

## A Terrible Beauty?

**New York's museums grapple with 9/11**

*by Robin Cembalest*

The [9/11 Memorial](#), with its shimmering pools, mesmerizing waterfalls, and elegiac bronze inscriptions of the names of the lost, will be dedicated this September 11. On the tenth anniversary of the attacks, the monument, floating on the footprint of the twin towers, will have the distinction of being the only element of the plans created, debated, endlessly revised, and repeatedly parsed for metaphorical, political, and practical implications that has actually come to fruition at Ground Zero, offering a degree of the closure that is elusive in so many other ways.

However, ongoing construction has blocked access to the memorial, resulting in limited tickets for the general public, which were [snapped up](#) by mid-July. The [museum](#) slated for the World Trade Center site, whose mission is to "bear solemn witness" using artifacts, photos, stories, and videos, won't open until 2012. So the collective desire for a venue for communal reflection and remembrance, to face the incomprehensible and grasp at the intangible, cannot immediately be fulfilled at the site of the attacks themselves.

This has left an opening—and a profound dilemma—for the city's cultural institutions. For New York museums, it's not clear whether creating content related to the anniversary of 9/11 is a responsibility, an opportunity, or an invitation to inevitable and unwanted controversy.



**Sarah Charlesworth's *Unidentified Woman, Hotel Corona de Aragon, Madrid, 1980*, from the series "Stills," is in the show "September 11" at MoMA PS1.**

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY, NEW YORK

In the aftermath of 9/11, it quickly became clear that art about or at Ground Zero was perceived by many as subject to a vetting process by constituencies connected to the attacks—and that stated priorities of patriotism, as well as the moral rights of victims and their families, trumped freedom of expression. This is why [Eric Fischl's \*Tumbling Woman\*](#) disappeared so fast from Rockefeller Center and why the [Drawing Center](#) pulled out of a planned cultural facility on the World Trade Center site. Though the roles of irony and sincerity, [initially reversed after the attacks](#), have been restored to their pre-2001 levels in the larger art world, it is not clear whether that's the case with content related to 9/11. The chronicle in the official book of the 9/11 Memorial, [A Place of Remembrance](#) (National Geographic), shows, as if any more proof were needed, how sensitive, delicate, and fraught each object, image, and symbol of the attacks remains.

Yet several of the city's museums are moving forward with 9/11 programming. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is exhibiting the [9/11 Peace Story Quilt](#) (2006), Faith Ringgold's project with New York City schoolchildren. The New Museum is showing [\[Swi:t\] Home: A Chant](#) (2001–6), by Elena del Rivero, who stitched together burnt papers and other detritus that blew into her studio, across from the twin towers. Other venues, including the Morgan Library & Museum, are presenting memorial readings or concerts. And three institutions are offering ambitious shows that reflect on the attacks or their legacy.

The New-York Historical Society, which has become the uptown clearinghouse for objects related to the tragedy, is presenting "[Remembering 9/11](#)," a "memorial installation," as curator Marilyn Satin Kushner puts it, of objects documenting "attack, shock, recovery." It includes about 150 images from "[here is new york: a democracy of photographs](#)," the wildly popular, critically acclaimed, crowdsourced, non-curated SoHo exhibition; objects from the shrines that materialized around the city after the attacks; photos of [Tribute in Light](#), the public-art project whose projected beams stood in for the missing towers; children's letters to firefighters and police officers; architect Michael Arad's drawings of the 9/11 Memorial, and more. Satin Kushner's approach for this show, she says, is very different from her approach to curating art, where she tries to explain why it's relevant. "The objects speak for themselves," she comments.

