

# ROEBLING HALL

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## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# Works Echo Differently When Life Overtakes Art

By HOLLAND COTTER

Does contemporary art have an impact on everyday life? The matter is up for debate. There's no question, though, that life can transform the way we look at new art.

An overwhelming political or social crisis — AIDS, for example — can alter aesthetic taste. Art that seemed smart and zeitgeisty one day feels out of sync the next. Hard-to-categorize work suddenly makes total sense. Fresh images, styles and attitudes emerge to deal with current events.

With the destruction of the World Trade Center this dynamic went into play. American culture was on instant high alert, scrambling both to accommodate what was happening and to avoid giving offense. Television shows were rescripted; films were pulled from release; Broadway plays discreetly dropped bits that might seem insensitive.

By contrast, gallery shows opened pretty much as planned. Most art isn't amenable to last-minute editing. And the art world resists self-censorship, for good reason. Art routinely gets punished for "offenses" — sexual, religious, whatever — that the rest of American culture gets away with. The only way to deal with this is to hold your ground. So even shows made problematic by the recent tragedy appeared as originally intended.

One of these was the New York solo debut of the young German artist Christoph Draeger, which opened

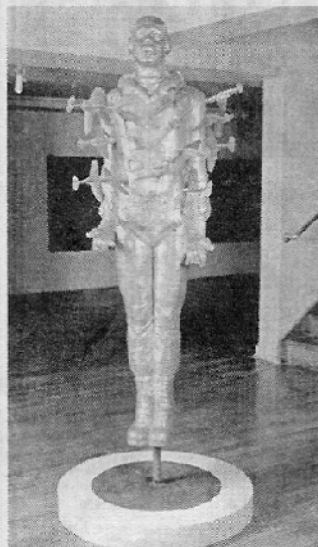
last week at Roebbling Hall in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Disaster and violence are Mr. Draeger's subjects. In the 1990's he visited the sites of plane crashes, explosions and tornadoes and constructed detailed models of the scenes, which he photographed or painted.

His obsession with destruction — its unpredictable occurrence, the voyeuristic fascination it inspires — culminated in a 1999 video titled "Crash," currently on view at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art in Florida. It is made up entirely of images of midair collisions lifted from from news films, amateur videos and Hollywood movies, spliced together into a prolonged experience of shattering impact.

The effect isn't all that different from the endless television replays of planes striking the twin towers. And for anyone who watched the buildings collapse over and over again on television, aspects of Mr. Draeger's Roebbling Hall show may have uncomfortable resonance.

In the center of the gallery sits a burned-out camper-trailer, eerily reminiscent of the ruined cars that recently littered Lower Manhattan streets. A video running inside the trailer delivers a short, brutal narrative: a young woman wakes up in the trailer, gets drunk, goes crazy and immolates herself. The final sequence, an exterior shot of the trailer bursting into clouds of fire and smoke, is projected large onto the gallery wall.

All of this was conceived months ago, but time has caught up with it.



Frank Stewart

"Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian" by Michael Richards, who died in the World Trade Center collapse.

Staged scenes of entrapment and destruction have been overtaken by stunning real-time correspondents. And when art and life cross paths this way, there is no comparison between them. Art can't help but seem at best child's play, at worst perverse self-indulgence and part of a different, distant, artificial world.

But being part of a different world is important. It permits Mr. Draeger to add something more to his work, to move it into the realm of metaphor where life and art can imaginatively coexist. He has filled three of the gallery walls surrounding the incinerated trailer with a continuous, floor-to-ceiling video projection of a dense, lush rain forest (actually shot at the Bronx Zoo), offering a cool, restorative vision of paradisaical life rising from the ashes.

Other New York artists, and their number is surely growing by the day, are making work in direct response to the trade center disaster. Within days of the event, the three-man team of Gustavo Bonevardi, John Bennett and Robert Hammond circulated a proposal on the Internet "for the immediate construction of the Manhattan skyline." It involves installing 80 high-intensity laser lights near the trade center site and projecting silhouettes of the Towers 1 and 2 as beams of light against the night sky.

The artists Paul Myoda and Julian LaVerdiere came up with a similarly utopian proposal, which they titled "Phantom Towers." (A computer-manipulated version of it appeared on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* on Sunday.) They have now joined up with Mr. Bonevardi, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Hammond in what they are calling the "Tower of Light" initiative, sponsored by the nonprofit arts organization Creative Time.

Mr. Myoda and Mr. LaVerdiere spent a lot of time in the trade center last year. They were participants in an international residency program called World Views, which under the auspices of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council provided artists with studio space on the 91st floor of Tower 1. A participant in this year's program, the Jamaican-born artist Michael Richards, was trapped in the tower when it collapsed.

At a memorial gathering at the Studio Museum in Harlem on Friday, one of his colleagues in the program, Jeff Konigsberg, said that Mr. Richards arrived at the 91st floor at 9 p.m. on Monday, Sept. 10, planning to work late into the night. He was not heard from again. His body was identified last week.

Mr. Konigsberg also described the almost-finished sculptures in Mr. Richards's trade center studio. They were part of a series he had been working on for nearly decade based on the theme of the Tuskegee Army, a segregated unit of African-American pilots who were awarded more than 150 Flying Crosses for valor during World War II, even though, like all blacks in the armed forces at the time, they were officially assigned noncombat "support" roles.

Mr. Richards's homage to them often took the form of a gilded bronze or steel figure cast from his own body. One of these, "Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian," was exhibited two years ago at the Studio Museum. The figure, in a sleek flight uniform, has the timeless look of a space traveler, standing erect, his face turned upward, his feet several inches from the ground, as if he were levitating or ascending. In place of the arrows shot at the Christian martyr-saint, the airman is pierced with a dozen small fighter planes, which seem to both wound him and lift him up. Art and life meet in the shadow of tragedy and are made larger by the encounter.



Christoph Draeger/Roebbling Hall

Events have given Christoph Draeger's installation a new resonance.