

**the art of 911****Sept 7 - Oct 15, 2005**Curated by **Arthur C. Danto**

Audrey Flack  
 Leslie King-Hammond  
 Jeffrey Lohn  
 Mary Miss  
 with Victoria Marshall and Elliott Maltby  
 Lucio Pozzi  
 Ursula Von Rydingsvard  
 Cindy Sherman  
 Barbara Westman  
 Robert Rahway Zakanitch

**Gallery talk:**

**On Wed Sept 21 at 6:30 pm, Mr. Danto will speak about his ideas behind the exhibition**

**apexart**

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## 9/11 ART AS A GLOSS ON WITTGENSTEIN

I learned two truths from the attacks of 9/11, both of which I would be glad never to have come to know. One was that everyone is capable of heroism, and, correlatively, that the moral aftereffect of tragedy is a mutual commiseration among survivors. For months after the event, there was a spontaneous bond between New Yorkers that expressed itself in a rare warmth and consideration. The other truth was that even the most ordinary people respond to tragedy with art. Among many unforgettable experiences of the early aftermath of the event was the unprompted appearance of little shrines in fronts of doors, on windowsills, and in public spaces everywhere. By nightfall on 9/11, New York was a complex of vernacular altars. In the course of that terrible day, a reporter had phoned, asking me what the art world was going to do about the attacks. I could not imagine that anyone not practically engaged in coping and helping was able to do anything except sit transfixed in front of the television screen, watching the towers burn, and of the crowds at street level running from danger and, later, trudging through smoke and detritus in search of someone they knew. I thought the last thing on anyone's mind was art. But by day's end the city was transformed into a ritual precinct, dense with improvised sites of mourning. I thought at the time that artists, had they tried to do something in response to 9/11, could not have done better than the anonymous shrine-makers who found ways of expressing the common mood and feeling of those days, in ways that everyone instantly understood.

In his *Notes on Culture*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, "Recall that after Schubert's death, his brother cut some of Schubert's scores into small pieces, and gave each piece, consisting of a few bars, to his favorite pupils. And this act, as a sign of piety, is just as understandable as the different one of keeping the scores untouched, accessible to no one. And if Schubert's brother had burned the scores, that too would be understandable as an act of piety." I have always been moved by this passage, and by Wittgenstein's use of the term "understandable." Schubert's brother acted in a way that was at once novel and immediately grasped. Naturally in any given culture, there are rules for conduct in moments of extreme feeling – weeping, rending garments, burning candles. What was so affecting on 9/11 and just afterward was the immediacy and intuitiveness of the shrines, though of course there would have been some degree of emulation. But emulation itself presupposes understanding. One says to oneself: I must do that or something like that. Cultural understanding in its way is like linguistic understanding. We understand the meaning of gestures we have never seen performed before, as we understand sentences that have never before been uttered. And of course we expect that kind of creativity from others in everyday life.

For the first anniversary of 9/11, I was invited by Katrina vanden Heuvel to write an article about art and 9/11 for *The Nation*. By that time, a number of my friends in the art world had told me of art they had made that somehow fell under the category of understandability, as described by Wittgenstein. Audrey Flack's initial impulse was to pitch in at Ground Zero, but found that no help was really needed there. She was seized by the need to go to Montauk and

paint the fishing boats there, which she did. That, I thought, was "understandable as an act of piety." It was on another plane altogether from painting for its own sake, though the difference was invisible, as acts of piety often are. Lucio Pozzi told me how he sat down and copied an earlier watercolor of his own, a landscape, and then, immediately after, did another copy. I thought that if I were to do a show of 9/11 art I would



want both Lucio's two watercolors, as well as Audrey's fishing boats, though they might look as if they had nothing to do with 9/11. That is how it is with religious acts. One has to know the spirit in which they are performed to grasp their cultural meaning. So I began to ask some other artists I knew whether they too had done any art that belonged to 9/11. I had already written about Leslie King-Hammond's marvelous shrine, which I had encountered in October, 2001, when I visited the Maryland Institute, where she had put it in the faculty show. It had been a time of personal turmoil for her and she at first thought she had nothing to show. But the shrine was natural to her West Indies back-



I was thinking about Robert Zakanitch, a founder of the Pattern and Decoration Movement of the late 1970s, whose work celebrates the impulse and meaning of fabrics and ornaments in domestic interiors, had decided to paint lace. I had just seen a show of Ursula von Rydingsvard at the museum at Purchase, and knowing something of the place of ritual in the texture of daily life in her Northern European background, I felt certain that 9/11 figured in the provenance of some of her pieces. Cindy Sherman responded to my query that she

ground, and that is what she made. Mary Miss told me about designing a peripheral zone – "A Wreath for Ground Zero" - that would vary with variations in the Zone's configuration, where people could come to express their feeling of desolation and loss in the company of others bent on the same mission.

As I had intuited, all the artists I contacted had done something of the sort

indeed was working on something that responded to the event. "I am fine, though it is hard to think of what kind of work to make at this point, other than decorative, escapist, or abstract. I suppose I'll explore one or all of these things." I could not imagine her making anything escapist or decorative, let alone abstract,



and I later saw a photograph of hers showing a woman in a kerchief, looking as if in a propaganda



poster, and I was not surprised that this should have been among her responses – this and her magnificent series of clowns.

Reading proof on the *Nation* essay for inclusion in my 2005 collection, *Unnatural Wonders*, I thought what an interesting philosophical exhibition this might make, and proposed the idea to Steven Rand at apexart, exactly the right venue for it. I wanted the show to coincide with this year's anniversary of the event, symbolically, I suppose, our Holocaust, it being caused by a parallel order of evil. There must have been any number of artists that might have been included, but I wanted the show to be made of people who were part of my

life. Jeffrey Lohn, at one time my student, figured as the character J in my first book on the philosophy of art, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Jeffrey had photographed a number of the photographs that went up in various sites around the city, of missing persons, bitterly sought. He then rephotographed them as the days passed and rain and dirt disfigured their faces until finally, in a second death, there was nothing left. My wife, Barbara Westman, had been deeply affected by the memorial blue lights – the only appropriate memorial to have emerged – which she and I observed from the roof of apexart. She published it as a cover for *NYArts* on the 2004 anniversary of 9/11.

I am not a curator, but I felt that such a show would itself be understood not as an ordinary art exhibition, but as what Wittgenstein calls an act of piety, and serve as an aspect of the question of what art is after all for, and how it, just as Hegel had said, serves, together with religion and philosophy, as a moment in what he called Absolute Spirit.

**Arthur C. Danto** is Johnsonian Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Columbia University and author of *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World*, and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.