theories and methodologies

9/11 as Avant-Garde Art?

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[The attacks of 9/11 were] the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos. Minds achieving something in an act that we couldn't even dream of in music, people rehearsing like mad for 10 years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying, just imagine what happened there. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then 5,000 [sic] people are dispatched to the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing. Artists, too, sometimes try to go beyond the limits of what is feasible and conceivable, so that we wake up, so that we open ourselves to another world. . . . It's a crime because those involved didn't consent. They didn't come to the "concert." That's obvious. And no one announced that they risked losing their lives. What happened in spiritual terms, the leap out of security, out of what is usually taken for granted, out of life, that sometimes happens to a small extent in art, too, otherwise art is nothing.

—Karlheinz Stockhausen ("Documentation")

STOCKHAUSEN ASIDE, HOW CAN ANYONE CALL THE 9/11 ATTACK ON THE TWIN TOWERS A WORK OF ART? OF WHAT VALUE IS SUCH A DESIGNATION?

What does calling the destruction of the Twin Towers a work of art assert about (performance) art, the authenticity of "what really happened," and social morality during and after the first decade of the twenty-first century? To even begin to address these questions, I need to refer to the history of the avant-garde—because it has been avant-garde artists who for more than a century have called for the violent destruction of existing aesthetic, social, and political systems. Of French origin, *avant-garde*—cognate to *vanguard* and *van*—has been used in English since the end of the fifteenth century. The *OED* states that the avant-garde is "[t]he foremost part of an army" but also refers to being "ahead" or "first" in any number of circumstances. At the start of the nineteenth century the term was taken up by social activists, utopians, and artists to signify those ahead of the rest of society.[1] The word kept its militancy, especially among artists. Here are a few exemplary quotations, roughly decade by decade, from a large repertory:

1909, from F. T. Marinetti's "Futurist Manifesto": "Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggres-

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sive character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man. . . . We want to demolish museums and libraries. . . . For art can only be violence, cruelty, injustice."

1918, from Tristan Tzara's "Second Dada Manifesto": "[W]e are preparing the great spectacle of disaster, conflagration and decomposition. Preparing to put an end to mourning, and to replace tears by sirens spreading from one continent to another."

1938, from André Breton and Leon Trotsky's manifesto *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*: "[T]rue art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society."

1960, from the *Situationist Manifesto*: "The existing framework cannot subdue the new human force that is increasing day by day alongside the irresistible development of technology and the dissatisfaction of its possible uses in our senseless social life. . . . All real progress has clearly been suspended until the revolutionary solution of the present multiform crisis. . . ."

Artists' manifestos advocating revolutionary terror all but vanished after the 1960s, even in the midst of the bloody student uprisings in France, the United States, and Mexico in 1968. The Living Theatre's manifestos proclaimed the rhetoric of violent revolution: "If we are going to bring down the structure, we are going to have to attack it from all sides, all ten thousand" (Beck, entry 16). But everyone knew that the Living Theatre was intrepidly nonviolent. Violent manifestos made real by actual explosions continued to be issued by groups such as the Weather Underground, not by artists. Why did artists move away from advocating violence? I have no definite answer. Possibly, the realization that Soviet Communism failed to deliver the goods soured the taste for revolution. More likely, given World War II, the Holocaust, the atomic bombs, and the fears engendered by the cold war, calling for violence no longer seemed wise or ethical.

This did not stop teachers and artists from honoring the futurists, dadaists, surrealists, and situationists. Moreover, Antonin Artaud's ideas from the 1930s saturated theater theory and practice, culminating in Peter Brook's hugely influential "theater of cruelty season" of 1964. Artaud's importance to avant-garde theater is canonical, but he might also be writing a scenario for al-Qaeda:

1933, from "The Theater and Cruelty": "The Theatre of Cruelty proposes to resort to a mass spectacle; to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets. The theatre must give us everything that is in crime, love, war, or madness, if it wants to recover its necessity. . . . Hence this appeal to cruelty and terror . . . on a vast scale" (85, 86).

Granted that Artaud stipulated that "the image of a crime presented in the requisite theatrical condition is something infinitely more terrible for the spirit than that same crime when actually committed" (85). But in our day, the walls between the real and the virtual have crumbled, the theatrical and the actual have merged. What 9/11 offered was a spectacle of cruelty in the Artaudian sense, "terror . . . on a vast scale."

