Art in America

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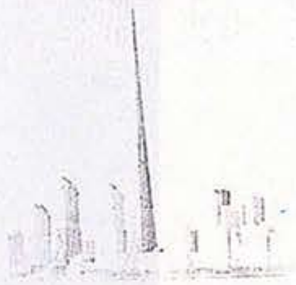
Still from Naomi Ben-Shahar's Floating Inside Out (WTC), *2001, DVD, 15 minutes; in collaboration with Yossi Schvetz. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.*

Studios in the Sky

World Views, a residency program at the World Trade Center, provided artists with a unique creative environment and studios with amazing vistas. Works by the last group of artists were recently on display at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo.

BY STEPHANIE CASH

The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) was created in 1973, the year the World Trade Center was completed, to help develop the area's cultural life. Its activities have included organizing numerous performances and exhibitions, giving grants and supporting public art. In 1997, an artist residency program was launched that provided free studio space for five months to international artists in unoccupied office space in the World Trade Center, courtesy of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (the program will continue in some form in a new location but remains homeless at this writing). Originally conceived as a program for cityscape painters, World Views rapidly evolved to include artists working in a variety of mediums.



Kara Hammond: Cenotaph, *2001, graphite on paper, 30½ by 23½ inches.*

With few exceptions, the LMCC and the resident artists lost everything on Sept. 11, including the organization's nearly 30-year archives. And tragically, one of the program's artists, Michael Richards, was killed in the attack [see "Front Page" and "Artworld," Nov. '01]. The most recent group of 15 participants would have held their open studio reception in mid-October; instead, on Dec. 1 the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo turned over its main floor for a special exhibition, which was dedicated to Richards. Some of the material on view in this show survived because it had

Some of the material in this show survived because it had been taken home or stored off-site. But mostly, the artists re-created from memory pieces that were destroyed in the attack.

