
■ CHAPTER 17 ■

Public Tragedy and the Arts

Sandra Bertman

Believing in the concept of world trade, Japanese architect Minoru Yamasaki designed New York's World Trade Center to be a living symbol of humankind's dedication to international cooperation and peace. "The World Trade Center should," Yamasaki said, "because of its importance, become a living representation of man's belief in humanity, his need for individual dignity, his belief in the cooperation of men, and through this cooperation his ability to find greatness" (Heyer, 1966).

Though he intended the 110-story steel-frame, glass, and concrete-slab towers to be more than commercial office space, Yamasaki could never have envisioned what the World Trade Center has come to signify since the events of 9/11. This public tragedy stunned Americans and left us groping and searching for explanations. The scale of the horror—the numbers who died when the towers fell, the destruction of two mighty skyscrapers, the strategy of using airplanes fully loaded with fuel as weapons, the suicides of the terrorists, the murder of the other passengers—all add to the chaos, conundrum, and soul pain.

Artists are missionaries, shamans, magicians of their crafts, expressing, in many modes and in various media, the inexpressible. The inexpressible happened on that perfect, cloudless morning—September 11, 2001—when these towers, along with the Pentagon, became the symbols of a devastating attack on democracy and freedom.

ART HELPS US COPE

What can we learn from the way people—both recognized artists and their audience—turn to the arts in times of public tragedy? In every era, artists—whether poets, dancers, musicians, architects, sculptors, painters, cartoonists, filmmakers—have created art in response to tragic events.

Thankfully, artists, both professionals who make art for a large audience and nonprofessionals who make art primarily for themselves, have already responded and will continue to respond to the 9/11 attack. Bruce Springsteen released an album, *The Rising*, urging his listeners to transform shock and grief into fortitude: in the song “My City of Ruins,” the lyrics exhort, “Come on, rise up!” (Tyranigel, 2002). Aidan Fontana, the six-year-old son of a trapped fireman, spent the months following the attack in kindergarten where he built and rebuilt the twin towers out of wooden blocks and told a story about how he might have saved his father if he had been with him (LeDuff, 2002). An elderly friend, not directly connected to the tragedy, spent several months at her computer, drawing and printing pictures of the towers—towers in night and towers by day, as if to make them stand again. She had never before shown any interest in drawing skyscrapers. There is a creative gene in each of us (Bertman, 1999), and we turn to it, and want to use it, particularly in times of perplexity.

What happened on 9/11 is unspeakable. What happened at Ground Zero initially is beyond words. We’re talking now about the morality of killing—correction, murdering—so many unknowing, unprepared, innocent victims: firemen climbing endless stairs to rescue people, police responding quickly to the emergency, restaurant workers going about their daily tasks, office workers who had no idea what they represented to the terrorists. How dare the arts—normally the purveyors of words, color, sound, joy, wit, and irony—attempt to minister to such horror, emptiness, and tragedy? The half-Jewish Marxist Theodor Adorno objected to what he thought of as art’s glossing over: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, 1949).

Immediately after 9/11, all forms of entertainment, concerts, Broadway shows, museum openings, were cancelled. The Smithsonian museums in Washington, D.C., reported an almost 50 percent drop in attendance in the aftermath. How could any film or drama be “relevant”? At first the nation paid respect appropriately—with silence—and then with communal mourning: makeshift shrines of teddy bears, candles, photographs of the missing, messages, bouquets of flowers, flags. On these shrines, scribbled prayers referencing, indeed transcending, all religious traditions appeared



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9/11 Building Block Memorial. In downtown Boston, architects placed wooden blocks, colored markers and other art supplies on the sidewalk outside their offices and invited passersby to help design and construct the block sculpture evolving in the lobby.

spontaneously. “On Monday, we e-mailed jokes. On Tuesday [9/11], we did not.... On Monday, politicians argued about surplus budgets. On Tuesday, grief-stricken on the White House steps, they sang in unison ‘God Bless America’” (adapted from a number of websites, including NATCA, 2001, quiltweb.com, 2001, Motorsports Ministries, 2001).

