

September 11th: Art Loss, Damage, and Repercussions

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THE ARTIST RESIDENCY PROGRAM IN THE TWIN TOWERS

by MOUKHTAR KOCACHE

Moukhtar Kocache is Director of Visual & Media Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC). The LMCC administered two artist studio programs in the North Tower of the World Trade Center (World Views and Studioscape) in space temporarily vacant and donated by the Port Authority of NY & NJ, with support from a number of corporations, foundations and government agencies. The studios and several hundred works of art were destroyed on 9/11. One artist-in-residence, Michael Richards, was killed. LMCC's offices at the World Trade Center were also destroyed, along with 30 years of archives and approximately 150 works of art.

I feel like the representative of "unofficial" art at this Symposium, not only because of the nature and the value of the art that I will talk about, but also because of the context and framework in which it was made. In fact, what I would like to do tonight is reexamine or, perhaps, expand our notions of loss or what was lost on September 11th, and in so doing, explore our notions of what the purpose of art is; its value, or its use. What is cultural production? What is visual culture? What is an artist? Who is an artist? What is an art experience? I will try to do that by illustrating some of the projects that were executed during the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's (LMCC) artist residency program in the WTC.

The program was initiated four years ago and provided emerging artists with studio space on the 91st and 92nd floors of the North Tower. Artists worked in painting, sculpture, new media, photography, and art installation and were selected by a jury for residencies that lasted six months. At the end of each six-month period, the studios were opened to the public. Thousands of people came to the Open Studios each year. The LMCC also organized public performances in the large plaza of the Trade Center for thousands of audience members. . . a venue often noted as one of the city's most democratic public spaces.

I'd like to focus initially on what was lost in terms of the Towers themselves—the architecture, the icons, and, for us, the "subjects" for over one hundred and fifty artists and cultural workers and producers. Slowly, I will highlight what has been lost in terms of opportunities, possibilities, context, and a whole world of

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references in the form of visual but also conceptual and political material. You have to remember that we did not go to work every day into the buildings simply because our offices and studios happened to be there, but precisely because they were located in the Twin Towers and our desire was to analyze them from within. Let me start for instance with Martina Geccoli, who in the year 2000, photographed abandoned office spaces at the Trade Center that were left in complete disrepair. For Martina, the architecture, the space, and the psychology of the space became her subject matter (Fig. 1).

A project by the E-Team, a performance art group, also dealt with the building itself. In Quick Click, the E-Team attempted to make photographic portraits of people in the studio from a helicopter that was hovering outside the building. Two members of the E-Team were in the helicopter, another in the studio space, and people were lined up along the windows to have their portraits taken. In another project (127 Illuminated Windows), the E-Team attempted to write their names on the exterior of the Towers themselves (Fig. 2).



Photo: LMCC

Figure 1. Martina Geccoli. *Suite 4047 Long View Table-Sink*, 2000. 120 x 100 cm.



Photo: LMCC

Figure 2. E-Team (Hajoe Moderegger, Franziska Lamprecht, Dan Seiple). *127 Illuminated Windows*. The appearance as it was supposed to be on the World Trade Center. New York, March 2001.

Many other projects dealt with the specificity of the Trade Center site. In a performance entitled *The Land of Far Beyond*, Susan Kelly embarked on a pilgrimage up the staircase from the first floor to the 91st floor. For *My America (I am Still Here)*, Emily Jacir documented purchases from every store of the Trade Center, which revealed the mechanics of power in global trade and production. Taketo Shimada envisioned a

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project on the escalator steps entitled Meeting, for which he would write poetry on the escalator steps describing a love affair that arises after a chance meeting.

Kevin and Jennifer McCoy, new media artists, created a fictive company called Airworld, which, eerily, has a logo of two airplanes, flying in each other's directions and joined at the wings. Their company Web site had absurd advertising banners that critiqued the sterile language used by corporate America. One banner read Safe Ascent, another, Welcome We Are Air. During their residency the McCoy's also broadcast from their studios an FM radio signal that you could hear if you were driving on the West Side Highway.

Another important loss on 9/11 was access to the views, this particular vantage point on the city. These views and that particular vision of the city, its topography and geological profile provided a unique opportunity for individuals, whether at work in their offices, visiting the observation deck or dancing at Windows on the World. Subject matter for numerous paintings created in the residency programs, such as Joellyn Duesberry's Cloud Over Mid-Town Brooklyn and Manhattan and Sonya Sklaroff's WTC Series, these views of the city were also central to many sculptural, installation, or performance-based projects. Matthew Bakkom, in 1 WTC Cinema, explored issues relating to the building, the city, and architecture in film screenings that were open to the public. It was a beautiful experience to watch cinema and art films with the skyline of New York City visible through the windows. For Picture Motion, Douglas Ross installed motorized blinds on the windows, which, in a darkened room, created a stroboscopic effect—the city looked like a film projected in slow motion. The last work that was produced in the WTC studios, on September 4th, was a project by Naomi Ben Shahr. She invited her friends to a party and provided everyone with headlamps. The room was covered with mylar so the city lights and the movement of the partygoers intermixed in a sort of a liquid, reflective environment.

