

# POSTMORTEM

## Ten, a Number between 9/11

HIRSCH PERLMAN

In July of 2002, Artforum magazine invited me to submit a "Top Ten" for its Fall '02 issue. The following is nearly the same draft I sent them. The peculiarities of being an artist and a teacher in the year that followed 9/11 motivated my attempt to write something that couldn't be construed as a shopping list. Artforum rejected it. However, my "Top Ten" is certainly in keeping with the journalistic spirit of Artforum's "Top Ten" in that my "Ten" are/were provisional. They are not the same "Ten" I would write today—for instance, I now believe No. 1 is too damning.

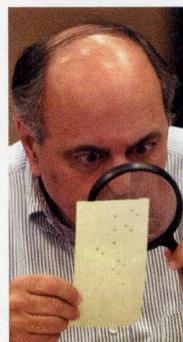
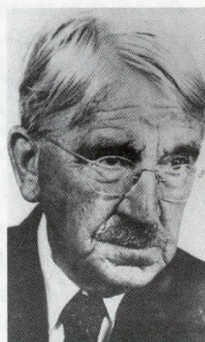
**1. Ground Zero:** On the evening of 9/11 an artist I know lectured to students on his/her work—supposedly never mentioning the events of the day. Who doesn't matter. There were probably a number of awkward artists' lectures taking place that evening. It made me sad to wonder who was more out of touch—those artists and institutions who so speedily got on with the show, or me for thinking it strange. To begin a recent *New Yorker* article, Calvin Tomkins asks: "In a time when art can be anything at all, how do you teach it?" I believe that within the entire blurry range of artist/teacher/student interactions, that peculiar artist's talk excludes itself as an answer to Tomkins's frank question.

**2. Vigilance** (John Dewey): "The teacher's problem is to protect the spirit of inquiry from becoming blasé from over-excitement, wooden from routine, fossilized through dogmatic instruction, or dissipated by random exercise upon trivial things." These words of caution remain a challenge to every teacher who believes that they're progressive, that they're not the institution, and that they fight the good fight.

**3. Irony:** In late September of 2001, students at An-Najah University (Nablus, West Bank) made a "commemorative" exhibit of the suicide bombing at a Sbarro pizzeria in Jerusalem that killed 15 and injured 130 a month earlier. Cross-fade from pictures of the Sbarro pizzeria bombing "exhibit" complete with broken mannequins, red splotches for blood, and strewn-about pizza slices to Alan

Schechner's 1993 depiction, in the "Mirroring Evil" exhibition (Jewish Museum, New York), of enjoying a coke at Buchenwald (*It's the Real Thing—Self-Portrait at Buchenwald*). The bizarre Sbarro pizzeria bombing exhibit is a shovel-in-the-face reminder that there are places in the world where before 9/11, irony was already dead, while *It's the Real Thing* is a symptom and cause of drowsiness, numbness, and resignation to a catatonic irony. However else either of those images can be described, the former is at least newsworthy, the latter not even that.

**4. Relevance:** Now the mother of all artists' travails is feeling simultaneously more and less relevant at the same time.



In the U.S. at least, image producers of all sorts are (supposedly) processing profound burdens of both micro and macro proportions: what could be more fundamental than designing a ballot form that won't be misinterpreted? What could be more horrific than the hyper-reality of 9/11 images? Yet, there's no sign of preferences being anything other than "lite." Even domestic terrorism now has a "lite" entry. The Unabomber manifesto's complete lack of visuals begot the Mailbox Bomber's connect-the-dots Smiley face pipe bombs across the Midwest, a much punchier non-message.

It was only a matter of time before an artist appropriated the unfiltered megalomania of a terrorist. By the time you read this, a show by the Russian artist Sergei Bugaev, a.k.a. Afrika, displaying a DVD of an Al Qaeda-produced tape of Russian troops being ambushed in Chechnya, may or may not have opened. It may or may not have been the spectacle anticipated. It's probably not any form of art you've ever anticipated.

**5. Narcissism:** Every artist faces the challenge of reconciling that you ultimately make your work for yourself. A good description of narcissism's close orbit around the artist's process is David Foster Wallace's text "The Nature of the Fun." "You discover a tricky thing about fiction writing [or art making]: a certain amount of vanity is necessary to be able to do it at all, but any vanity above that certain amount is lethal." Wallace says that if you can work your way back to fun—the original motivation—then "Under fun's new administration, writing fiction [or making art] becomes a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turns out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers and readers everywhere share and respond to, feel."

**6. Prescriptions & Vaccines:** Mind you, frivolity and narcissism don't necessarily exclude the possibility of sorting out serious issues. In his essay "Frivolity and Unction," Dave Hickey cheers us to begin thinking of art as "an intermediate





institution of civil society, like that of professional sports, within which issues of private desire and public virtue are negotiated and occasionally resolved. Because the art world is no more about *art* than the sports world is about *sport*. The sports world conducts an ongoing referendum on the manner in which we should cooperate and compete. The art world conducts an ongoing referendum on how things should look. And the way we should look at things—or it would, if art were regarded as sports are, as a wasteful, privileged endeavor through which very serious issues are sorted out.”

