NEW MUSEUM

CONVERSATIONS WITH ARTISTS SERIES: WORLD VIEWS

The following excerpts are from a conversation that took place on December 15, 2001 on the occasion of the *World Views: Open Studio Exhibition,* Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Artist-in-Residence Program, on view at the New Museum of Contemporary Art from December 1, 2001- January 13, 2002. The New Museum presented the work of the LMCC's artists following the events of September 11, 2001—their studios were located in the World Trade Center.

During this program, Moukhtar Kocache, Director of Visual and Media Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, spoke with four of the participating artists: Carola Dertnig, Mahmoud Hamadani, Geoff Konigsberg, and Geraldine Lau.

Moukhtar Kocache: Putting the exhibition together was a challenge on so many levels, for the artists and for the staff at the New Museum. We thought that the best thing would be to have an informal gathering, and have the artists talk about their experience, and the challenges of creating work for this show. Some have faced formal challenges, and some more conceptual, political, or personal. We'll just go through each experience, and that will hopefully lead us to conversations about what happened, and about the notion of art making. It is still very important that we focus on the *process*, since that's what the residency program is all about. Residencies are mostly about process, and not the end result, although the exhibition here doesn't necessarily reflect that.

Mahmoud Hamadani: At the beginning of the residency, all fifteen artists arrived, and we started work, most of us slowly, gradually settling into our

spaces on the 92nd floor. At the beginning, there was confusion, actually. A lot of people didn't even like the spaces. It was this huge raw space with the steel beams showing on the ceiling. There was absolutely nothing in it. But within two months everybody had formed their own definition of it, and by the third, established communication with each other. So the work not only seemed to be cohesive on its own, but existed as part of a broader relationship between the work of all the artists.

In the fourth month, the tragedy struck. By then, most artists in the residency had determined what they were working on, and most of us were nearing completion. So when the tragedy struck, of course the first thought was, "Is everybody alive?" And after a few days we understood that Michael was missing. Although all of us lost work in that space—some of us up to five years' worth of work—there was an "unspoken agreement" about how we dealt with that. I have not heard any of the artists lamenting the loss of work.

We lost our work, but at the same time, there was a "memory" that came with this event—and artists work with memory. If the reality is gone, the intangible memory and all the fantastic opportunities it gives you, remainwith you. So while this tragedy had an impact on all the artists, the impact was not so much about looking at the past, as about how it would inform our work in the future.

I have two works here: one is called "Ode to Kabul," and the other one is called "Ode to New York." The twist in my experience is that I worked in Kabul between 1993 and 1995, and I saw the destruction of Kabul. And in fact, the assault on the World Trade Center was not the first assault that I saw by fundamentalists on an "icon". The assault on the Buddha sculpture Bamiyam had a devastating effect on me.

Very soon after I got the chance for this show, I knew I had to do something for New York and something for Kabul, because these were the two cities that I loved the most, and that had the greatest influence on me. One represents modern cosmopolitanism, and the other represents ancient cosmopolitanism. To see both cities under assault was what moved me to create the works for this show.

Moukhtar Kocache: In a sense you were the only artist who responded to what happened, or produced something that directly refers to the attacks. What were you working on before the residency, and what were you hoping to accomplish during your six months at the Trade Center?

Mahmoud Hamadani: Before the residency, I was doing mainly drawing. At the Trade Center, I decided to work with installation, and I created this huge installation that dealt with the dynamics of light and shadow. My work actually did start in response to my experiences in Kabul. And that installation is gone. As soon as that happened, I knew that I was not going to repeat that installation or do something similar. I was very much committed to do something that expressed my love for New York and for Kabul at the same time—because of the situation, and because of what has evolved afterwards. One would not be complete without the other.

Geraldine Lau: When I first got into the space, I was looking at old New York maps to create a wall drawing. On the first day, the thing that struck me most from my window—which was looking south towards Staten Island—was the Jewish Holocaust Museum. That was the first piece that I put down on the wall: the little red swath, and the yellow hexagonal pieces right in the middle.

