway station: Various points and fixtures throughout the space have been neatly painted a uniform red. She and her assistants conceived the idea of a "moving perimeter" around Ground Zero, which would in the course of the work take on the form of a wreath—and indeed the title of the piece is *A Wreath for Ground Zero*. It would have the form of a figure eight, with reference to the two linked areas where the towers stood, or of the infinity sign, symbolizing the "endless knot" of mourners. The "wreath" would allow visual access to the site as the rebuilding took place, and it would also "make a place for the flowers, flags, candles and notes that have appeared throughout the city." Miss's idea got the backing of various public arts agencies, but inevitably ran into resistance with the bureaucracy and business interests of the city. One bureaucrat rudely asked who the hell she thought she was, coming forward like that when there were so many who had just as great a right as she. Her response was that everyone should be called to come forward with their ideas. Nothing immediate came of her project, but on her webpage she has issued a call for ideas, in a way modeled on the shrines that appeared everywhere, for memorial sites throughout the city, recognizing that New York as a whole was and is a mourning site. We should all be memorial artists.

**GENUINE 9/11 ART HAD TO FIND WAYS OF EMBODYING THE FEELING RATHER THAN DEPICTING THE EVENT, AND IS INEVITABLY OBLIQUE.**