



WOLFGANG STAEHLE

Wolfgang Staehle's view of a suddenly historical New York.

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Art in the Aftermath

THERE ARE still no words to describe it. No music as yet to commemorate the event. No pictures sprung from the imagination do it justice. For the first time in this prosperous American half-century the nation's creative classes have been silenced, muted by the shock of an unnamable barbarity. The words of social critic Theodor W. Adorno, recently relegated to the dustbins of university lecture halls, acquire a new resonance in our time: "Poetry after Auschwitz is no longer possible." Written after the discovery of Nazi concentration camps in Europe, Adorno's pronouncement sounded an impossibly ascetic note for the future. As the years passed, not a single poet listened. Not a single writer, painter, sculptor, musician or film director heeded his call.

Of course, as the inhabitants of New York have found out during these last few weeks, everything looks and feels different in the wake of a communal tragedy (even the hysterical musings of Theodor Adorno). "No cafés. No good restaurants... Everyone was indoors by ten," was how Doris Lessing described London after the blitz. While no one would accuse New Yorkers of having given up entirely on food or nightlife, attendance at restaurants, hotels and plays has been sparse enough to consider historical parallels. Britain, despite Lessing's dour description, nurtured great theater and creative figures like Philip Larkin, Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon amid what one contemporary called "an atmosphere of heightened emotion." France, while under German occupation, managed a retrenched but lively cultural life featuring, among other luminaries, the continued presence of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso.

New York is neither as fearsome as wartime London nor as oppressive as Vichy France, yet nonetheless today squarely faces what is undoubtedly an historical and cultural watershed. "The world will never be the same again," our commentators tell us. "We have all lost our bearings." "American history has leaped off the tracks." These observations, culled from the art writing of various New York publications (*New York*, *The New York Times*, the *Village Voice*) in the weeks following Sept. 11, point toward a set of dramatic, even frightening challenges to come. Voiced from

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within a culture jolted awake from the sugar-coated dreams of virtuality and entertainment to confront suffering and death, America studies its new reality with not a little trepidation. "Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies," wrote the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. If her formulation contains even a grain of truth, then we may have finally, painfully, brutally grown up.

The morning after everything *did* look different. How to consider a piece of escapist Broadway boilerplate like *Phantom* or *The Full Monty*? What about the giant billboard shilling for the movie *Collateral Damage*, this fall's *Armageddon*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger? What dark collective New York mood impinged on the joys of decadent restaurant eating and the city's conspicuous purchases of clothing, furniture and other luxuries? At the corner of Union Square and University Pl. a fatuous young punk sang a previously trivial pop song to a crowd of fatigued, then hostile stares: "It's the end of the world as we know it..."

If we have had a single lesson drummed into our heads over the last 25 years, it's that context is everything. Yet, amazingly, no post-structuralist ever considered a context like the one New York inhabits today: a setting where signifiers and signifieds urgently construe the difference between life and death, security and fear. Never have studies of cultural power divorced from political power seemed so irrelevant; the heady invocations of universes replete with simulacra appeared so utterly beside the point; the inflated achievements of globalism and the Internet looked so small and inconsequential. What role will cynicism have in the coming days, one wants to ask? What about irony? Can we, immersed as we are in a deepening and dangerous worldwide morass, continue to invoke "the truth" in brackets?

Everything changed in the galleries and museums, too. In deserted Chelsea, works like Richard Phillips' vapid grisaille portrait of George W. Bush at Friedrich Petzel acquired an entirely unanticipated gravitas: recording the President's well-known cocker spaniel look, the face in which so many today trust so much confronted the viewer with granite and uncertain monumentality. Digital collagist Nancy Davenport saw her prints of leaping suicides and terrorist attacks hijacked by events totally out of her control. At P.S. 1

Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, Janet Cardiff's segmentation of Thomas Tallis' 1575 choral piece *Spem in Alium* into 40 separate channels arrived as the perfect antidote to wartime anxiety: a 13-minute engulfing, meditative boat ride on waves of soothing, contrapuntal melody.

But eeriest of all was Wolfgang Staehle's exhibition at Postmasters Gallery. The first solo show in 10 years for this pioneering Web artist, Staehle's recent work consisted of three live-feed video projections. Devised as a "visceral experience in synchronicity" and an "instantaneous compression of time and space," the artist's webshots of Berlin's spindly communications tower and a medieval monastery near Stuttgart never stood a chance against a third work: a 9-by-23-foot real-time video panorama of the Lower Manhattan skyline. The work was moving landscape projected onto one of the gallery walls and was initially intended to relativize the notion of physical "presence." After Sept. 11, Staehle's untitled piece registered only absence: the unflinching, heart-wrenching absence of New York's two tallest buildings and nearly 6000 lives memorialized in Cinemascope-sized images of the island's blasted, smoking maw.

"The past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are," Oscar Wilde optimistically wrote in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. That optimism, while exceedingly difficult to conjure up today, may be the strongest bulwark artists and those who love them have against despair. Reflecting on the futility she felt on reentering her studio after Sept. 11, veteran painter Elizabeth Murray spoke of the enduring "hope" associated with coming growth and reflection. "It's what I do, and all I can do," she told *The New York Times* with resigned finality. *I must go on, I will go on*. Independently of what direction the markets take—be these stock or art related—human activity of all sorts has no choice but to emulate this stubborn pattern. While art has in the past anticipated the most dreadful historical events, it will now have to settle, like everyone else, for bravely, determinedly, following them.