On the other hand, William Gaddis’s lone character in *Agape Agape* rants against the wholesale nepotism of popular taste. “This gaping clutch of pleasure seeking chance persons, this enormous market of the non-literate and half-literate devouring the poets who compose to please the bad taste of their reviewers end up instructing one another, what this glorious democracy in the arts is all about isn’t it?”

**7. Criticism:** In the book *Pictures and Tears*, James Elkins shows us how Diderot finessed popular taste, narcissistic fun, and the sorting out of serious issues in his criticism. Elkins tells us how Diderot imagines an emotional conversation with the subject of a painting (Greuze’s *Young Woman Who Weeps Over Her Dead Bird*) and then engages us in conversation from the perspective he has “inside” the painting, which is when he tells us what he really thinks the painting is about. Diderot stepped into the painting with enthusiasm and emotion, but also as an opportunity to try to discern the boundaries of his interpretation itself.

**8. Responsibility:** Is “stepping in” a way to take responsibility? Almost. There’s also some “stepping out” necessary. In *Postmodern Warfare*, Stanley Fish offers an unassailable description of the rich contingencies of our lives. He says that, “you or I or anyone, begin in some context of practice, with its received authorities, sacred texts, exemplary achievements, and generally accepted benchmarks, and from within the perspective of that context—thick, interpersonal, densely elaborated—[we] judge something to be true or inaccurate, reasonable or irrational.” Namely, good art or bad art, teaching or not-teaching.

Without examining your context, including the intentions you bring to your interpretation/art/anything else, you will only exercise hollow authority, spin, or salesmanship. Fish says to uncritically ape someone/thing else’s assumed authority by “affirming universals because you believe them to have been certified by an independent authority acknowledged by everyone,” dooms you to support and repeat a “pattern of demonizing the particularism of local and partisan perspectives (either philosophical or religious).” You’re either critical (and game to “step in” and “step out”), lazy (shitty work, hollow spin and salesmanship), or you’re bigoted.

**9. Cynicism:** In a tragicomic allegory of Biblical proportions, Robert Coover’s “Stick Man” (who is literally that) steps into the human world to get fresh ideas. However, once humans get ahold of him, Stick Man is forced to represent whatever we humans choose to project onto him. Humans make declarations like “The Stick Man is afraid of heights” and “The Stick Man tells a lie and is empowered by it.” We expect to be freed from the human condition if Stick Man takes it on for us. Of course, he fails, and we continue to shirk all responsibility.

After we’ve completely degraded Stick Man and Stick Woman and have nearly killed them, Cartoon Man swoops in and saves them both. Stick Man laments at the end that “the trouble is, now that I have lived in their world, truly lived there, I don’t really like it anymore. And if I don’t like it, how can I find pleasure in imagining it?”

The ruin and near destruction we caused Stick Man disheartened me.

**10. Hope:** The answers to the world’s problems are in cartoons. Like science fiction, cartoons depict at least an aspect of both our future destruction and survival at the same time. Genndy Tartakovsky’s epic cartoon, *Samurai Jack*, openly and directly projects you and Jack to a future destruction/survival where hedging, shirking, and lack of judgment are simply not options.

Muppets are also presenting opportunities to re-imagine the world. The joint Israeli/Palestinian/Jordanian production of *Sesame Street* had to change its title to *Sesame Stories* because, according to Julie Salamon of *The New York Times* (July 30, 2002), “the concept of a place where people and puppets from those three groups can mingle freely has become untenable.” *Sesame Street*, an imaginary place, could no longer be imagined. Kids will have to re-imagine that imaginary place from a new set of stories. It’s sad but maybe it’s not a bad thing. Possibilities open only between Muppets, it seems.

Muppets should do more of the negotiating. They should make the hard choices, or at least show us how.



**POSTMORTEM** is an occasional column dedicated to encouraging dialogue between and across art writing and publication. **HIRSCH PERLMAN** is an artist and teacher based in Los Angeles. He teaches in the Graduate Fine Arts Department at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena and in the Graduate Sculpture Department at Yale University, New Haven. Above citations include: Calvin Tomkins, “Can Art Be Taught?” (*The New Yorker*, April 15, 2002). John Dewey, *How We Think* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), 34. David Foster Wallace, “The Nature of the Fun,” in *Why I Write*, ed. Will Blythe (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1998), 144. Dave Hickey, “Frivolity and Uncion,” in *Air Guitar* (Los Angeles: Art issues. Press, 1997), 204. William Gaddis, *Agape Agape* (New York: Viking, 2002), 51. James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 112-14. Stanley Fish, “Post-Modern Warfare,” *Harper’s Magazine* (July 2002), 33-40. Robert Coover, “Stick Man,” *Harper’s Magazine* (August 2001). On Afrika’s Fall ’02 show at I-20 Gallery, New York, see Charlie Finch, “Prelude To 9/11,” *Artnet* (<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/finch/finch8-2-02.asp>).