

EYEWITNESS IN NEW YORK CITY

11 September and Umbrella in New York City

I was staying on Franklin near Church in a lovely loft. Just finishing breakfast, the building felt a rumble and then a huge explosion and the building moved. We ran to the roof and saw the WTC enveloping in black smoke. My knees almost buckled, and we stood in shock. Then I ran down the 5 flights of stairs to the street—this was Church Street, directly down from the twin towers. People were running from the towers and I was crying. Someone kept driving us down the street—go, go, go he said—and we all ran. I didn't know whether I was running from a fireball or a wave of rubble—for it seemed to topple towards us. I stopped at Lispenard and Church where there was a man who had come down from the 25th floor—he was soaked, he said, because the sprinklers went on and then the fire hoses—I told him he seemed to need water—he said someone passed him a cup of water as he was running down the stairs in Tower 1.

Then suddenly another official looking man kept pushing us down the street to Canal—move, move, move, said he. And we moved. I found myself in the parking lot at Mercer and Canal, where usually there is a flea market on Sundays, but today, only a gray SUV—I wondered what a funny thing to have in New York City with its terrific traffic and its space problems for parking—but SUVs are everywhere. I was so glad that SUV was there, because as as we looked at the towers, the second one was hit—and the fireball appeared.. And then, and then the tower just crumpled and disappeared in a vast cloud of debris—and it was down. We screamed, we cried, and my knees buckled. I held on to that SUV to stay upright—and then there was a man listening to his friend on his cell phone who was listening to CNN—so we found out what they thought it was—a bomb, etc. But it was just the amazing amount of fuel that fed the whole thing—and the structure just melted from the heat. I found myself feeling so lonely, so alone, so terrified. I then found the door of the Ron Feldman Gallery open, and what should I see but the work of Leon Golub—and it was the wrong work to see—I didn't know where to go, I was traumatized, but also confused. I walked out of the gallery and found myself sitting on some cast iron steps across the street, where a British man who once worked in the Towers was trying to use his cell phone, but could not. I sat quietly making small talk—but then the second tower collapsed—and then it was too much for me. I sobbed until I couldn't sob any longer. I was shaken and in psychological shock. I looked toward the towers and the winds were wafting toward Brooklyn. I kept thinking of my friend Beth, to whom I called right after I

came down from the roof—Beth from Pasadena, Beth with whom I was supposed to have dinner—but not that night nor the night afterwards. I kept thinking that September 11th was really the beginning of a new millennium, not the first of January, but September 11th—the whole history of the Western World would change from that date onwards and I was part of it.

As I wandered through SoHo, my friend Steve Clay (the reason why I was in NYC because we had celebrated his 50th birthday on the previous Saturday night) found me bent over and dazed, grabbing my hand we went to Gourmet Grocery to buy staples for his family with his older daughter, Ruby (6). One of my artist friends in the Women of the Book show, Mira Schor, was also in the grocery, and Steve recalls that I really didn't even recognize her at the first. And so I was taken in by his family where two other friends were staying—Barbara Fahrner, the book artist from Frankfurt and Mary from Northern California. We stayed in front of the TV almost all day—the two of them going out to smoke a cigarette—it gave us a way of seeing where the cloud was going, how the fires were, and to get away from the news, the tragic news that overwhelmed the world. Diane and Jerry Rothenberg stopped by to share their experiences and go on and away from Canal Street. From that morning, we were bonded sharing the events of each moment with sitting on the stairs outside watching firemen, the press, volunteers go by.

Between the silence of the streets (blockaded, with police everywhere) and the deep sadness, I could not eat or ate very little. I recall finding myself going home to my Franklin Street loft to sleep and nothing was barricaded. And yet the fires raged, the smoke changed direction, and the fumes started irritating the eyes and the chest. My friend, Nancy Azara, and I spoke about the day comparing notes and feeling so sad. Sleep was fitful. Phones were not functional for long distance, and some phones in Tribeca just didn't work. Luckily, we sent e-mail at the Mercer St. residence (Clay-Harrison). How can we every forget the 11th of September? It had always been the anniversary of the death of my grandmother—and now..a day of infamy, treacherous evil, and New York was crying. The stories of missing people began so early and are still continuing to this moment.

