

# Urban Warfare

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It is not on my first, but on my favorite visit to Battery Park that I watch the ground suffocating, crushed downwards under the weight of two feet of fresh snow. My own breath quiets in sympathy as I step through Bowling Green station's bomb-shelter doors into frigid twilight. The various statues that litter the landscape of the park are drowning in an ocean of fallen flakes. As I force footfalls through the brightened darkness I feel in every nerve a sense of rude violation, as though the Park were a performance I had boorishly cut short.

Officially, I've wandered at this late hour in the evening far from my apartment at 10th Street and Broadway to see Fritz Koenig's "The Sphere," a sculpture made famous by its original installation between the twin World Trade Center towers and made infamous by their subsequent collapse. I've chosen to investigate the complexities of this structure as best I can, and that means making a pilgrimage downtown to observe it as frequently as possible. Unofficially, however, I'm really just here to see the snow, to take a welcome respite from the traditional insane scramblings of another Sunday night in New York City. Watching the Sphere squat grimly over the blue construction barriers currently carving great swathes from the park's otherwise open promise, I notice that the few inches of white still clinging to the orb's cracked surface mask the open wound at its apex. Tonight, you could almost believe that the Sphere was meant to be here, that its original shine and smoothness still remain unblemished beneath the muffling of all that snow. Just for a moment, I imagine how glorious it must have looked for all those years in Tobin Plaza, and I am ravished into silence.

With the major damage hidden away by a blanket of white, the curving surfaces conjure up the sleek and sexy aura of a thousand automobile ads, even while the roiling black steel on the globe's north side offers a menacing contrast to what lies beneath its golden armor. I love the way the blackened metal platform reaches up and grips the structure like a fist, clutching it aloft in triumph, and I thrill to see how the dark seam that splits the bronze per-

fection to the south side widens its way towards the explosion of ridges and uneven cuts to the north. I remember hearing that the sculpture was commissioned by the Port Authority to symbolize the cause for world peace and wonder if the gold plate is meant to represent free trade, slowly building a smooth and gentle world over the chaotic turbulence of the steel ridges. If this is true, the snow tonight conceals a telling secret: the biggest holes torn by falling debris are all on free-trade's side.

Weeks after New York's icy carapace has dissolved, the bright glare of sunlight reveals the true extent of The Sphere's decay: the 45,000 pounds of its cast-steel and bronze immensity, which once revolved glamorously over endless streams of falling fountain water, are now markedly reduced, as the large segment of its surface torn off by falling debris during the 9/11 attacks can no longer conceal the hollow void at the egg's center. One side of the circular platform that holds the globe in the air is bent backwards over itself, the ragged edges of the torn metal still lethally exposed to passers-by, though a chain-link cable and a polite sign urge the public away from any direct contact. Countless dents and gashes have twisted what were formerly the ball's strongest features: it's made of metal, but that only emphasizes its lifelessness; it stands some twenty-five feet tall, but that only increases the sense of precarious balance, as though the globe were merely waiting to collapse at the poetically appropriate moment. Four years of construction, and thirty more of New York history, decimated in a matter of hours. It is absolutely gorgeous.

In Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," the author recounts, in a series of vivid vignettes, some small aspects of his horrifying experiences in Vietnam. Reflecting on the nature of war stories as often seeming too fantastical to be true, O'Brien observes:

The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat . . . any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful, implacable beauty. (188)

Speaking literally, the Sphere has been through no war, has had no soldiers hunting each other with grim determination around its hulking mass, no shrapnel bombs tearing through it that would explain the perforations. Yet standing here, looking up with the same grim determination into the twisting black steel, I know that here is a war story made real. The grim soldiers hunting each other around its base were firefighters, construction workers, men who sought each other out of desperate love instead of desperate hate; the

bombs that tore through it as they would paper were business supplies, plane seats, falling people. Standing here, looking up into the twisting black steel, I am forced to consider what it must feel like to be human ordnance, to plummet resolutely down a thousand feet and to find only the barest solace in trying not to think at all. As a civilian-citizen of a land where a foreign military has not intruded for years, this is as close to war as I have ever come.

