

ART

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The sorrow and the city

Looking south for the World Trade Center
By Tim Griffin

More times than I can remember, I've taken a taxi down the FDR late at night just to see the lights. With any luck, I'd see the B train snailing across the Manhattan Bridge toward the bowels of the city above the highway. Sloping and curving southward, taillights in speeding rows echoed the illuminated bend of the Brooklyn Bridge. At such moments, the entire city seems weightless, composed of disembodied flecks of light flowing along its axes in the dark, like the froth on invisible waves.

A perpetual feeling of weightlessness was one reason I decided to move to lower Manhattan. And I did, two blocks east of the World Trade Center. The neighborhood I discovered was a place where a person could no longer fathom scale or distance, where the signs of history seemed to be both richly layered and thinly applied, reflecting the city's penchant for continually renewing itself. At its best, living there felt like living in a many-sided crystal of American time: colonial-era tombstones coexisting with towering skyscrapers; technology stocks trading within blocks of Thomas Jefferson's former residence on Maiden Lane. Herman Melville was inspired by his regular walks down the "great Mississippi of Broadway," as he called it, and along its banks today, you can see a massive outdoor sculpture by Jean Dubuffet and a five-story-high reproduction of Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884*, on the side of a building. The site of Thomas Edison's first electrical system lies just around the corner from a clock composed of red, blue and yellow numbers in a grid covering an entire facade. Every day, thousands of people in suits and uniforms walk,

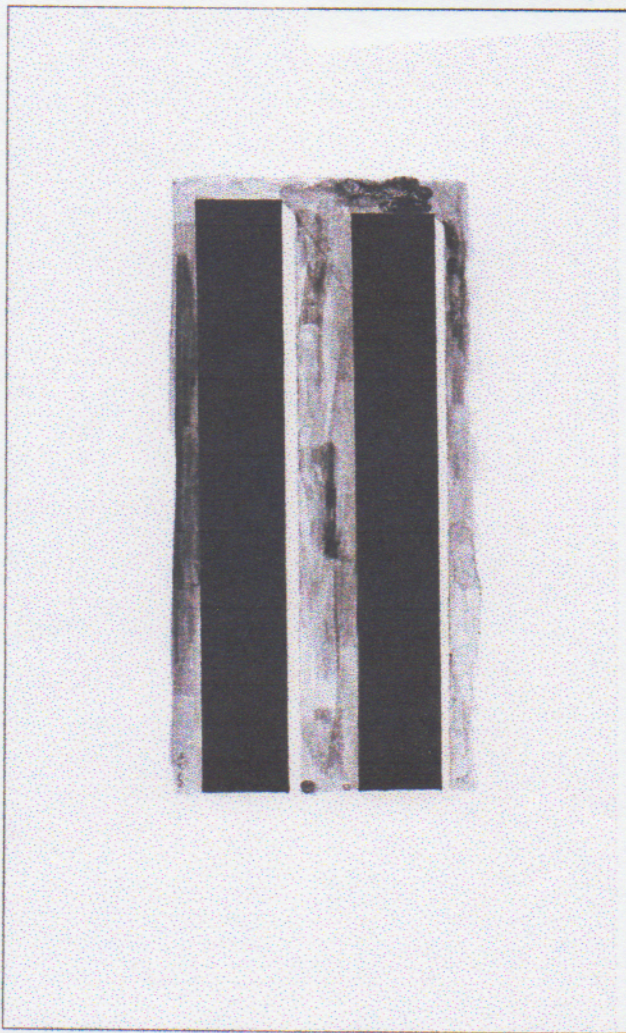
of Chambers, giving an intensely cinematic feel to the streets. The human eye, which evolved to look straight ahead, never has become accustomed to viewing such heights at such close proximity.

In truth, tall buildings have always reigned there, embodying their historical moments. In "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (a work whose sense of professional alienation offers a clear precursor to Kafka), Melville described at length a soot-laden wall opposite Bartleby's window on Wall Street. As the buildings grew higher, their kaleidoscopic parries and counterparries in the sky inspired

But nothing was so staggering as the World Trade Center. Fitting its time, manifesting the global corporate forces set in motion decades ago, nearly making a mockery of Céline's anthropomorphic metaphor, it became New York's inverted mirage. No matter how close you were to the WTC, the towers always seemed to stand in the distance until they were suddenly upon you. The Trade Center's plaza was notorious for being uninviting—an unreal place where no one wanted to stay for very long, a flat concourse measured only by a strange, continuous wind. It seemed appropriate that most New Yorkers rarely visited the place, because it didn't really belong to the landscape of the city: It never obeyed Manhattan's physical laws, its organic logic. It eliminated an entire neighborhood when it was constructed, and its structures made no attempt to integrate themselves into the geometric flow of the urban skyline.

That was because the World Trade Center was more about its own name than about the city surrounding it. If the towers had anything to do with New York at all, it was as symbols of what would be coming next: an era stretching the traditional definitions of geography, locale and physical boundaries. To live at its foot was to live within an image. While the decision to make two towers was a nod to the technological impossibility of creating a single column that could match their combined height, the effect was implicitly uncanny: The WTC provided its own double, reproducing itself like a picture. "It was like a [recorded] loop," one artist recently told me.

In this sense, the towers represented for America what I imagine kings have represented for other countries—supposedly transcendent, everywhere and nowhere, everything wrong and right, all at once. And when the towers fell, moans and screams came in a way that summoned historical accounts of the execution of King Charles I, an event that was eagerly anticipated by thrill seekers before it inspired horror at the abasement of fundamental principles. Even those who disdained America's hegemonic approach to world politics had their hearts torn out. The lights were no longer where they should have been. The very moon seemed ripped from the sky. ■



Robert Moskowitz, *Untitled*, 1992.

as they do nowhere else in the city, with a sense of mission—a destination, a date, an hour, a minute to meet. Few things are so pleasurable as drifting among them.

This disarming collapse of time is matched by the vertiginous reaches of the architecture that walls the narrow roads south

the first American forays into Cubism, like John Marin's great etchings of the Woolworth Building. And when Ferdinand Céline first encountered the skyline in the 1920s, he was inspired to write in *Journey to the End of Night* that "New York is a city that stands straight up."