Within a short time, media coverage, memorial services, many kinds of music, which Leo Tolstoy called the shorthand of emotion, moved us outward to the public and collective, providing consolation and community. We began to listen to and sing along with “Amazing Grace,” Barber’s “Adagio for Strings,” “America the Beautiful,” African-American spirituals, “Ave Maria” in several versions, Sousa’s marches, the national anthem, taps, as well as recordings of various requiem masses. We also continue to observe many moments of respectful silence. Art, symbol, and prayer all emanate from and minister to the same source—the human soul.

ART IS RELEVANT

In a televised interview, Bill T. Jones (2001), dancer and choreographer, was asked how dance could be relevant as a response to 9/11. Was he, himself, in fact able to dance? Could he envision himself going back to the site, to Ground Zero, and dancing? Yes, he could, was the reply, “I could dance with respect . . . I could dance with grief . . . I could dance and invite grieving people to dance, and we’d dance together.” A few decades earlier, the playwright Samuel Beckett expressed his own deep-seated need to write: “one writes not in order to be published; one writes in order to breathe” (Mitchelmore, 2000). In addition to manmade disasters, public tragedies can be the result of natural catastrophes—earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods—often sudden and terrifying. These also take their toll on the human psyche, and artists respond. A recent book of short stories by the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, titled *After the Quake*, centers on the 1995 earthquake in Kobe. In addition to 4,000 dead, another 300,000 people lost everything, homes and all. Murakami’s parents were among the homeless. A reviewer, Jeff Giles, wrote in *The New York Times*: “What makes the book so moving is the sense that on some level it is Murakami’s deeply felt get-well card” (2000). Murakami writes about those who survived the quake, their dread, their fear of another similar disaster. With natural disasters, however catastrophic, the survivors do not have to deal with the evil or madness of fellow human beings; their questions involve the impersonal forces of nature or the mysteries of God.

In dealing with 9/11, most of us are just not struggling with our many emotions—shock, disbelief, surprise, horror, sadness, anger at the perpetrator—we are rediscovering and reformulating exactly what we value. In times of tragedy we desperately seek out those among us who can see beyond logic,

analysis, reasons, ideologies, politics, and minister to our broken spirits. We need artists of all descriptions who can arouse our numbed or raw emotions and provide insight, catharsis, sanity, connection, even consolation.

ART IS RESISTANCE AND PROTEST

Artists have responded to public tragedies throughout the ages. In some cases, only a work of art, often a masterpiece, remains to remind us of a public tragedy, particularly after time and successive tragedies have pushed the event itself from public consciousness. Who knows about the massacre at Chios? But the painter Delacroix teaches us in his *Massacre of Chios*, hanging in the Louvre.

In 1937, Picasso painted a 26-foot-long mural as a tribute to the Spanish town of Guernica. The Basques, a minority population in Spain, were opposed to the Spanish fascist Franco, who called in his German allies to bomb one of their towns to ashes. Approximately 1,700 unarmed men, women, and children were slaughtered in a sneak raid, with no warning they were about to be shot down from the air—a relatively unknown form of attack at that date. A few days after the bombing, Picasso made his first, very rough, still existing sketch (8 by 10 inches), compelled by his feelings of outrage, and continued to develop his ideas with more finished sketches in the following weeks. Three months later, a memorable visual image, speaking of mass slaughter of innocent people and the singling out of a minority group, was brought to the world's attention by a painter already celebrated in his own lifetime.

Picasso allowed himself only black, gray, and white—paradoxically, a colorless painting. The recognizable details, a mother holding her dead child, a screaming horse, a burning house, a bull, a lamp, a broken sword, and so forth, are only schematically drawn and act as complex symbols. Picasso later said they were perhaps unconscious symbols; he was not aware of creating specific political symbols. The Norwegian painter Edvard Munch wrote of this mural: “This painting is not cruel at all—imagine how Goya would have done it—and yet it represents war” (Boeck & Sabartes, 1957). Another critic, Herbert Read, called it a “monument to disillusion, to despair, to destruction” (Barr, 1946).