Is that perhaps why the Sphere has me so enraptured? The “absolute moral indifference” that O’Brien ascribes to war’s aesthetic is exactly what I feel pouring forth here, the sense that to love the Sphere’s beauty demands willful ignorance of its cruelty: the way it mocks traditional American values—capitalism, success, liberty—in favor of the single, disquieting principle that all that lives is born to die. It’s nauseating, really, swallowing beauty with all that pain; even so, I find simultaneously something comforting about it, almost for the same reasons. The Sphere before 9/11 was strong, spilling over with the mindless optimism and luxurious indulgence that is the trademark of America’s economic might; today, the mood surrounding the burned-out structure is solemn, composed, silent—it’s like the Financial District’s own personal reality check, God’s subtle way of keeping the American Dream in line. So, I love the aesthetic here; in fact, I love the Sphere more now than I ever could have when it was whole. Yet even as I attempt to enjoy the beauty of the piece for what it is, there’s that question nagging: on some level, am I *glad* it’s ruined? If poignant, engaging public art flows forth from streams of blood and jet fuel, for what inspiration can we hope to safely strive? Shall we gain immortality at the expense of the whole world?

This last thought, admittedly, sounds extreme, but it’s not the first time that I’ve encountered it. A late-morning visit to Chelsea’s “Gallery Row” on West 26th Street last month found me wandering apprehensively into the Gladstone Gallery, the venue for the latest work of Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn—a violent and controversial installation entitled “Superficial Engagement.” Consisting of four wood-cardboard platforms decorated with a variety of materials—prints of horrific wartime photographs, mannequins imbedded with hundreds of screws, televisions running amateur video from the streets of Arab countries after a bombing—Hirschhorn’s work is an exercise in conflicting emotion. Although promptly horrified by the photos—among the worst is of a man lying in the street, his head split open, spilled in full view onto the asphalt—I was simultaneously struck by the beautifully intricate geometric designs, pencil and computer-drawn patterns scattered randomly by Hirschhorn about the piece. Searching through the gallery’s promotional material for some explanation, I found a press release calling the

work “the intersection of the destruction of war and the creation of art.” Somewhere in this barely-controlled chaos, Hirschhorn was struggling with the same miracle that I’ve found at work in Battery Park, the way that earth-shattering inspiration sometimes faintly glimmers in the ashes of pain and loss. The violent pictures, the tortured plastic people; maybe it was all there just to challenge the existence of the geometric designs, to pose the question: *How can you accept both destruction and beauty at once?*

Looking only at his art, I couldn’t hope to explain how Hirschhorn sleeps at night, but I’ve lain awake for hours sometimes after a visit to the Sphere, trying to rectify its present condition with all that war means to me. My personal “engagement” with war and violence has never been anything *but* superficial: a childhood addiction to videogames and history alike saddled me with the weight of a murder’s lexicon, but the best illustrations my experience could muster were occasional, bloody-nose inducing fistfights with an older brother living out the full implications of his role. For the violence-obsessed, optimistic young man, the seeds of cynicism and apathy are planted deepest when he first confronts war’s ignoble reality; war’s glory is hard to defend when a burned out egg marks all that remains of Tobin Plaza. My own adolescent urges to “destroy the Enemy” ended the day I comprehended, *engaged* with Vietnam. Now, as a fictive deserter once deadpanned, “I’m not sentimental about war. I see nothing noble in widows.”

So what am I to do, what is any artist who can’t support war to do with the Sphere? To say that it’s a better work of art now seems tantamount to admitting that a gut-wrenching waste of life has made improvements, has fashioned a work that could not have existed without the tragedy of the World Trade Center. In “Camera Lucida,” Roland Barthes reflects on the difference between the “studium,” or “a kind of general interest . . . an *average* effect” of a given piece of artwork, and its “punctum,” that “which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (27-8). In a sense, what is so important about The Sphere as art is its transition from studium to punctum. The Sphere could not simply have been built as a dented, penetrated shell; what animates one who looks at it is the fact that what was *once* no longer *is*. Does that imply that war is, in some special, circumstantial way, a good thing? Perhaps even worse, a necessary thing for the production of compelling art?