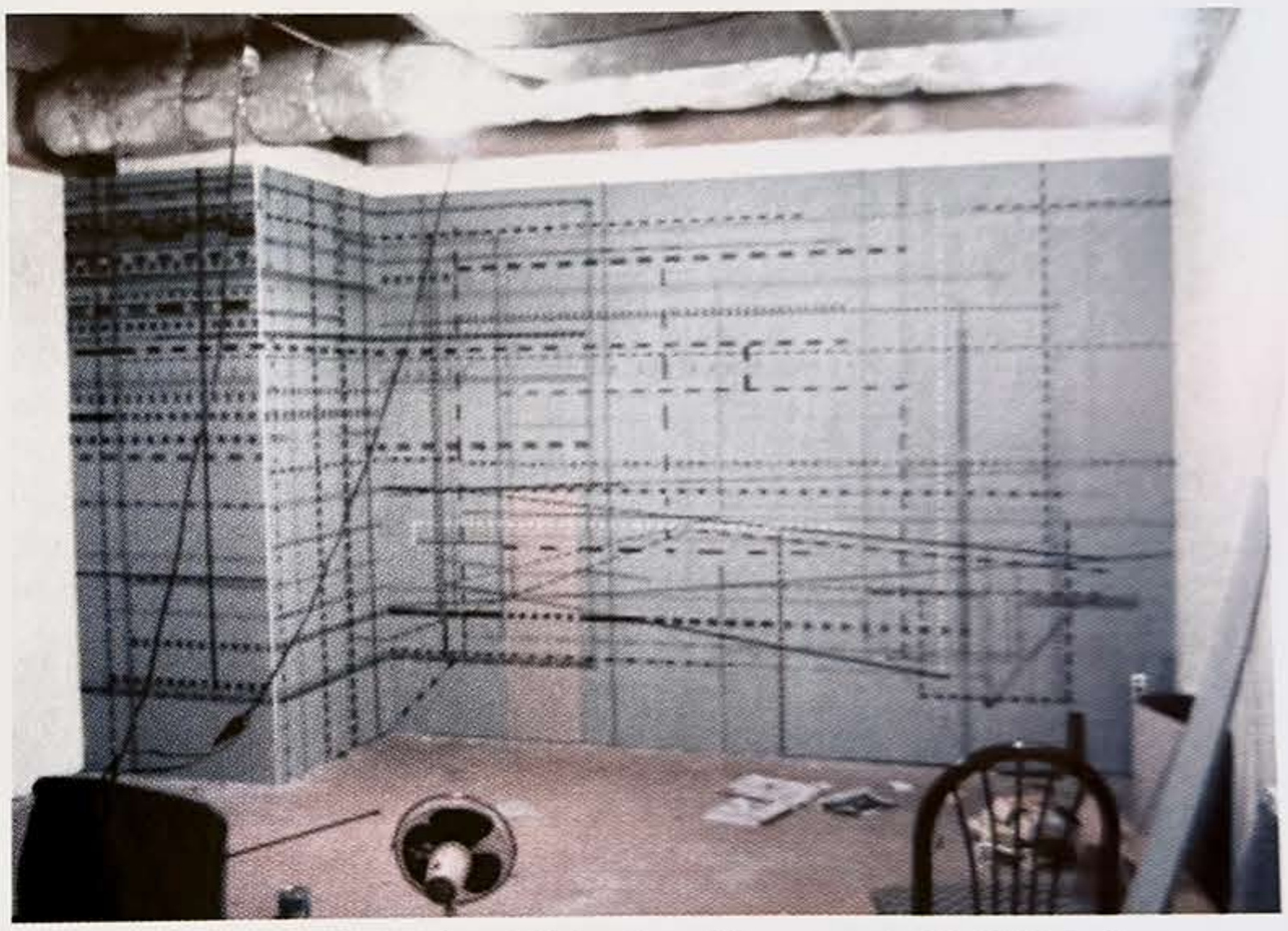




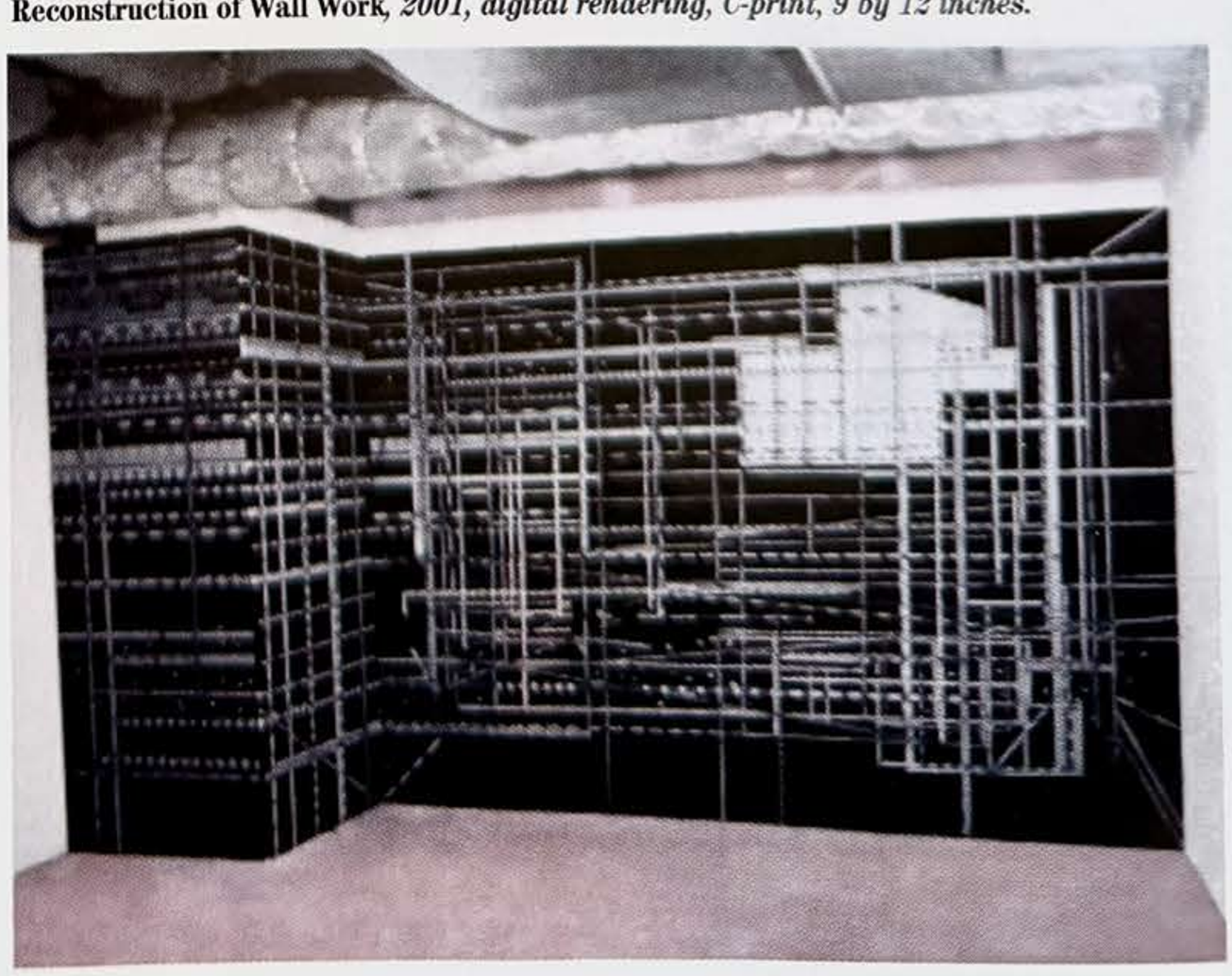
Above, Justine Cooper: Evanition, *2001, LCD glass, DNA, stainless steel, proximity sensors, 96 by 36 by 30 inches. Inset, detail showing DNA vial. Photo Jason Mandela.*