I think the piece here turned out really well, because it forced me to make decisions quickly. I didn't have four and a half months to dally with it like I did in the studio. I think this freshness, this spontaneity, came out in the

work. The pieces are mainly made out of vinyl and packing tape and electric tape, just very fragile common everyday bonding materials. In the piece, I'm dealing with ideas about how neighborhoods come together in cities, and how there is a fragile bonding between neighborhoods to keep them “liveable” and coexisting.

Moukhtar Kocache: The wall you were working on extended out the windows south to the water, the harbor, the sky, the light. How did you manage the way the wall went out of the building and into this huge open space? Did you think about what was outside when you were working on the wall?

Geraldine Lau: Actually, not really. I concentrated mostly on the wall. And it's interesting that you pointed that out, because I actually started from the window side and worked in, as opposed to starting from the inside wall and working out.

Carola Dertnig: I originally come from Austria. For me, being in the World Trade Center was very intense because I had just come to New York when the first attack happened. I had never seen such huge buildings, because in Austria everything is a little smaller, and the architecture is different. So Moukhtar showed us that space on the 92nd floor. I didn't actually really like my space; I didn't like the corner. When I went to find the studio again, I stopped on the 91st floor, and went into the wrong office for a dot-com that had gone bankrupt six months ago. It was called something like SmartWorld.com.

Rather than being in the studio, I began going through the building to look for what was going on in it. I have a text that I wrote about my first impression of that day when I went home:

"So when you enter the World Trade Center, you pass thousands of people, and thousands of people will pass you at the same time, especially at the rush hours. Sometimes I have a lot of things to carry, since the studios are on the 92nd floor. I have to pass through these revolving doors with all my stuff. I am walking around with a wheel-carry, and once I got stuck in the revolving door. I was unable to move forward or backwards. I was stuck between the entrance of World Trade One and World Trade Two. A well-dressed man came along, and pushed me through the door. He pushed so hard that all my stuff fell out on the floor, loads of art supplies and I myself fell on top of it.

I don't like the studio on the 92nd floor, it is not so cozy, I cannot hide. I share with 15 other artists. I'm sure they are all very nice, but I'd rather hide. So I got lost on the first day, looking for my studio, and I found this huge empty dot-com space. The dot-com office is half as big as one floor. It feels weird to be in there by yourself.

The view is in the direction of Battery Park, Hudson River, and Statue of Liberty. Sometimes I go there and meditate or I do some Power Yoga in the World Trade Center. While I sing 'om shanti', a huge helium balloon is sliding by with the American flag on it. Then I realize how high up I am, and that feels strange. I'm thinking of giving tours in the building. I could even make some money. I could guide people through the empty dot-com spaces. I could give Power Yoga classes. I like to think about the World Trade Center and Power Yoga. It is interesting that in our society, we developed the term 'Power Yoga'; it sounds so competitive and stressful."

Moukhtar Kocache: You were working on the video of the revolving door at the same time as you were making drawings. And you were hesitant to show that piece, or even edit it to begin with. Do you want to talk a little bit about what happened there?

Carola Dertnig: In general my work deals a lot with humor. And this piece also is about me. But then I didn't finish. I'm still not sure if I made the right decision. It's a very awkward situation to have footage of something that is not there anymore and especially of people who are not there anymore. How do you deal with that? So for a while I thought that I wouldn't show all the footage.

I now have four segments of two minutes, and in every two minutes, the people change a little bit. So I try to have as many people in that piece as possible, because all of a sudden, it had a whole new meaning.

Moukhtar Kocache: It's really important for me when I take people to look at the show to say which works were done before the attacks— like your drawings of the twins—because the way we read this work now is going to be dramatically different. At a time when a lot of artists and a lot of people in the art world want to respond to 9/11, we wanted to make sure that we continued our work. We did not want the work to get sidetracked or become confused with the efforts to create a eulogy of the towers—whether this was on a political, patriotic, or personal level.

We needed to finish the work we were doing, even though we knew people would have a different reading of it right now. At some point we hope people will stop and say: "Okay, I'm reading it within the context of the loss, I'm reading it within the context of the events. But that tells me something about how I experience art, and how we interact with a work of art when we enter into a space. And perhaps I can also read it without the events, without September 11, and then have another experience of the artwork."