During Rebecca Solnit’s long perambulations on and around the famed Las Vegas Strip, detailed in the brief essay “Las Vegas, or the Longest Distance Between Two Points,” the art critic and museum curator reflects briefly on something the local ACLU director had told her:

The casinos . . . are trying to privatize the very sidewalks, to give themselves more muscle for prosecuting or removing anyone engaging in First Amendment activities—speaking about religion, sex, politics, economics—or otherwise ruffling the smooth experience visitors are supposed to have. (588-9)

It's rather an ironic surprise: Las Vegas casino owners making efforts to eliminate the eccentrics, the raving would-be preachers and the desperate solicitors (of whatever variety) who have traditionally made Las Vegas so fascinating. Unsurprisingly, taking a negative tack on this latest example of abusive corporate power, Solnit supposes that what the casino owners are ultimately after is "making cities into theme parks": stripping all the grime and the unpleasant, toiling masses that have always been a part of the urban experience away, in favor of a controlled, pleasant, and ultimately monotonous place (588). I consider what would become of New York City, of the Boston I grew up in, if every American city suddenly were reduced to the ubiquitous blazing neon and fake miniaturized versions of every other once-interesting location on Earth; even the idea of it makes me shudder.

Uniformity alarms me because it seems like the calculated goal of American society (everywhere there's enough money) to effect such standardization. Manhattan Island, once a proud bastion of unadulterated concupiscent, has every year become more dominated by the white upper-middle class, pushing the poor and the ethnically marginalized into the other boroughs and gradually bringing an end to the days when communists, beat poets, and all other manner of strange bohemian called the city their home. National reaction to September 11th has even gone from excising images of the Twin Towers from movies to pasting their ill-fated forms across coffee mugs and posters; nothing turns a profit in the States like cheap nostalgia, after all. Looking across the water of New York Harbor from Battery Park, you can see the small form of the Statue of Liberty seemingly adrift in ocean currents. Each time I look at her from under the shadow of the Sphere, I rue the image of camera-toting tourists and field-tripping classes waving miniature American flags from the Lady's perforated crown, and I wonder anxiously if someday my beloved bronze orb will be similarly co-opted—reproduced unto death by multiplicity. Everywhere in our "modern civilization" (neither term seems very realistic), trees are cut down to free space for grazing livestock, local establishments are closed because they can't compete with international chains, and amazing spectacles of artistic achievement are exploited and worn out in the name of profit. We don't go to war because people

believe in slaughter; we go because we are taught to believe in the numbing, nullifying notion of “progress.”

Which is perhaps why the destruction of the Sphere—the beautiful morbidity of its appearance notwithstanding—is, ultimately, a necessary evil. The political spin-doctoring that surrounds every modern conflict is a potent force: in an America at war, we learn to band together, squash and smother dissenting ideas, “defend Freedom”; we find ourselves apathetic and uncaring towards the violence as words like “collateral damage,” “casualties,” and “acceptable losses” replace more complex realities. Ordinarily, military jargon floats aimlessly within the haze of jingoistic propaganda, but the Sphere in Battery Park snares such words, anchors them to an illustration that has literally stopped its spinning. After all, the eternal flame burning ever-so-nobly before it notwithstanding, the Sphere itself is just a hunk of metal: a fitting image for war’s stupidity, pointlessness, and waste. Perhaps it wasn’t the Sphere that I’ve found so beautiful all this time, but the clarity it now reveals. Perhaps also it’s just the poetic irony of our world that an act of terrorism should leave us with art worth keeping the peace for. TV clips and sound bites cloud our senses in every moment, but the most exhausted of us can always turn them off. But the Sphere in Battery Park is proof that public artwork is about more than just perfected aesthetic beauty. Try as you might, you can’t hit a Mute button on twenty-five feet of twisted metal.

Once again strutting down the southern end of Manhattan in the fading light of a much warmer February day, the calm air I had found weeks earlier on that snowy evening has been burned away. The ocean of noise drowns the serenity that once seemed so natural: vendors sell tourist photos to passers-by, young men hawk purses out of garbage bags, and I have to focus hard to hear O’Brien’s words echoing somewhere in the back of my brain:

At the hour of dusk you sit at your foxhole and look out on a wide river turning pinkish red . . . and although in the morning you must cross the river and go into the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river . . . and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not. (188)

Sitting here watching the bronze Sphere turn red in the setting sun, I overflow with love for New York City and my place in it. Terrible things will happen today somewhere in this urban jungle, and the snow that might have stifled the perpetrators has melted off. Where once I heard only the cracking of cold air, today the noise is endless, deafening me with the desperate screams

of wasted lives. Rousing myself from the hard and unyielding wooden bench where I've been reclining, I flinch at the feeling of old anger stirring behind my eyes, wondering once again when we'll stop needing artwork like the Sphere to remind us that war is of no use despite the terrible twisted beauty it sometimes leaves in its stead.

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