View of Mahmoud Hamadani's wood sculpture Ode to New York *(foreground), 2001, and his ink-on-paper* Ode to Kabul *(right, on wall), 2001, with Geraldine Lau's tape-and-vinyl* Information Retrieval #63, *2001 (center, on wall). In background, Simon Aldridge's* Long Hard Stare, *2001. Photo Jason Mandela.*



Above, view of Jeff Konigsberg's untitled wall work in process in his WTC studio space, Sheetrock, marker, house paint, 8½ by 18 feet; shot Sept. 3, 2001. Below, Konigsberg's Reconstruction of Wall Work, *2001, digital rendering, C-print, 9 by 12 inches.*



been taken home or stored off-site, including irreplaceable video footage. But mostly, the artists re-created from memory works that were destroyed in the attack, or slightly altered their original projects in response to the tragedy.

Many viewers may have gone to the show hoping to see literal depictions of the towers, as if seeing them could somehow erase what happened. But artists participating in the residency program were not required to make any obvious connection to the site, and most of them did not, though the location usually had some degree of impact on the works produced.



Stills from Monika Bravo's **September 10, 2001, uno nunca muere la víspera** *, video, 5 minutes. Photo courtesy the artist and De Chiara Gallery, New York.*

With the number of shows and artist projects making explicit reference to the disaster that proliferated after the attack, it was actually refreshing to take in this visual eulogy and not be overwhelmed with tragic images or political content.