Countless projects were destroyed. Micki Watanabe's, Floorplan Collage: WTC 91st floor and 15 Park Ave. A project by Christyian Nguyen referencing the Asian panel landscape painting tradition, A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines, had been installed in the Port Authority's offices (Fig. 3). Jeff Konigsberg's untitled work in progress that he had worked on for four months—carving, painting, peeling—creating an incredible three-dimensional experience out of dry-wall. Simon Aldridge's minimalist wall sculptures that reference skateboard and BMX structures, and Hot Fun in the Summertime, a piece which illustrated his struggle in rendering the towers as light structures that emphasized verticality but at the same time allowed light to come in and reflection to take place.

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Just a week before the attacks, Justine Cooper moved all of her work from the past two years to the WTC studio. Everything was stored there during the attack, including her three-dimensional luminous sculptures of gene sequences, a sculptural MRI of her hands, and numerous photographs from electron microscopes (Fig. 4). Kara Hammond also lost many, many paintings and drawings. Again, she had stored some of her work from the past two years in the studio, including *Showroom Floor*, *Voskhod Interior*, and *Concrete Warehouse* (Fig. 5).



Photo: LMCC

Figure 3. Christian Nguyen. *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines*, 2000. Drywall and studs. 180" x 85".



Photo: LMCC

Figure 4. Justine Cooper. *Lamine*, 1999. ACE gene sequence, film, acrylic, stainless steel, halogen. Ht: 96". W: 8". (Base 14" W).

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Photo: LMCC

Figure 5. Kara Hammond. Showroom Floor, 1998. Oil on wood. 24" x 48"

still assessing what exactly was lost, but we estimate over 150 art works—paintings, drawings, sculptures, and photography, including pieces by Komar & Melamid, Tim Hailand, Daniel Kohn, Taylor Spence, and Takashi Murakami.

The value of the work that the artists lost in the studios on the 92nd floor is approximately \$500,000, with equipment valued at around \$50,000, and materials totaling approximately \$20,000. On the 91st floor, we lost art work valued at \$150,000, and equipment and materials valued at about \$10,000. Also destroyed were works at the LMCC's offices. We are

Beyond tangible art objects or opportunities for creation, I want us to think and evaluate what else was lost on 9/11. I am thinking of the company archives, for instance, the World Trade Center's construction archive and architectural history, incredible sources of documentation, drawings, writings and historical artifacts. Many individuals had valuables, jewelry, photographs and documents in safe deposit boxes in banks; these items are gone. One incredible loss for instance is an estimated 10,000 photographs taken by the official Kennedy family photographer: they were being stored at a bank in the buildings. An informal memorial at the third floor basement that the union members had built for their friends and colleagues who had perished in the 1993 attack, that too is gone. Beautiful graffiti in the bathrooms and on the basement walls, love poems, manifestos to the world—these are gone. The wad of red chewing gum that performance art group Gelatin had stuck outside the building on the 91st floor after removing one of the windows, signing or marking the building from the outside, this is an art work that's also gone. Office workers had built personal altars on and around their desks with photographs, images and letters. These are gone. The views of the clouds at such a height, the sounds of the wind and of the city from that height, all of this is gone.

In the last century, we expanded the definition of art-making and artists; we have come to think of them as shamans, healers, activists, social workers, and revolutionaries. What was the loss in terms of intellectual and creative energy and human potential? Why not consider as artists, the chefs, cocktail masters, the elevator guy, Billy, with his funny performances and stories, the window washer and ultimate romantic Rocco, perched on top of the buildings full of amazing revelations and narratives. . . he could see the

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curvature of the Earth from where he worked. . . how about the computer geeks who wrote code and dreamt of new machines and technologies? All of them contributed to the social experience and cultural fabric of the Center, making it a unique environment to make art and enjoy life. And in terms of the ultimate purpose of art, which to me is experiential and phenomenological, we lost random and banal things like the exhilarating ride up the elevator, the intense wind in the plaza that would on certain days lift you from the floor, and the symphony created by the creaking revolving doors near the Custom House during rush hour. What about all of the very private and ephemeral moments like, for instance, smiling at someone in Tower One when you're standing in Tower Two and they smile back at you...or the white plastic bag that one evening took my breath away as I was watching the sunset from the 91st floor. I will remember forever how it fluttered and fluttered and fluttered.