Jeff Konigsberg: My work has been architectural for about the past fifteen years. The space I was given at the World Trade Center had a nice wall, and a great view of Brooklyn. But I asked to change the space that day,

and actually took a space that was originally set aside to be a storage space. It was the only space that didn't have windows. It was a three-walled space facing inside the building. I felt that related more to my work, as my work is very diagrammatic, and deals with architectural space, the feeling of being in a space, and the memories of being in a space.

My proposal was to do a large wall work that referenced the space it occupied. I bought a digital camera a few weeks before the residency started, and took pictures along the way. One photo in this exhibition is the last photo I took. The other photo is a reconstruction using Photoshop and markers to show what the wall work would have looked like had I had the chance to finish it... The other works in the exhibition refer to the space in the sense of memory. One is based on my space, one is based on Michael's space, and one is based loosely on Geraldine's space.

Moukhtar Kocache: Can you describe what this wall piece consists of?

Jeff Konigsberg: The wall work is composed of sheet-rock on which I drew and painted, and also incized and peeled away sections. Sheet-rock comes in a number of different colors. If you peel the surface color away, you get this brown paper bag color. And if you peel that brown paper bag color away, you get white plaster. I thought this related to works such as Renaissance frescos, where the paint was applied directly to the wet plaster, and thus would become a permanent part of the wall. Working with sheet-rock is sort of like a modern day version of that experience, where the art itself is not only in the space but becomes a permanent part of the space.

I was beginning the painting phase on September 10, and this has been really difficult to think about, given that Michael and I hung out that night, the night before. We watched Monday night football, and worked and hung out. And the next day when I saw it in the news, the first thing

that I thought of was him. And I knew it, I just knew that he was there. I was hoping he wasn't, but I left at one in the morning, so…I knew that he slept over. So that was my first thought.

And later on, I did actually think a lot about my work, and I did get angry about losing this work. And I really do miss the work that I lost there, because it was the beginning of a new series of work for me. I felt this work really expressed where I was at now, and I was very excited about presenting it to the public. So that was actually very upsetting for me, though it's not something I think about very much now at all, it doesn't concerns me as much.

Moukhtar Kocache: I remember talking to you about this. You would get really angry about the work, and then you would place it within the context of what happened, and then you'd feel somehow embarrassed and ashamed. And that was something that we all had to negotiate on a regular basis, thinking about the small things, the pen that we cherished, the piece that we were about to finish. And then just stopping ourselves immediately, and feeling completely guilty because of the thousands of people who are dead and gone, and the sadness of all of it.

Jeff Konigsberg: The hard thing now—now that three months have passed and the show is up—is to remember what we've learned, what *I've* learned from this experience, and then get back to the daily grind, going back to work every day. I'm getting into a tough area here, but I feel that it helped my work in a very strange way. I feel that my work is much more condensed. And there is just no time now for goofing around or not being sure of what you want to do.

Moukhtar Kocache: Some of the artists who were World Views residents are here, so I am going to open it up and give them the chance to talk about the experience of making this work or participating in the residency.

Motonobu Kurokawa: What was great about the World Trade Center space was its rawness; I could do anything I wanted. In terms of the material loss, I really don't much regret that—although I didn't get to complete the program, I felt like I became part of it. I was there.

Moukhtar Kocache: Does anyone in the audience have questions?

Audience member (to artists): How much did the World Trade Center inform your work?

Mahmoud Hamadani: Very much so. For me, I had some ideas, because I had seen the space before. But after being in the space for a while, the work became an extension—but also an expansion—of the ideas that I had. You can see how the various artists' work corresponded to the space. As raw as the space was, as unattractive as it was, we got all pissed off at the view because when we had the opening, everybody who came to the space would first go to the windows and look at the view instead of our artwork. The space had great influence, and I created my work in response to the space and the people.

Carola Dertnig: Well, also its a symbol. The World Trade Center is not like any other kind of a building. It represents something of our western culture, as medieval churches symbolized the Middle Ages.

Geraldine Lau: I think that it's inevitable that the Twin Towers would effect the work, be it externally or internally. I didn't think so much about the structures externally. But it was a luxury to be in this very raw space, and to be able to do whatever you wanted to. I felt we were very fortunate to be chosen for the residency. And I spent a lot of time there.