Taken together, the message coming from many key avant-garde artists and theorists, insistently repeated for more than a century, is clear. Destroy the current order. Create a new order, or anarchy. Are these manifestos mere ineffectual fantasies of powerless artists? Or do they set a tone that carries over from avant-garde art into popular entertainments—and beyond into actual events? Indeed, so-called high art and pop have merged just as news has melded into entertainment. Additionally, at least since 1971, when Chris Burden

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had a friend shoot him in the arm, many performance artists have wounded themselves, opened their veins as art, suspended themselves from hooks, slaughtered animals, and in manifold ways used real violence in the arts. Rituals—art's close relation—include flagellation, scarring, circumcision, subincision, and so on. Popular culture is full of tattoos, piercings, and cosmetic surgeries, which, whatever their psychological and sociological meanings, enact the desire to be beautiful. Aestheticizing and ritualizing violence, not as representations (as in the visual arts, theater, or other media) but as actual acts performed in the here and now, are widespread. But, you might argue, except for the rituals, the manifestos, performance art, and violent practices of popular culture are largely a part of Western civilization, a system that Osama bin Laden and his allies explicitly despise, stand apart from, and wish to destroy.

But is this really so? First of all, beautification by means of intrusive body alteration is practiced all over the world. Second, al-Qaeda and other jihadists are not adverse to using those aspects of Western culture they find helpful. Bin Laden and his allies take advantage of the media and advanced technology, from the Internet to hijacked jets. The technological sophistication of the jihadists debunks the ruling myth that they are primitive cave dwellers living in tribal areas. In fact, no location is outside the global net, not even northeast Pakistan and Afghanistan; and no tribe or group of people is absolutely other. Paradoxically, the West and the jihadists occupy very separate spheres from the point of view of values while sharing the same global system from the point of view of techniques. Osama bin Laden issues his fatwas over the Internet, releases videotapes of his speeches, and exploits global financial instruments to pay for al-Qaeda's operations. In the media, where any mention is better than absence, jihadists and the warriors against terror compete for imagination space on the global stage.

Almost as they were occurring, the 9/11 attacks were marketed as popular entertainment. Representations of the attacks are paradigmatic of the accelerating conflation of news and entertainment, and not only in the United States. In Yueqing, a newly industrialized city southwest of Shanghai, videos showing the attacks were for sale by 14 September. In larger cities, these videos probably were on the market even sooner. As Peter Hessler reported from China:

> They stocked them on the same racks as the Hollywood movies. Often the 9/11 videos were located in the cheaper sections, alongside dozens of American films. . . . All of the 9/11 videos had been packaged to look like Hollywood movies. I found a DVD entitled "The Century's Greatest Catastrophe"; the box front featured photographs of Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush, and the burning Twin Towers. On the back, a small icon noted that it had been rated R, for violence and language. (311–12)

In the United States, news programs are sponsored. That is, the news is given in small temporal units, and after two or three items there is another temporal unit, a commercial break. This format of program content and advertising running sequentially is the same for news, sports, drama, and various contestant shows (quiz shows, *American Idol*, etc.), including reality television. The exponential increase in reality television—the presentation of apparently actual ordinary people either in the midst of their ordinary lives or, more frequently, in some real or cooked-up crisis situation, further erases the boundary between the real (including news) and the made for entertainment. (Internet sites such as *YouTube* and its many Internet cognates further blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional.)

The television presentations of the 9/11 attacks soon took on the qualities of a made-for-television drama series. Within hours after the planes struck the Twin Towers, each

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of the networks found a melodramatic title for its coverage of the attacks and the consequent events: CBS, "Attack on America"; ABC, "America under Attack"; CNN, "America's New War." A drumbeat began that led up to and into the bombing and invasion of Iraq in 2003. There was also much pathos. On 14 September, NBC aired "America Mourns," heartbreaking stories mixed with calls for dedicated patriotism. On the first anniversary of the attack, the networks aired such programs as "The Day That Changed America" (CBS), "Report from Ground Zero" (ABC), and "9/11, the Day America Changed" (Fox). The 9/11 attack segued into the American-led war against Iraq, with its own titles on television. It all went under the overall official rubric of the war on terror.