A century earlier, Goya, another Spanish painter, responded to the suppression of a popular revolt by painting a monumental canvas now hanging in the Prado in Madrid, titled *Executions of the 3rd May, 1808*—



Guernica. Pablo Picasso's huge work was inspired by an event that occurred during the Spanish Civil War. For four hours on April 26, 1937, the German Luftwaffe bombed and machine-gunned the Basque village of Guernica, leveling its homes and businesses and

a historical event barely recalled. Goya shows well-equipped soldiers who put an end to a popular uprising by shooting unarmed, shabbily dressed men. The painter depicts viscerally the fear visible in the enlarged white eyes of those still alive and the profuse blood seeping from the dead lying all over the ground. Whereas Picasso uses symbolic flat images, Goya explicitly and graphically illustrates the scene. Both, however, use their art to express outrage over great wrongs done by and to fellow human beings. In diverse ways these artists document, they do not censor. One speculates that painting these massive works brought some relief to the artists themselves, in their efforts to make clear to viewers what they must know about the human capacity for brutality. The words attributed to Pastor Marin Niemoller carved in the granite base supporting an eternal flame in the Hall of Remembrance at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., do the same:



Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. Used with permission.

decimating the population. The painting aroused world opinion against fascism. Sixty-six years later, Guernica remains one of the best-known anti-war statements of all time.

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

(Littell, 1986)

ART IS CONSOLATION

Another form of healing is offered by architect Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial located in Washington, D.C. (1991). The then young and unknown Lin won the competition to design the monument. The visual restraint of the simple wall, the aesthetics of abstraction, the endless listing of names of those lost, speak in a meaningful way to untold numbers of visitors. Vietnam

veterans hold reunions at the wall, touching the names of their lost buddies, leaving offerings, and embracing tearfully. A simple, inscribed marble sculpture in a V-shape helps them, and us, acknowledge the waste and loss of war (58,158 American soldiers dead), and helps us find our way, eventually, back to humanity and hope.

Memorial Hall, now familiarly called Mem Hall, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was erected by Harvard College to honor the young Harvard classmen who had perished in the Civil War. Harvard now uses the sizable building for lectures, concerts, and examinations. A precedent for Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, the names of the dead were listed high on the walls of the central hall—now easily overlooked unless one looks up. The names, from well-known New England families, along with the birth and death dates of the students—and the hallowed names of battlefields on which they died—are moving. Those killed all died at a very young age, cheated of their lives and of fathering the next generation.

The healing power of art is not a rhetorical fantasy. Somehow the pain of loss is reduced as the evidence is preserved and the event is shared. These shared human connections remind us of the fakeries of “clock” time. The past, present, and future are acknowledged and consoling in the world of now.

ART ASKS QUESTIONS

On being asked to write a poem early in World War I, Yeats did not feel personally moved by the event and even seemed emotionally detached in his reply. He responded with a very short poem of six lines, titled “On Being Asked for a War Poem” and argued in it that the poet has “no gift to set a statesman right.” He further wrote, in a letter to Henry James, that this was “the only thing I have written of the war or will write” (Jeffares, 1968).

Surprisingly, he had a much stronger poem to write before the war was finished. Yeats was deeply touched when people he knew personally, Irish nationalists who were fighting for Irish independence, were quickly executed by the English after mounting a revolt around the Dublin post office. “I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me—and I am very despondent about the future” (Jeffares, 1968). This painful situation moved Yeats to write at length; the resulting poem, “Easter 1916,” frequently anthologized, is considered among the very best of his many fine poems. He memorialized several of the executed men as well as a woman friend who was imprisoned,

speaking of personal qualities, not always flattering—one showed “ignorant good will,” another was “a drunken, vainglorious lout.” But his earlier opinion of them had been changed by their willingness to die for their passionate cause of freedom: “What if excess of love/Bewildered them till they died?” he asked. Of another dead Irish nationalist, he wrote sympathetically:

He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.

Yeats was too untouched by the impersonal war to write about it until he was personally assaulted by his friends’ sacrifice. In “Easter 1916,” he asks himself, and us, a significant question: “Was it needless death after all?” And we respond by asking ourselves: Are all war deaths needless deaths?

