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"September 11"

MOMA PS1, NEW YORK

Hal Foster



View of "September 11,"
2011. Foreground: Christo,
Red Package, 1968.
Background, from left:
Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*
(*Questions*), 1991; Willem de
Rooy, *Index: Riots, Protest,*
Mourning and
Commemoration (as
represented in newspapers,
January 2000–July 2002),
2003. Photo: Matthew
Septimus.

THE GAMBIT OF THIS EXHIBITION about 9/11, which includes sixty-nine works by forty-two artists, is deceptively simple: to eschew any images of the attacks and any made in response to them. (As if to prove the rule, there is one exception, a 2003 proposal by Ellsworth Kelly to reconfigure Ground Zero as a giant trapezoidal park of bright green grass.) Instead, MoMA PS1 curator Peter Eleey writes in his brochure, "this exhibition considers the ways in which 9/11 has altered how we see and experience the world in its wake." This is a strong thesis—one that asks to be taken seriously. As for the ban on images of 9/11, Eleey regards the attacks as an intervention in spectacle that was a spectacle in its own right: 9/11 "was *made to be used*," he argues, with the Bush administration no less than Al Qaeda in mind. "Why would I want to repeat such transgression?" His catalogue essay begins with an epigraph from Wittgenstein—"A picture held us captive"—and his purported aim is to release us from this captivity, to despectacularize 9/11, a little.

Possibly the strongest claim of this retroactive charging of artworks is made in relation to *Unidentified Woman, Hotel Corona de Aragon, Madrid*, 1980, by Sarah Charlesworth, a murky print of a news photo of a woman falling from a building to her death, her dress fluttering up to reveal her bare legs and backside. This representation, which evokes similar ones by Warhol, "no longer belong[s] to itself," Eleey asserts in the catalogue, as we now read the work through our images of the desperate jumpers from the Twin Towers; "[it] has . . . been subsumed into 9/11." And yet even if we grant that traumatic events might color artworks after the fact, it remains a tricky proposition. For example, do we confuse the hooded victim at Abu Ghraib with one of the hooded Klansmen in *Birth of a Nation*? One hopes not. But Eleey's deployment of the Charlesworth is especially troubling because the very meaning of the work is thought to lie in its pointed ambiguity: The artist has purposely denuded the image of context, leaving us to wonder what the isolated picture means and what it had meant when it appeared in the newspaper from which she appropriated it. How, then, can we be asked to read this image in the context of the Trade Center attacks? Another problematic example of this curatorial repurposing involves *"Untitled" (The End)*, 1990, a Felix Gonzalez-Torres stack of papers with black frame and blank image. To claim that we now see it through the filter of 9/11 is not to enrich the piece with added resonance but to rob it of its actual significance, which is bound up with the AIDS crisis. This isn't a matter of interpretation: the connection to 9/11 is simply false.