The program titles, the style of presenting the news, and the sequencing of advertising and news items showed how television, more than the other media, marketed 9/11 and the (second) Iraq War as a made-for-television series. This series included many subplots. Reporters were embedded with the troops on the ground. There were daily suicide bombings and attacks of what the government and media called insurgents. Civilians were slaughtered in these bombings and also by the allied military. Individual stories of death and wounds, pain and pathos, were aired side by side with reports of the growing opposition to the war as well as ritualized official reports of "We're winning." The high point (or maybe the low point) of this competition for attention in the entertainment version of reality was President Bush's 1 May 2003 arrival by jet fighter onto the deck of the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*, where a giant banner proclaimed, "Mission Accomplished." Here melodrama gave way to farce. Bush was gussied up in a flight suit though he was a passenger, not the pilot. Who descended to the carrier's flight deck? Bush or a Tom Cruise impersonator?

Bush's show is not the only one of its kind. These conflations of news, staged media events, and actuality do not make the 9/11 attack and the Iraq War art, but they come very close to the melodramatic form of the serial. For performance theorists and historians, the collapse of aesthetic categories was already familiar from Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. In that collapse, the ordinary urinal dubbed *Fountain*, the famous movie star (Marilyn Monroe), the common supermarket item (Campbell's soup cans), and high art are not easily if at all distinguishable. At the far ends of the spectrum—urinal, movie star, and supermarket item at one end and the masterpieces that hang in the august galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the other—distinctions are still clear. But today most of the art world and the real world live in between these extremes. The reporting-fictionalizing of 9/11, including the broadcasting and rebroadcasting of iconic images of the explosions, fires, destruction, aftermath, and war, constitutes an absorption of events not only into the popular imagination but also a presentation of events as objets d'art.[2]

On 9/11 there were four planes heading for their targets. Two torpedoed the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, one damaged the Pentagon, and the fourth plane—probably headed for the White House or the Capitol Building—had its mission foiled by the resistance of the passengers and crashed in the woods of Pennsylvania. Given four planes and three targets, why almost immediately did *9/11* mean the destruction of the World Trade Center towers? New York is a real place, but it is also Batman's Gotham and Superman's Metropolis. It is, to many Americans, simply the City, quintessentially American and foreign simultaneously. Weirdly, I wonder if the jihadists knew Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York":

> Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today
> I want to be a part of it—New York, New York
> . . . . . .
> If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere

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And why did the first attack occur at 8:45 a.m. eastern time and the second at 9:03? If the planes had crashed into the towers three hours later, many more people would have died. If the two planes hit simultaneously or nearly so, the media would not have seen the collision, only the aftermath. I believe the jihadists timed their hijackings as a one-two punch for maximum spectacular effect, synchronized to the morning news cycle in New York and midday in Europe. Their intention was not to kill as many people as possible but to reach as large a spectatorship in the West as possible. The World Trade Center was the epicenter not only of the attacks but also of the imaginary that is 9/11. And what kind of imaginary is that?

When on 16 September the avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen called the destruction of the World Trade Center towers "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos," his remark was greeted by rage and disgust. Also commenting on 9/11 was the 1997 Nobel laureate in literature, Dario Fo, who circulated an e-mail message stating:

> The great speculators wallow in an economy that every year kills tens of millions of people with poverty—so what is 20,000 [sic] dead in New York? Regardless of who carried out the massacre, this violence is the legitimate daughter of the culture of violence, hunger and inhumane exploitation. (qtd. in Erlanger)

Later I will say why Fo's remarks drew no criticism, while Stockhausen was pilloried for his. At present, I return to the question of art and of what kind. This leads me to the sublime as expounded by Immanuel Kant in 1790. Kant writes that the response to the sublime—"a negative pleasure. . . . An outrage on the imagination"—is different from the positive, life-affirming response to beauty (202). "Negative pleasure" and "an outrage on the imagination" were precisely the reaction of many who witnessed in real time or in replay the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. But we must go further into Kant's assertion and give an opinion on its relation to art as we have known it, avant-garde art especially.

Kant discusses the sublime mostly in relation to any extraordinary natural occurrence, which in "its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation provided it gives signs of magnitude and power . . . chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime" (203). But Kant is not satisfied. He notes that if something is

> great . . . without qualification, absolutely, and in every respect (beyond all comparison) great, that is to say, sublime, we soon perceive that for this it is not permissible to seek an appropriate standard outside itself, but merely in itself. It is a greatness comparable to itself alone. Hence it comes that the sublime is not to be looked for in things of nature, but only in our own ideas. (207)

In other words, insofar as the 9/11 attack was a successful assault on the imagination, it was sublime.

