

ON EDGE

Artists Document the World Trade Center's Demise

ON SEPTEMBER 10, 2001, MONIKA Bravo spent seven hours filming from the 92nd floor of the World Trade Center. On September 10, this was a piece about the passage of time. Bravo was one of the artists with a studio in the north tower under the auspices of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. A thunderstorm came through the city on the last night the Twin Towers existed, a storm so beautiful that Bravo considered staying to film a full 24 hours in time-lapse.

She remembers waving hello to artist Michael Richards when he came in around 9 p.m. She was still filming the various views that no one will see again. Sometime before midnight, she called her boyfriend, and he pointed out that she had no water or food and hadn't even eaten dinner. Maybe she should do the 24 hours when she was better prepared. She agreed, leaving all her equipment and saying goodnight to Richards, who was watching the end of *Monday Night Football*. He had decided to spend the night in his studio, while Bravo did something she now calls "weird." Usually she won't remove a tape from the camera unless it's finished, but that night she took her tape home.

This footage became *September 10, 2001, Uno Nunca Muere la Vespera*, one of 14 short films about 9-11 that will be shown on Channel 13's *Reel New York* over the next two Fridays (June 7 and 14 at 10 p.m.). The film's title is an idiomatic saying in Bravo's native Colombia, meaning you die on the day you're supposed to die. Says Bravo, "I just felt it was not my day."

Nor did she intend to turn her footage into a public document. "I didn't understand the power of it yet." After the attack, she organized a meeting for LMCC artists as they began to cope with the loss of their work and the loss of a friend. Michael Richards was "missing." Bravo decided then to make copies of the tape for all the artists, dedicating it to "Michael, wherever you are." The day she handed it out, September 17, was the day they all learned that Richards's body had been identified.

**KATHY BREW LOST HER OLD OFFICE** in 5 World Trade Center. Now she's this season's series/curatorial consultant for *Reel New York*. "We're all over-mediated and saturated on 9-11, on the slo-mo continual replays," she says. "When it's always the usual suspects and the same material, people get injured. Now some of the alternate voices are trickling out, the reflections and the different communities that aren't normally presented. That's what's cathartic about this."

The destruction of the World Trade Center may have been the most witnessed atrocity of all time, and a good number of those witnesses picked up some kind of camera. *Reel New York's* producer, Garrison Botts, estimates that they got over 75 completed films on the subject.

The opener on this Friday's program, *First Person 911*, uses in-the-moment footage from three artists who were camcorder-ready. Anthony Paris is taping his wife and new baby when suddenly we're on their roof looking at the smoking towers just a couple of blocks away. Paris doesn't believe his wife when she says she saw someone fall. He continues in this-can't-be-happening mode with the declaration "I don't think the building will collapse." Soon they're

making a numb getaway through the white ash. Luke Jude Joerger is wailing while he shoots from a window at the Chelsea Hotel: "That is so fucked up! Oh God, that's horrible!" He's watching it live, then running to a television that is already replaying the moment of impact as Joerger screams, "Oh my God! How horrible! Fuck you!" Ray Mendez makes his way into an eerie Ground Zero that night, capturing its feverish activity and preternatural stillness: shoes in the rubble, exhausted rescue workers, someone carried out in a body bag, a musician who's appointed himself to sit there and play his cello.

This film adds raw emotional content to images that are now very familiar. That's the key. Nothing here is canned. These are films about people trying to get their minds around this catastrophe, asking questions about the knee-jerk nationalist response, and coping with loss. A union rep talks about the multiculti group of workers he organized at Windows on the World (43 dead). A gay firefighter talks about losing Father Mychal Judge, the Fire Department's beloved chaplain. One filmmaker uses the theft of her bicycle to reflect on whether New Yorkers really "bonded" after the tragedy.