ART OFFERS ANSWERS

Michael James Cotton, owner of Michael’s Liquor Store in Waltham, Massachusetts, had never written a book before, but 9/11 prodded him to begin, and in four months he completed 200 pages. He then found a publisher and his book became available on Amazon.com. “After September 11,” he said, “I wanted to make sure to get the point across to people that something had to be done. I never thought I’d write a book, but once I started punching out the words, I kept going” (Stern, 2002).

Cotton feels that “aggressive” methods must be used to make sure America remains safe, and his book is about a small group of American soldiers sent to find the Al Qaeda terrorist organization. He drew upon his own war experiences in Vietnam. His book, entitled *9/11: The Day the Call Went Out Around the World*, had a goal: Through his writing he wanted to urge all Americans, rather than feeling vulnerable and powerless, to take necessary steps to make sure America remains secure. His strong desire to get his message out turned him into a published writer.

We may not agree with Michael Cotton’s retaliative aggressive “answers.” We do not look to creative expressions simplistically for “right or wrong”—but for insight. Respecting the act of art-making for clarifying life and its meaning for each of us, we welcome the uncanny ability of others’ creative products to put us in touch with ourselves and our own beliefs in authentic ways.

ART PROMPTS RECOVERY

Many artists, both professionals and nonprofessionals, have responded to the events of 9/11. Newspapers have reported record numbers of concerts, exhibitions, and sales of photography to raise money for victims. The Internet continues to spill over with websites dealing with the attack—in the categories of theater, writing (poetry), conversations with artists, sound, and music—to name just a few that were indexed (PBS, 2002; Americans for the Arts, 2002; Hauck, 2001). At the Theatre Development Fund's online newsletter for teens, *Play by Play*, high school students were invited to submit original dramatic monologues, scenes, even complete plays (2002).

Detroit's Museum of New Art rotated photography exhibits, such as "Photography Now, Beyond Narrative"; the Museum of Modern Art in New York offered "From the Ashes." *The New York Times* reports on endless books published on every aspect of the attack and estimated that as many as 150 books were published to commemorate the first anniversary of 9/11.

Students at the Stuyvesant High School, who were three blocks from the World Trade Center on that Tuesday morning, interviewed one another and wrote monologues about their experiences after their teacher noticed how eager they were to tell their individual stories of what happened to them during that day. The results were collected in a book, *With Their Eyes*, and published by HarperCollins for other young readers. Elementary school students' drawings from Lotspeich School in Cincinnati, Ohio, were used to illustrate a simple yet honest book, *September 11, 2001*, portraying the facts, stressing patriotism over assault (Poffenberger, 2002). Children's books on the subject include *New York's Bravest* (Knopf) and *Fireboat* (Putnam).

CAN ART BE INAPPROPRIATE AND TRIVIALIZE?

Public tragedies are of such magnitude that, to some critics, art dealing with them seems trivial, inappropriate, sentimental, unworkable, even offensive. Explaining what he meant by "writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric," Adorno later said, "something of the horror is removed" (Adorno, 1982). A more moderate position is surely that Auschwitz is not unimaginable, not inexpressible. Nor is it morally repugnant to write about it. The questions it raises deserve to be faced by every human conscience: How could human beings have done what they did at Auschwitz? Murdering women,

children, whole families, because one group had decided another group should be wiped out.

The moving account, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, is widely read and records the terrible forces gathering, as witnessed and recorded by a girl in hiding with her family. Her writing, her art, clearly must have helped this perceptive, acutely alive youngster who died as a teenager in a concentration camp, make sense of what was going on around her. That Anne Frank was not allowed to live out her life is indeed barbaric. Her journal writing, describing her family's attempt to survive and avoid deportation—and worse—is not, despite Theodor Adorno's dictum against art after Auschwitz. It is more illuminating to understand Anne's situation, and her fear, by reading her diary entries than to understand the phenomenon by studying statistics of how many died in camps. Art is a peaceful means of teaching about human failings and inhumanity, in the hope that the lessons of vigilance, responsibility, tolerance, and compassion can be learned before it is too late.