12 September:

After calls to friends, I left for Mercer Street—and I could walk in the middle of Broadway, or Canal, or any street, since barricades had been set up to allow ambulances, trucks, police cars and fire engines to pass easily. Very few people were on the streets, and all businesses were closed. Subways were closed from 14th Street to Brooklyn, so no

stops were made in the "war zone". Police were at barricades at Houston and at Canal, and I needed to show identification not only for myself but for where I was staying. We carried bills from Julie and Steve with the address of Mercer Street on it, if we wanted to leave—and the cops were on 21 to 24-hour shifts. Restaurants gave them food for lunch and dinner, and the compassion and generosity of so many people seemed to soften the presence of the plume that always shifted, bringing terrible smells of burning plastic, burning eyes, heavy chests. And then we heard about a new fire and a new building tumbling, building no. 7. Because no cars could appear beyond 14th Street, there were no deliveries of the *New York Times*, no bread or milk, and likewise, no long distance phone lines. The infrastructure also included 12,000 people without power. Once again we could walk in the middle of any street, no traffic, not even people—there was no noise, no horns, no talk, just nothing except a friendly smile from some people, and fear and terror in the eyes of others. More people were wearing masks, the wind changed radically toward us this day, and I began to cough and not feel well.

Once again we looked at CNN a good part of the day, with an occasional walk—how lonely it was, except when we looked north and another fire had begun. Police seemed to abound in large groups, access was difficult for the innocent bystanders. As we sat on the steps, we met an elegant young Nigerian who spoke of worldly wisdom. We also talked to a volunteer, a young woman, who had been working 10 hours a day, saying that at ground zero it is very dark. Being a woman, she was asked to pass food, water, etc. They were even giving IV to the dogs, since they were tiring after so many hours seeking bodies anywhere they could in the area. People were giving blood, but after so many donations of O- positive, they needed O-negative more.

I took a walk back to Mercer Street and the streets were even more deserted. Luckily, by this time, I asked my hostess for some kind of document to indicate where I was staying with her name on it. Between that and my California license, I was able to penetrate the barrier on Canal. But there were trucks everywhere taking away rubble—flattened automobiles, ambulances, gray white powdered ghosts of their original shapes—and there were humvees, and military vehicles too, and national guardsmen, and electricians. I felt I was living in a Magritte painting, the most surrealist of all worlds. Nothing seemed real—and New York was silent with the dead sound of the thousands who were missing. Smoke seemed to increase this afternoon—with masks given to me by my hostess which I passed out to my "bonded buddies". We discovered an ice cream store in the Village and walked to just get some air—Argentinian Italians making gelato better than anyone

I know—Washington Square had the regulars and a shrine which was begun the night before to those dead and missing. Another one was on Union Square—and growing constantly.

I passed George Stephanopolos (ABC commentator and former assistant to Clinton) walking to get to his loft, probably, near Chamber Street (the cut-off for non credentialed people). And the press kept coming with their pink badges—some with equipment on their shoulders, others with carts full of equipment. We talked, the children of the family kept us involved with life, and CNN provided us with a great deal as did Peter Jennings with a feed on FM radio—so sometimes, the TV was off. It was very difficult for us to view the images over and over and over. I speak for myself that each time I see the planes hit the towers, I react as I did originally and that is too much for any human being, so I am trying not to look at those repeats or put my hands over my eyes.

That night, my hostesses had gone away—and wouldn't return until the following day—so I was alone in the loft—after the police had accompanied me to my door. I knew I was in a police state with a state of war.

