

Missing: Streetscape of a City in Mourning

An interview with Marci Reaven by Barbara Abrash

Since 1986, City Lore: The New York Center for Urban Folk Culture (www.citylore.org) has documented and fostered the cultural diversity of New York City--from poetry, food and music to children's games, street festivals and historic places--through publications, exhibits, media projects, and educational programs. Their mission statement reads, "Authentic democracy requires active participation in cultural life, not just passive consumption of cultural products."

In the hours following the attack on the World Trade Center, City Lore began to document the shrines, signs, messages, murals, photographs, videos, found poetry, and music that demonstrated New Yorkers' "instinct and ability to use public spaces all over the city to gather and express themselves, and in many cases to give others an opportunity to do the same." In partnership with the New-York Historical Society (www.nyhistory.org), and with emergency funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, City Lore created *Missing: Streetscape of a City in Mourning*, an exhibit that opened at the New-York Historical Society on March 12, 2002. It is a tribute to "how New Yorkers--drawing on their powers of expression, their words and symbols--were able to forge a creative response to the tragedy of magnitude commensurate with the loss."

On June 11, 2002, Barbara Abrash spoke with Marci Reaven, one of the curators (along with City Lore Executive Director Steve Zeitlin and Martha Cooper) of *Missing*.

Genesis

MR: City Lore quickly realized that documenting the response to September 11th would go beyond anything we had done before. We had been documenting memorial walls for years, but documenting alone seemed selfish, not enough. We needed to show the spirit of sharing that was in the air. Our first impulse was photo documentation. City Lore's Director of Photography, Martha Cooper, was taking pictures from the start. Her photographs are a key component of the exhibit.

City Lore's offices are in an area not far from Ground Zero that was designated the "frozen zone" that was closed to non-residents on September 11 and in the days immediately after. I walked out of my home into the streets and found a world of people using homegrown strategies, trying to find each other, to help each other. There were no preconceived ways to respond, so people used what was inside of them--words, art, faith--and commandeered the streets. They didn't wait for authorities to tell them how to respond.

We wondered how to document this outpouring of expression, but also how we could show it to people who couldn't be there physically to see the scope of it. We put out a call on e-mail, looking for stories that would help make sense of the event. Stories root you; they help establish a relationship with the swirling world around you. How to weave this

extraordinary event into the ordinary fabric of your life? We needed to process the event to remember it.

People were using the arts to say things they couldn't say in ordinary prose.

The Exhibit

We decided to create a public space that would provide information, and also a place for discussion and a place for grieving.

The **entrance area** begins with quotes and photographs, a feeling of quiet that evokes the strong memory of the unnatural quiet in the city that day. It included a “**Ground Zero Wall**” of messages, photographs, and eyewitness accounts, as well as a “**Missing Persons Wall**” of posters, flyers, and messages posted by people looking for friends and loved ones.

In the next section, you turn a corner into a **recreated public space** and there's the cacophony of voices, memorials, and music—the explosion of response. This expressed the curators' sense of the explosion of both grief and solidarity in the city.

The Parks Department had gathered up the photographs, shrines, sculptures, drawings by school children, letters, banners and other objects from Union Square and other sites which had become gathering-places, and stored it all in the Hamilton Fish Park ladies' locker room on the Lower East Side. They arranged for neighborhood volunteers to sort and box it all. A good deal of this material appeared in *Streetscape*.

There were so many diverse expressions in those spontaneous memorials, but at the same time a feeling of unity, an equality of spirit and activity.

We created a **time line** as you go around the exhibition, that tracks changes in civic responses over time. At first, it was democratic and free, then individual initiatives lessened and organized initiatives increased. The time of mourning was ending at the end of the year. People wanted, in a ritualistic way, to take down the memorials.

The “**Shrine Wall**” is composed of photographs by Martha Cooper of the spontaneous shrines and memorials that appeared in front of fire houses, in parks, on fences, walls, bridges, and construction sites, in train and subway stations in every borough and in New Jersey.

The back room of the exhibit is a **reflective space**. There was immediate response to the events of September 11, but also there came a time when people started looking back. Artists were the quickest to do that reflection. We installed benches, a fountain, and books of art responses from around the world. Here we can see the making of collective thinking, of remembering.

There was such a great outpouring of poetry, much of it by people who had never written a poem before; we thought we would create a collaborative poem on our website

(www.peoplespoetry.org). Working with Bob Holman, a partner on our Peoples' Poetry Project, we imagined rebuilding the towers in words. For the exhibit, Bob crafted the *Poem Towers*, two poems each 110 lines long. The lines of the first poem are drawn from our website. For the second, he invited 110 established poets each to contribute a line.

The wall text reads: "When the Towers exploded, the air around them was filled with tiny pieces of paper scattered by the blast that rained down all over the City, covering streets and treetops and balconies in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Pushed to the limit, people responded with poetry on tiny scraps, on index cards and butcher-block paper. People who called themselves poets and people who had never written a poem put heartfelt thoughts into words."

The exhibit also has a "**Tell Us Your Story**" wall, "a documentary project incorporating photographic portraits and words that presents people's experiences and feelings surrounding the events in New York City on September, 2001." The project was sponsored by The Flux Factory (www.fluxfactory.org), a group of artists based in Long Island City. In the days after September 11, Sally Herships and Laura Dotterer interviewed hundreds of people in Union Square and elsewhere in the City. This section of the exhibit also includes the September 11 Digital Archive (www.911digitalarchive.org), which is gathering personal accounts and other historical materials.

The Future

Missing will be traveling to several sites in New York State in the coming year. We hope it will inspire people to think about the importance of the way in which New Yorkers took over public spaces and the many ways in which they came together. The exhibit is a tribute to the creativity embedded in this city that was expressed in the days after September 11. Humanity could restake its claim. It broadens the history-making arena when people who are not normally part of decision-making feel they have a claim to make. This public space, this humanity is now at risk.