Audience member (to artists): How has being so close to the Trade Center—as the place where you worked, and the center of your life—affected you in terms of feelings of optimism, pessimism, urgency, or in terms of your role as artists?

Carola Dertnig: When this all happened, I thought that to be an artist was the most useless thing. You really questioned your role in a moment like that. I think I still do. But then on the other hand, I don't think it's more important or less important than anything else.

Jeff Konigsberg: We had a meeting very shortly after the event, when Liz Thompson [Executive Director, LMCC] talked about what artists did now, and how they were going to respond. My initial feeling was that by choosing to continue working, you're making a statement. You are stating your belief in the future. But it's not so simple now. I still do believe that, but now I find that I feel more “extremes”. I've never felt stronger about my work—especially after having to get this done very quickly and being reasonably happy with the work in the show. But also, this experience really drove home for me the feeling that you can't assume anything, you don't know what tomorrow brings. There is a connection to history that I've never felt before.

Mahmoud Hamadani: Well, I feel like my lease on life has been renewed. And I also feel like my rent has been increased substantially. (Laughter)

Moukhtar Kocache: I think we didn't have an option really. I knew that we were going to do something no matter what. We did not have a choice but to continue and to produce, and to be fruitful. It was amazing that the group came together, but everybody wanted to do that. And no one retreated. And that was really, really beautiful. I think it had something to do with being an artist. Artists have this weird role in society—and people

often ascribe to artists mystical and/or visionary powers—so there is this desire to keep doing something, and to respond to something.

We didn't go to that space just because our offices happened to be there. Every single day when we entered that space, and we pushed that button and we went through security, we were aware of every single thing we were doing, we were not just getting there to just send out the e-mails and do the filing and get on the phone. We were going to that space because it was *that* space. And so we were always hyper-aware and hyper-sensitive. And so after that, we were still buzzing, we had all this material and data and we just needed to do it.

Audience Member: Do you think that experience of knowing that you are going to a special place was shared by the corporations and businesses that shared the World Trade Center, or do you think that yours was a special case?

Artist (not identifiable in transcription): I don't share it with corporations and businesses. I share it with people, I mean, I share it with the guys who I used to sneak past security with, and those people I rode the elevator with. Or at the moment when you are complaining in the bathroom because there is never any soap, and the dispenser is always broken. It's in those moments of fissure, where the system "bends", that you share the space and realize there are people who are just as attached to that environment as we were, and just as aware of it.

If you visited people's offices, you would see that they created "shrines" in their office environments. They put up photographs, or the note that they got from a Chinese cookie, and decorated the space. If we were to document those environments in the Trade Center, they would tell you that most people there were also "on" all the time, going into the space, trying to humanize it, trying to remain separate from the corporation,

trying to break the system. And the basement was really amazing, because there was all sorts of graffiti there.

The minimalism and sterility of the office environment ended the minute you went to the basement. It was another world. There was garbage down there, and rats and graffiti, and sweaty moving men, and truck drivers, and you could smoke there and you could drink there, and you could curse. It was a complete mess. And we had access to seven basements full of this kind of stuff.

That environment was completely alive. The graffiti and notes ranged from poetry to cursing to someone solving their calculus homework. It was phenomenal material. I mean, people thought I was crazy because I would go down and try to find these things and photograph them, or take people there and say, "Oh, look at this great marking in basement three."

Jeff Konigsberg: Well, it should be remembered that there were 140 or so artists that did this program before us. And thankfully for this program, documentation exists. And there is this work that relates to that place that just would not exist now.

Moukhtar Kocache: Also, I want to mention the fact that on the 91st floor, we had nine artists that were in residence in a program called Studioscape, and they were painting the views. They were seascape painters. The challenges they faced after September 11 were very different from the artists who were working on a more conceptual, sculptural level. They lost their object, I mean, they lost their . . .

Mahmoud Hamadani: Their models. Artists create works of art because they are moved by things. This exhibition is proof that they work even harder when they are shaken violently. I'm not so much concerned about how this impacts the artists, because we are constantly moved and

impacted by various phenomena—this is reflected in our art. What I am concerned about is how September 11—and its impact on security and immigration—is going to affect New York City as the center of artistic activity in the world.