Transportation had eased, and I was to have dinner in Brooklyn with my friend, Beth. Found where the stop was right near the Mercer address, so it made it easy. Brooklyn has now been gentrified, but they were the first to get the smoke, since the wind blew everything their way the first morning—Beth saw people fly out of the buildings—and I thought to myself, I would rather fly than burn if I had a choice. Once again in Greenwich Village as in Soho and Tribeca, no noise (except ambulances and police cars), no horns, no voices.

Beth and I had dinner after looking at the Brooklyn view of what had been the site of the Twin Towers—how ironic that when I arrived from the Newark Airport, I always walk through the World Trade Center, and that 8th of September, I marveled how New York sparkled and how wonderful it was to arrive from Newark and see those buildings sparkling themselves after having been bombed in 1993—and how lucky I was to have friends in Tribeca to put me up for the five days. Never will I enter those doors again—never will it be convenient to fly with the freedom we have had. Even nail clippers are being taken away, let alone scissors (I gave mine to Beth who will be shipping back her tools later in the month). But back to Brooklyn and an incredible energy of artists. We sat and tried to eat dinner, but the sight of two military helicopters (big ones with missiles) prevented me from eating much of my dinner nor could Beth. I returned to the city and the quiet of a loft, because of the departure of my hostesses to their home in Woodstock. Alone again, I knew weather was coming—terrific lightning and thunder all night and 2 inches of rain came down on Friday—a dark day

of National Mourning—and a sad day in New York. The streets were even more isolated. We went up to the Whitney which was open to the public free of charge to see Thiebaud and an interesting show called “Stories” with series of narrative prints by Westermann, Rivers and O’Hara, etc. Then my German friend and I walked (after the rain) from the Whitney to 42nd Street and she proceeded by herself to Mercer, while I took the subway to Broadway and Houston, stopped into the New Museum and then sat with the Clay-Harrison family for a while. We lit candles at 7 p.m. since we were told that would be a national gesture wherever you lived. The children participated as well.

Each day, long distance did not work, so we relied upon Julie and Steve’s home computer to e-mail family and friends about the situation. I just want to repeat that whatever you saw on TV, it really was much worse—frighteningly different. Tense, trying, sad, terrifying and very surreal. Yes, I really was in a Magritte Painting.

On Saturday, I took a walk to Chelsea, passing by St. Vincent Hospital, where people were holding up pictures of their missing relatives, friends and parents, while each bus stop and corner were covered with pictures of missing persons and corners became shrines with candles. It was so very sad, so very heartbreaking. Not only will New York never be the same, but the free world will never be the same. I have just returned having tried for four days to come back home, each time my flights being canceled. Finally, I left this morning in a hired car at 4 a.m. to get to Newark Airport—and there were hundreds of people wanting to get home or get somewhere they had to go to. Security was tight, not only through x-ray, but frisking for some, and questioning for others—how long have you been in Newark? I said 1 ½ hours—well, where were you. I answered Manhattan. How long? A week. Not a nice scene, but necessary, I guess. Two policemen appear with rifles and six rounds—and hang around for a while. My plane needed a chief pilot, who called in that he couldn’t appear because he had just been called up for reserve duty. So they had to find a captain, then a part in the plane was defective, replaced, and the replacement was defective, and so they opted to get another plane—3 hours later, we left. The passengers applauded the crew when we landed—and then it took 10 minutes to get towed in place. And the airport had no cars—silent, no people, it only had shuttles, buses, and taxis—but no personal cars could come to the airport. They had to be at the surrounding parking lots waiting for their loved ones. And my newly found Dutch friends (visitors to the US taking a bus to Santa Monica) told me that on Saturday there was a bomb scare at the airport, because two pieces of luggage were left without being claimed, and so the whole section of the airport was evacuated. What kind

of world is this? Where are we going? I have returned, but not to a better California—but a country sobbing.

Written on 16 September upon my return to Los Angeles after being in New York City for one week—and what a week! It took four days to return to Los Angeles.

—Judith A. Hoffberg



Rupert Howard