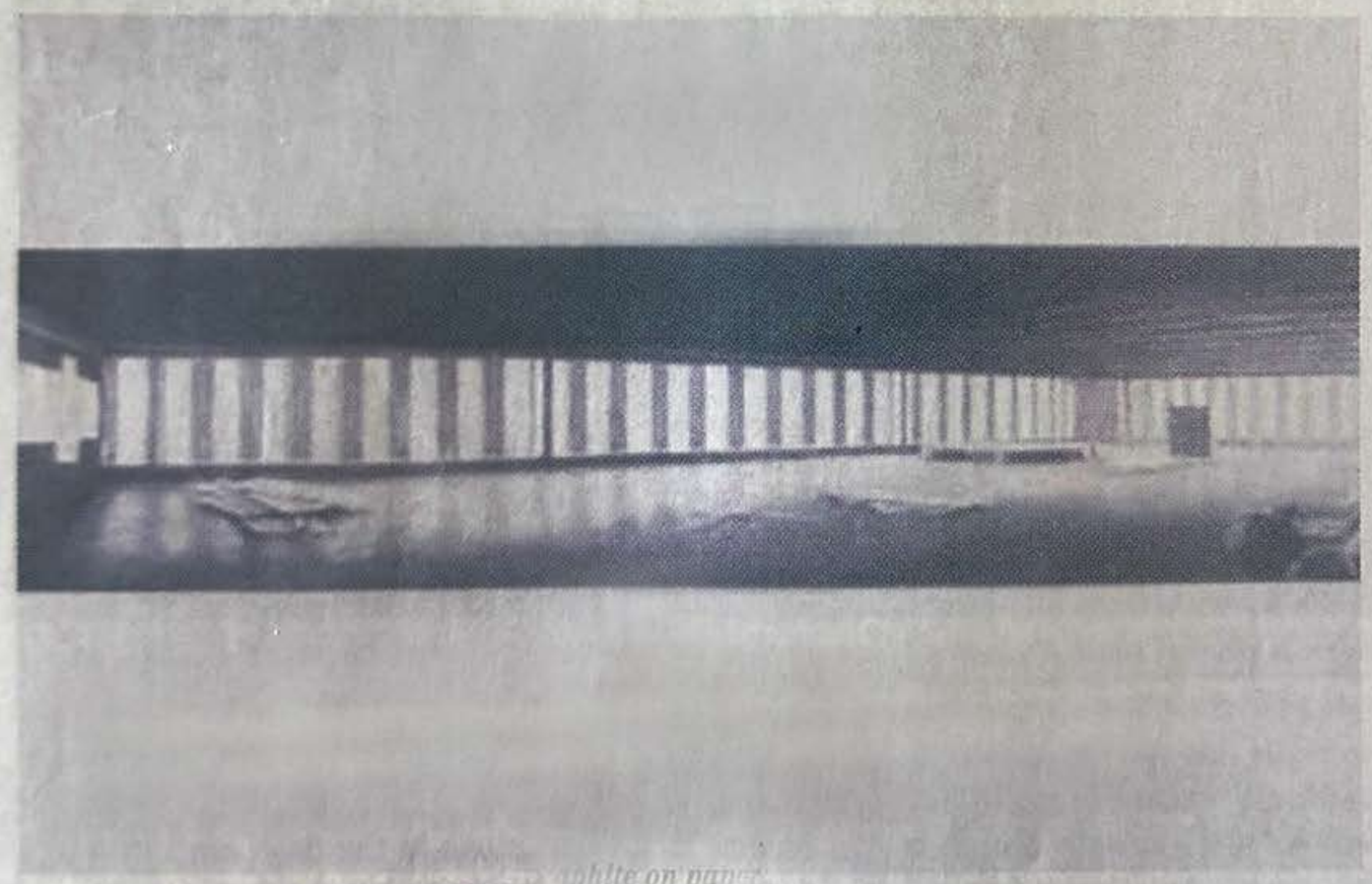
Yet the temptation to look for some oblique connection to the towers in each piece was irresistible. Works that referred even subtly to the structures had an unexpected poignancy. Conceptually elegant, but also rather eerie, was Justine Cooper's work *Evanition*, for which she used the light patterns of the Twin Towers' windows to create a synthetic form of what she called the buildings' DNA. Originally intended to be a woven pattern in wool, here the work consisted of a rectangular cutout in a freestanding wall with opaque glass panels on either side. A light periodically shone through the cutout shape, casting a shadow onto the glass that resembled a tower. As viewers approached, the glass became transparent, revealing a labeled DNA vial held aloft by air jets in the center of the rectangle. In the shadow of 9/11, the work took on new meaning as families of victims were asked to supply DNA samples to aid in the identification of human remains.

Another particularly engaging work was Carola Dertnig's humorous video *Revolving Door*. The 9-minute loop shows the artist making her way across the windswept WTC plaza towing a shopping cart and an unwieldy package that almost acts as a sail, before clumsily squeezing into a compartment of one of the Trade Center's revolving doors. Some passers-by attempt to help by slowing the door's revolutions; others patiently wait their turn or look perplexed, as when she continues to go around several times instead of exiting or gets the cart stuck in the door. Surprisingly, there are no heads visibly shaking in disbelief, eyes rolling, or angry gesticulations, which might be expected to accompany such a display of poor social judgment. Later, we see the artist—still carting all her stuff—more smoothly exit from the building, this time through the regular doors just to the left of the revolving one.

Monika Bravo created a video piece from footage she had shot during a storm on the night of Sept. 10. Shown on the museum's mezzanine and dedicated to Richards, the atmospheric work and its accompanying soundtrack are haunting and beautiful. The footage includes views of the East River bridges and impressive lightning strikes in the surrounding area, as well as shots of the Trade Center exterior. The towers look like beacons



Still from Carola Dertnig's **Revolving Door**, *2001, DVD, 9 minutes.*



Kara Hammond: **91st Floor Studio, May 2001**, *2001, graphite on paper, 23 by 30 inches.*

Even works that didn't seem to relate to the Trade Center were often inspired by its less tangible qualities, such as light, scale and geography, or such concepts as globalism and consumerism.

traffic below, the Statue of Liberty, and boats in New York Harbor and on the Hudson River.