After 9/11, a series called "Terror Widows"—in a pop-culture comic book format—began to appear in newspapers and on the Internet. One cartoon by Ted Rally showed two panels: a widow of one of the victims laments, "I keep waiting for Kevin to come home, but I know he never will." And another widow responds: "Fortunately, the \$3.2 million I collected from the Red Cross keeps me warm at night." This strip was pulled from *The New York Times* website when feedback indicated many readers found it inappropriate, feeling that it might cause gratuitous pain to victims.

The cartoonist refused to apologize, saying, "pushing the envelope of polite criticism is what editorial cartoonists do." The implication that some women prefer money to anything else might be in some circumstances amusing, but it seems highly insensitive and hurtful to women survivors trying to cope—and questionably amusing even to those not directly affected. What is the "polite criticism" that the cartoonist is trying to get beyond? Humor at the expense of people grieving is worse than tasteless. On the other hand, some pop culture creations, *The New Yorker* magazine cover at Halloween (October 29, 2001) showing youngsters going trick-or-treat dressed as firemen and policemen, or the special Marvel comic book edition, *Heroes* (2001), including works by superhero creators Alex Ross, Sam Kieth, Stan Lee and Joe Quesada (proceeds to the Twin Towers Fund), are heartwarming. Quoting from the back cover:

Comic book universes are populated by colorful characters that possess fantastic powers. But on September 11, 2001, an untold number of real men and women amazed the world with their phenomenal acts of bravery. When others ran away, they charged forward. When others reached out for safety, they offered a helping hand. When others cried out, they responded with a soothing voice. And, tragically, many of them died . . . but in doing so taught us all how to live.

They can't stick to walls.
They can't summon thunder.
They can't fly.
They're just HEROES.

After 9/11, the nation gradually recovered some of its equilibrium, but the shock and aftereffects lingered for months, and many were still feeling uneasy, approaching the first anniversary of the attack. According to *The New York Times*, survivors, witnesses and nonwitnesses, continue to seek psychiatric care and psychologists predict they might need it for years to come. In *The New Republic*, the drama critic Robert Brustein mused on the “relevance” of three new plays that had the bad luck to be mounted on Broadway in the months directly after the attack. Brustein expressed what continued to bother him and others: “Through no fault of their authors, none is really ‘relevant’ to what has been lacerating our souls this season.” The plays Brustein wanted to see in the aftermath had to attempt to answer the large, difficult, and perhaps unanswerable questions—about evil, terrorists, human behavior—about why.

Some thoughts have been expressed about the commercialization of the event, Springsteen's album, in particular. Charles Cross, publisher of Springsteen's fan magazine, said, “they're really marketing it as a September 11 album. I think we need art that can deal with it, but . . . it's still pretty fresh. Frankly the commercial element of it really scares me” (Tryangiel, 2002).

Some critics worry that enough time and distance must pass. Whether the artist needs time and distance or not seems best left to the artist. Benjamin Britten waited, and his much admired Requiem on World War II was composed 16 years after the end of the war. But Wilfred Owen did not wait and wrote his war poems, including “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” beginning with the line “What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?” in the middle of World War I, which he did not survive.

So where are we? We need the arts to help us cope and to find our way back to belief in humanity. They arm us with specific and practical strategies relevant to young and old whatever their background, culture, or beliefs. They ask the soulful and spiritual questions, offer answers and call us to action—resistance, protest, witness, and prayer. They can and do prompt recovery, but they can be inappropriate and trivialize. In *Zorba the Greek*, Zorba asks the questions, “Why do the young die? Why does anybody die? . . . What’s the use of all your damn books if they can’t answer questions like that? What the hell can they do for you?” The young scholar answers him: “Well, they tell me about the agony of the man who can’t answer questions like yours” (Kazantzakis, 1952).

Naj Wikoff, president of the Society for the Arts and Healthcare, puts it well: “The terrorists used very simple things like matte knives to cause great destruction. We too can use very simple things like tape, pencils, crayons, a song, movement, and yes, even matte knives, to help the healing process, to bring light into this terrible darkness” (Wikoff, 2001).

We will let the poet Theodore Roetke (1964) have the final word: “In a dark time, the eyes begin to see . . .” ■

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