But isn't it obscene to consider such an event sublime? Can the horrible even as it is unfolding be experienced as art? Even before Kant, in 1757, Edmund Burke tackled this question in his treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke's salient, if disturbing, observation is that even the most exquisitely executed of the "imitative arts" cannot compete with the "delight in seeing things" that we would in no way want to endorse or see done. In this vein, Vernon Hyde Minor notes:

> [W]e are drawn to disasters not because of some perverse pleasure in others' pain, but because we cannot be of a caring disposition unless we find something agreeable in astonishment, something satisfying about the horrible . . . we are quite naturally aestheticized—rather than anesthetized—by horrific events of great historic significance. . . . The vast, powerful, terrifying forces unleashed by ill-used human technology overwhelms our cognitive faculties, revealing to

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> us in gut-wrenching terms our inability to grasp, comprehend, or—and this is particularly challenging for an artist—to accomplish anything of such magnitude.

"Aestheticized—rather than anesthetized—by horrific events of great historic significance" is a deep insight of the process (many) people undergo in assimilating otherwise hard-to-swallow events. Aestheticization is not the only response to these kind of horrific-yet-fascinating-and-"attractive" events, but it is one strategy. Making art about them—in protest, awe, and sometimes support—is another response. And, of course, political and military action is still another. Far from wanting to eliminate one response in favor of another, I prefer to hold them all in consciousness with regard to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center.

But even if the 9/11 attack is art, is it good or bad from an ethical-moral-political point of view? Most of what we today call art carries an ideological or religious message. In the West, before the Renaissance and the advent of capitalism, there was no category of fine art as such. Notions of art for art's sake were not theorized in the West until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At present, most art remains bound to forces outside itself and is not independent or disinterested. Most art is good or bad in an ethical-moral-political way in terms of values operating beyond or despite the work itself. To cite two well-known examples of great bad or evil art according to today's value system: D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. What is both obvious and troubling is that determining what's good or bad is dependent on the beliefs of whoever is making the judgment. In other words, there may be some agreement universally about what is art and what is not, what is sublime and what is not, but there is no such agreement, nor can I foresee a time when there will be, about what is ethically-morally-politically good or bad.

By mainstream American standards, the 9/11 attack was evil. Thus it is understandable that Stockhausen's remarks were met with outrage. But why did Fo's even more harsh opinion regarding the United States and the victims of 9/11 hardly cause a ripple? Because Fo was not talking about art. He situated 9/11 within the sphere of politics, ideology, and war. Stockhausen placed 9/11 within the art world. And art is not as serious as politics; art is play, secondary, a representation. However, from the perspective of performance studies, the attack on the World Trade Center was a performance: planned, rehearsed, staged, and intended both to wound the United States materially and to affect and infect the imagination. The destruction of two iconic buildings, and the murder of so many people in one fell swoop, was intended to deliver a very specific message about the boldness of the jihad and the vulnerability of the United States.

A performance, surely, but art? I believe that the attack can be understood as the actualization of key ideas and impulses driving the avant-garde. Thierry de Duve writes:

> It is as if the history of the avant-gardes were a dialectical history cast off by the contradictions of art and non-art, the history of a prohibition and of its transgression. A slogan could sum it up: it is forbidden to do whatever, let's do it. . . . This is a duty and not a right. . . . What could anyone do once it is mandatory that everything be permitted or, as the rebelling students said in May '68, once it is forbidden to forbid? (332–33, 340)

Seen this way, the 9/11 attack was in direct succession to futurist, anarchist, and other avant-garde manifestos and actions; destructive as with the Vienna Aktionists; massive as with Christo and Jeanne-Claude's drapings of buildings and the landscapes.[3] To those opposing al-Qaeda, 9/11 was bad art in the ethical and moral sense. It was illegal art from the point of view of international law because it targeted civilians. But it was avant-garde art

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from the point of view of the tradition I am discussing. Is this kind of analysis perverse, not only doing dishonor to the dead and injured but also soiling what art is or ought to be? Does such a designation grant the jihadists much more than they deserve? And does it help us understand better the world we are living in?

Stockhausen was actually envious of the jihadists. "I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing." He desired the most extreme place for art. "Artists, too, sometimes try to go beyond the limits of what is feasible and conceivable, so that we wake up, so that we open ourselves to another world" (*Documentation*). He was claiming an importance for art in the real world. Not the artlike art that hangs in museums or is heard in concert halls and theaters but the lifelike art Allan Kaprow did and theorized—art that is action, not representation. De Duve wrote before 9/11, while Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe wrote after, locating Stockhausen's opinion among a long tradition of artistic fanatics:

> The desire beneath many romantic literary visions is for a terrifying awakening that would undo the West's economic and cultural order. . . . As any avant-garde artist might, Stockhausen sees the devotion of high artistic seriousness . . . in the complete commitment of the terrorists. . . . Like terrorists, serious artists are always fanatics; unlike terrorists, serious artists have not yet achieved the "greatest" level of art. (100)

A single attack has changed world history. What (other) art act has done that? Having just written this, I confess that I am very uncomfortable. I have reasoned my way into a position that I ethically reject.