Delicate pencil drawings by Kara Hammond depict rather mundane spaces in the towers, including office hallways and the LMCC 91st-floor studios with, again, the unmistakable Trade Center windows. In works re-created from memory, the omission of people now has an ominous feel. After the attack, Hammond also made a drawing of Lower Manhattan with an elongated pyramid-shaped building rising from the WTC site. Called *Cenotaph*, the work offers a sad memorial to the thousands who perished.

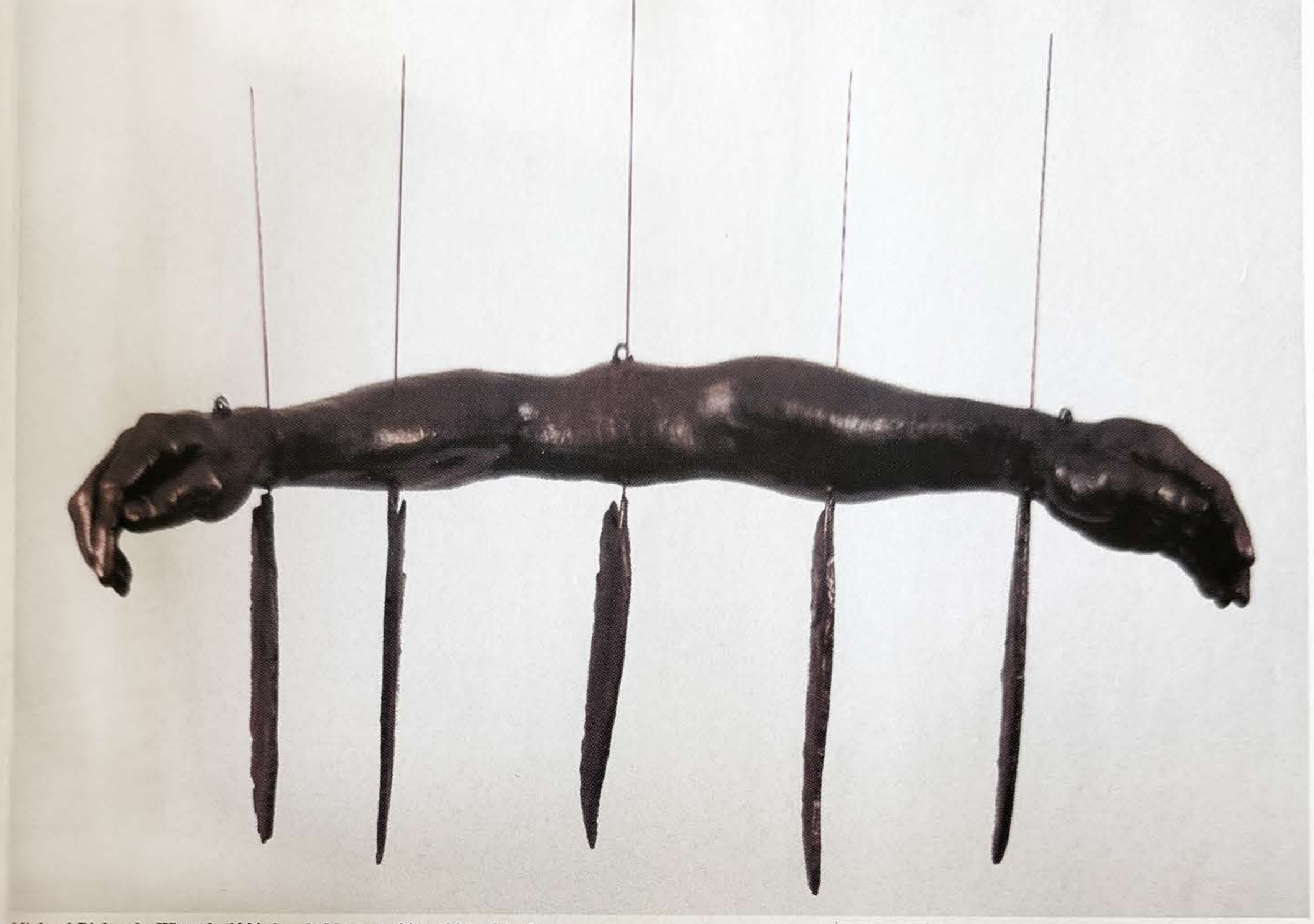
Mahmoud Hamadani contributed two pieces, *Ode to Kabul* and *Ode to New York*. The former consists of a grid of 49 abstract ink drawings, each representing a square composed of calligraphic marks. The latter looks like an overturned Sol LeWitt open cube sculpture, perhaps referencing the fallen towers as well as the gridded layout of Manhattan streets. Jeff