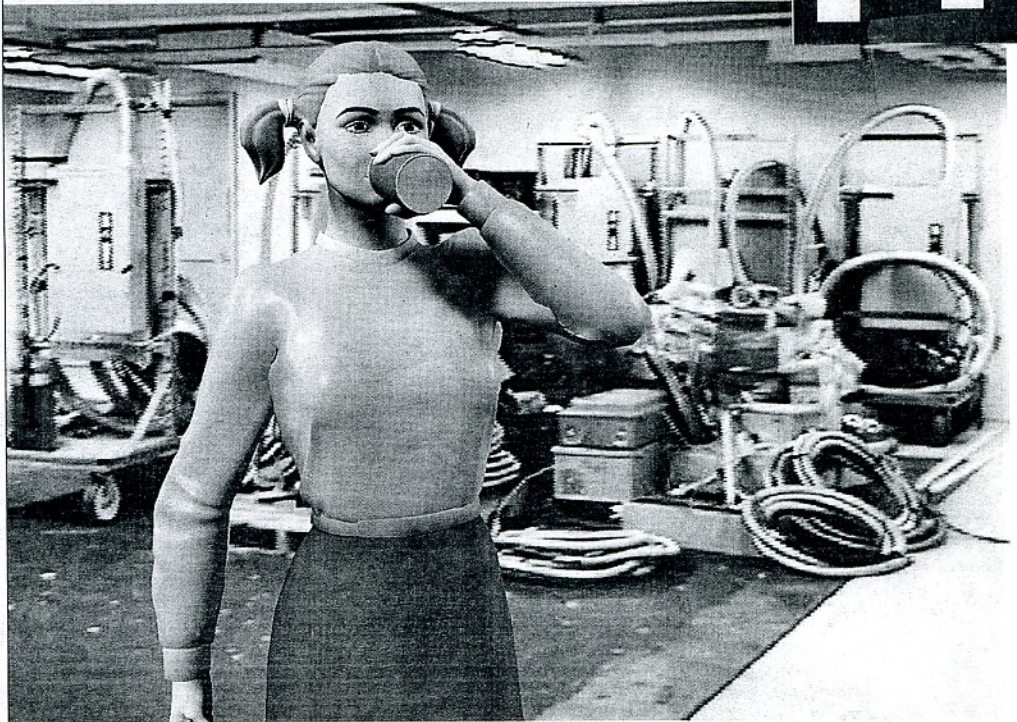
Third World Newsreel contributes three pieces—on the reaction in Chinatown, on the anti-Muslim backlash, and on communities that still felt like outsiders as America came together. "Immediately following 9-11," says Executive Director Dorothy Thigpen, "we put a call out to our students and to our filmmakers to document the other side of 9-11, to focus on communities of color." Forced off the 2 train that morning, she walked across the bridge to her home in Brooklyn and tuned into the one available channel, taking offense at "the way they were vilifying Arabs but also just people of color." Third World Newsreel has now completed 17 films about 9-11, with more expected.

**ONE YEAR BEFORE THE 9-11** disaster, Kristin Lucas was an artist in residence at the north tower, working on a piece about ghost-watching at the World Trade Center—*Encounters of the WTC-Kind*. It was then that she set up her Web site, [www.invisibleinhabitants.com](http://www.invisibleinhabitants.com), featuring ghosts with cell phones.

Lucas has long been interested in electronic emissions, "the invisible fields you operate in every day," and she considered the World Trade Center to be their epicenter, emitting countless TV and radio waves, for one thing. She always noticed people talking about how the building created distortion on their cell phones. She also thought the place haunted, maybe because her studio was near the elevators and they howled. The freight elevators, not the ones with the humans. It was spooky. Then, the artists were always on an unfinished floor, a "hollow" floor. And she was always very conscious of the first terrorist strike. "After the '93 bombing, I was thinking of the invisible, wondering if we could communicate with these waveforms."

But Lucas was especially fascinated by the WTC sub-basement, when Robert "Bob" Lynch, a property manager for the Port Authority, gave the artists a tour. (Lynch was last seen in the south tower on 9-11, evacuating people to safety.) "The towers were very impersonal, but in the basement there was all this heart and soul. That stood out to me. You'd see thin layers of paint and the old graffiti behind it." Lucas taped down there, then grabbed stills for her video *Five Minute Break*, in which an avatar—a sort of powerless Lara Croft—tries to navigate an underworld where signs lead nowhere and doors don't open.

Now, of course, it all seems bizarrely prescient—like Michael Richards's sculptures of pilots falling from the sky. □



FROM *FIVE MINUTE BREAK*: THE BACKGROUND WAS SHOT IN A WTC SUB-BASEMENT A YEAR BEFORE 9-11.

the witnessing eye

BY C.CARR

JUNE 11, 2002