Maybe my way out is to assert that art requires artists who consciously choose to make art and spectators who willingly observe art. This, surely, is the modern humanist tradition. But there are ritual performances that are extremely powerful, performatively and artistically, in terms of structure, color, rhythms, narratives, and so on and that require and enforce participation and witnessing. Indeed, many artworks are not the products of free will. Are only the planners and overlords artists, and not the workers or victims? Consider the pyramids of Egypt and Teotihuacan, Mexico, generally regarded as architectural masterpieces. The Egyptian pyramids were constructed by slaves, and the Teotihuacan pyramids and surrounding ceremonial site show that human sacrifices took place. Time washes the blood off the stones; the magnificent stones remain unstained by what once were the immediacies of experience. The 9/11 attack is too recent, too drenched in our people's blood, too much a part of unfinished historical business. We reject the possibility that 9/11 may be art because so many of our own people were killed and wounded; and because our national and cultural psyche was violated. From our humanist perspective the attack was ethically horrific: "innocent people" died—the phrase in quotation marks because to the jihadists those who died were not innocent. Their very presence on the planes and in the Twin Towers marked them as participating in hated Western culture. To this way of thinking, there are no neutrals, no bystanders.

Still, neither Mohammed Atta nor the other hijackers thought of themselves as artists. They would have absolutely rejected the label "art" in relation to their actions. And most of those who write about 9/11 do not place it in the domain of art. If there is art in 9/11, it is in the reception and aftermath: what Stockhausen imagined when he saw the media representations of the attack. In the unfolding event, visual artists, performance artists, writers, artists of any kind can do just about anything with what happened. There is nothing new in that: Goya and Picasso—not to mention Homer, Aeschylus, Vyasa, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Hemingway, and many more—have made masterpieces from the horrors of war. But all these works are reflec-

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tive. They came after raw, unmediated events. What makes 9/11 different is that it was mediated from the outset and intended to be mediated. Its authors' purpose was not to conquer or occupy territory, or even slaughter as many civilians as possible, but to stage a stunning media event, photo op, and real-life show—a terrifying, sublime event. As such, it exists in both the propagandistic and aesthetic realms—and existed there while it was happening. This nowness is fundamental. It does not cancel out representations after the fact: the documentaries, dramas, films, writings, firsthand accounts, and memorials all came later, on 12 September and after. But they were supplemental to the attack itself, which was already a media event as it was happening.

Liminal to that event were the hundreds if not thousands of impromptu "Have You Seen?" notices and photographs posted around and sometimes far from ground zero or put on the Internet. These were not accounts of what happened; nor were they ongoingly part of the attack. They were collateral theater (parallel to collateral damage in a military operation). Even while the Twin Towers were burning, people sought information about missing loved ones. The media picked up on these notices, which individually were simply pieces of paper but collectively walls of anxiety and grief. Each notice carried its own hope against hopelessness. No one knows exactly how many people found each other through this means. Soon enough, the notices were joined by flowers, a sure sign of condolence. If the 9/11 fireballs and astonishing tidal wave of dust and debris as first the towers collapsed were terrifying, gigantic, and sublime, the walls of notices seeking the missing were pitiful individual atoms of human yearning. These notices were part of the spectacle even as they provided a human-scale entry into experiencing what was happening. People who didn't know anyone in the World Trade Center gazed at the notices as a way of empathizing with those who had lost someone. The walls of "Have you Seen?" tied the enormity of the collective catastrophe to thousands of smaller expressions of individual need.