View of Simon Aldridge's **Long Hard Stare**, *2001, plastic strands, plastic ceiling panels, fishing line, glue, spray paint, 8 by 8 by 8 feet. Photo Jason Mandela.*

in the stormy night, still strangely reassuring in their solidity and familiarity. Bravo also created a video installation activated by viewers stepping on flooring that bears an image of a crowded Milan sidewalk. Different panels triggered various video clips of city scenes from around the world, including an airplane at Kennedy Airport and a view across the East River to Long Island City. Her Sept. 10 footage was intended to be a part of this work.

Another beautiful video piece, shot in one of LMCC's spaces in Tower One, was made by Naomi Ben-Shahar. The artist covered every surface of a room with Mylar, except for the windows. She then threw a party and had the guests wear lights on their heads. A camera set up in the darkened room captured the movements of the guests and the nighttime skyline beyond the windows. The ethereal result looks like a moving constellation of stars against the more stable lights of the city. Laurie Halsey Brown re-created the view from her WTC studio in an installation using glass panes that suggest the shape of the towers' windows, along with video projections that show surrounding buildings, street



Michael Richards: **Winged**, *1999, bonded bronze, 20 by 38 by 4 inches.*

Konigsberg had been working in his studio on a diagrammatic wall piece based on structural studies of the space. Displayed here was a photo of the original unfinished work, together with a Photoshop version of what the finished piece would have looked like.

Even works that didn't seem to relate to the Trade Center were often inspired by less tangible qualities of the site, such as light, scale and geography, or such concepts as globalism and consumerism. A wall piece by Geraldine Lau was composed of colorful tape and vinyl in a shape derived from city maps. On an adjacent wall, Lucky DeBellevue attached small, circular gray dots that congregated more heavily in a corner between a column and the wall. His whimsical mobile made of white plastic cable ties hung nearby. Stylistically similar are Motonobu Kurokawa's bright green tangled ball of serrated and coiled plastic straws, and a work by Simon Aldridge using plastic strands hung in a square formation with subtle touches of fluorescent paint, suggestive of the vertical striations of the towers. Hyungsub Shin contributed a pair of works using low-tech materials. *Silence* is a simple projection, triggered by a sound detector, of a magnified lightbulb. *Noise* is a turntable using empty plastic Coke bottles and two crude needles to elicit painful screeching noises from a *Porgy & Bess* LP. Nathan See's installation involved a swirling black cutout form on the wall and floor, and two speakers that emitted the nearly inaudible "I'm asking you a question."

The show included one work, from 1999, by Richards—a bronze cast of his own arms pierced by dangling feathers, a reference to flight. For some years, Richards had been working on series of sculptures based on the Tuskegee Airmen, highly decorated African-American WWII pilots who still faced discrimination after the war. At the time of his death, he was creating a work that depicted a pilot riding a meteor. Richards was also given a mini-retrospective, of sorts, in a slide show that rotated with Bravo's video on the mezzanine. LMCC has set up the Michael Richards Fund to award grants to artists from the Caribbean or of Caribbean descent.

After Sept. 11, the art world wondered how the attacks would affect art production. Would artists become overtly politicized, as so many had during the Vietnam years? Would they seek refuge in abstraction? Would a shift be perceptible at all? Only time will tell, though this show demonstrated a range of possible responses.

Some 140 artists have participated in the World Views program, including Sanford Biggers, Jennifer Bolande, Patty Chang, Rackstraw Downes, Yvonne Jacquette, Paul Pfeiffer, Paul Myoda and Julian LaVerdiere (working collaboratively) and the group Gelatin. Moukhtar Kocache, director of the program, is planning a retrospective, along with a catalogue, that he hopes to tour nationally beginning in late 2003. The works produced by the participants now have special resonance. They're mementos not only of two immense buildings, but of distinct vantage points as well. While there are other tall buildings that provide comparable views, we'll never get used to the hole in the city's skyline. □

"World Views: Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Artist-in-Residence Program at the World Trade Center" appeared at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, Dec. 1, 2001-Jan. 13, 2002.