If such objects fulfill a visceral need to collect and remember, the challenge for art museums approaching 9/11 is different—presumably, to process this raw material into some kind of expression that transforms, questions, enlightens, inspires, soothes, or any of the other things culture is supposed to do. Documentary artifacts are "inextricably bound with the event," says Peter Eleey, chief curator at MoMA PS1. "They don't allow us to make our own meaning." Yet as Eleey set out to curate a show on 9/11, he decided that there isn't enough significant art inspired by 9/11 to anchor an exhibition. Individual works like del Rivero's have been made with or about detritus from the attacks—or, as Art Spiegelman put it in the title of his 2004 graphic elegy, about living "[In the Shadow of No Towers](#)." But what's lacking, Eleey says, is work that "speaks to the immensity of the event"—though he's not sure it's even fair

to demand such a thing. In part, he notes, addressing the spectacular nature of the attacks is a challenge for artists because it is so closely tied with terror, violence, and death. In addition, the ongoing presence of soldiers in the field and construction on the ground reflect a different problem: "How do you memorialize or commemorate an event that hasn't been concluded but is referred to as a finished event?" he comments.

His show, titled "[September 11](#)," defiantly features work mostly made before 2001—much of which seems at first to bear little connection with 9/11 and which slyly tricks us into discovering how the event has influenced the way we see. The images range from the quotidian to the tragic, from a William Eggleston photo of a drink on an airplane tray to a found suitcase by Lara Favaretto, from a still life with cityscape by Jane Freilicher to an appropriated photo of a falling woman by Sarah Charlesworth to Thomas Hirschhorn's vernacular shrine *Mondrian Altar* (1997). Though the selection might initially seem like a slap in the face to the viewer who arrives for collective communing, it is designed to become a weirdly intimate acknowledgment of the shared anxieties that appear unexpectedly and uninvited in our daily lives. Certain forms of abstraction do summon an image of the twin towers, just as certain types of figuration, such as bodies in free fall, bring 9/11 to mind. The sculptures by Christo and John Chamberlain look as though they could have been pulled from the wreckage.

But Francesc Torres, who was documenting actual wreckage, had the opposite problem—how to prevent his photos of remains from Ground Zero from looking too much like art. The artist had been hired by the September 11 Memorial & Museum to document a hangar at JFK airport where objects from Ground Zero were sent for storage and preservation. Filled with items ranging from twisted steel beams, PATH trains, fire trucks, and police cars to business cards and other personal effects, singed cartoon characters from the Warner Bros. store, a four-foot-high "composite" encompassing the remains of four crushed stories of one tower, and much more, the hangar became, in a sense, the first 9/11 museum, whose contents were off limits to the public—and were later distributed to various institutions. The photos taken by Torres, documented in the book *Memory Remains* (National Geographic), have been transformed into an installation of projections for the International Center of Photography's show "[Remembering 9/11](#)." The artist describes the piece as "the sediment of the sediment of history, hoping to extract something from the event not attainable by any other means."

ICP staff had thought about doing a 9/11-related show on the theme of "memorialization," but decided that it would be difficult to assemble a critical mass of relevant artworks, curator Carol Squiers says. Instead Squiers and associate curator Kristen Lubben, working with the 9/11 Memorial, selected photographs, video, and installations that focus on remembrance and recovery. In addition to the Torres piece, the show includes photographs by Eugene Richards from his series "[Stepping Through the Ashes](#)"; a video installation, *cedarliberty*, by del Rivero and Leslie McCleave; photographs and proof sheets by Gregg Brown, who shot the cleanup

process from the air; and an excerpt from "here is new york." "How we process the unimaginable and how to make sense of it is the impetus for all this work," says Squiers.

Meanwhile, at the Educational Alliance on the Lower East Side, artist Tobi Kahn is creating a space to facilitate an activity somewhat less viable in the crowded museum shows: meditation. "[Embodied Light: 9-11 in 2001](#)" includes sculptural shrines, memorial candleholders, a floor relief evoking an aerial view of the city, two charity boxes, and 220 sculpted "memory blocks" (one for each of the floors in the two towers) on which New Yorkers contributed remembrances or reflections and which visitors can rearrange. Designed to be elegiac, interactive, and ultimately uplifting, the show is not intended to document or explain anything. "Grief ruptures meaning," Kahn says. "Art can be a small, still voice that begins to mend it."

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