Lentricchia and McAuliffe do not stop by situating the 9/11 attacks within a tradition of transgressive art. They go on to discuss 9/11 in relation to popular culture—how soon after 9/11 the New York site of the attack became "Groundzeroland" (5–17), a Mecca (how's that for irony) for tourists, and a site for nationalist mythmaking in the Wagnerian tradition:

> On December 30, 2001, Mayor [Rudolf] Giuliani opened a viewing platform for the folk over the mystic gulf that is Ground Zero, a stage to which he urged Americans, and everybody, to come and experience "all kinds of feelings of sorrow and then tremendous feelings of patriotism." . . . The platform's purpose is to connect tourists to their history at a site that perfectly conjoins terrorism, patriotism, and tourism. (103)

By now the platform is gone, but its intention lives on in the work of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

I wish I had a neat conclusion to my ruminations. I don't. I cannot settle in my own mind the question of whether 9/11 in itself is art or can be more fully understood under the rubric of art. From the morning of 9/11 onward, I've been troubled by this question. The terrace of my apartment has a clear view of lower Manhattan. That morning, I was watching television when I heard shouts from workmen constructing a New York University building on La Guardia Place. I went onto my terrace, looked south, and about one mile away I saw the blazing north tower. I thought it was a horrible accident but wondered how such an accident could happen on a day when the sky was blue and clear. Moments later, I saw a plane flying low make a sharp turn from north to west. "Oh, my!" I said or thought. Something banal and full of shock. Then I saw the plane slice into the south tower as smoothly as a hot knife into butter. Not a

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sound. A silent movie in full color. A great ball of orange flame and black smoke. It was terrifying; it was sublime; it was horrible; it was beautiful. After that, except for about forty-five minutes when my wife and I fetched our daughter from school, I stood on my terrace with some neighbors who had come over because they knew of the view. We watched as the towers came down, etcetera. What did I do? I offered people something to drink and eat, told them where the bathroom was. From the terrace we watched and talked, amazed, horrified, excited, scared, fascinated. We used binoculars. We saw some people flinging themselves from the towers.

I wish I could report that I had only the correct reactions—I wish I could write that it so horrified me that I turned away, daring not to look, or that I was overcome with Aristotle's pity and fear. But it was a lot more complicated than that. I had seen high-wire acts in circuses. I had watched a lot of violence on television. What was happening was all in silence. I couldn't stop it and did not feel personally responsible for it. So in my own way I witnessed it in more of a spectatorial than a "This terrible thing is happening to me" kind of way. I cannot speak for my neighbors—professors and good people all—except to note that our conversation indicated that their response at this point in the unfolding story was akin to mine. People walked back and forth between the terrace and the television room. There was sympathy and anxiety but nothing approaching a full-blown "pity and fear" tragic catharsis. That reaction, for me, came later, when I recollected the events and played them over in the theater of my mind's eye. When new people arrived, they brought rumors and information. We took in what passed for analysis by media pundits. But, most important, everyone was very aware that from the terrace looking south we were watching the thing itself. What we saw and heard on television were explanations and rationalizations both describing and shaping reactions, reporting events and instructing us the receivers how we were to react. The coverage and talking heads gave us both a wider horizon with which to comprehend what we were witnessing and close-ups at and near ground zero. As I watched both in person and on television, I knew that whatever else it was, I was experiencing a spectacle, a live movie, real history happening, et cetera. Being the academic that I am, I referenced Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle." And I knew that the jihadists intended it to be thus: 9/11 was no stealth attack, noticed only by its devastating effects, like anthrax through the mail or poison in the water; it was a show and a showing. And I and my neighbors were among its designated intended spectators—as were supporters of the jihad. Globally speaking, we were a divided audience.

I am exploring these possibilities not to validate terrorist actions or insult the memory of the dead and the suffering of the wounded but to point out that terrorism, at the scale of 9/11, works like art more on states of mind and feeling than on physical destruction. Or, if you will, the destruction is the means toward the end of creating terror, which is a state of mind. The 9/11 attack is an example of what Burke and Kant called the sublime, arousing in some, if not most, spectators the Aristotelian tragic emotions of pity and fear. At least from the Western side. Al-Qaeda and its adherents saw in the attack the very wrath of God. Looked at in these ways—as event, shock, avant-garde art, tragedy, or vengeance—9/11 performs Artaud's uncanny assertion from his 1938 essay "No More Masterpieces": "We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre has been created to teach us that first of all" (79).

Notes

1. According to Thierry de Duve, Olinde Rodrigues, a follower of Henri de Saint-Simon, wrote in 1825, "It is

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we, artists, that will serve as your avant-garde; the power of the arts is indeed the most immediate and the fastest. . . . We address ourselves to the imagination and feelings of people: we are therefore supposed to achieve the most vivid and decisive kind of action" (430–31).

2. For more on the relationship between terrorism and television, see Dayan.

3. See www.christojeanneclaude.net.

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