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Iterations of Mourning: On Variability and Change in Barbara Siegel's *Missing*

INTRODUCTION

The American artist Barbara Siegel (1946–2015), for nearly four decades of her life, lived and worked in a loft about a mile from the World Trade Center. As an essential part of her artistic practice, she often documented her surroundings with a camera. She also collected everyday objects, from clipped stories she read in the *New York Times* about people who led creative and unusual lives to items found on the streets of her Tribeca neighborhood. These finds varied from deformed cans and bottles to abandoned gloves and eyeglasses. Siegel also collected artwork from different cultures, particularly wax votives of body parts and ex voto paintings that she purchased from antique and knick-knack stores all over the world. The spiritual power and apotropaic function of these forms, which often depict either tragic or hopeful scenes accompanied by a written prayer, deeply resonated with her. Siegel used her archive of things as fodder for sculptures, artist's books, drawings, prints, and installations incorporating both two- and three-dimensional works. Her oeuvre can be seen as a quasi-journal chronicling her interactions with people, objects, and history. In her work, Siegel frequently explored themes of death and remembrance, having experienced tragedy at a young age. Her aunt died by suicide when Siegel was only three years old. And, in her 20s, a hotel fire in Copenhagen claimed the lives of four of her family members. Both incidents had a profound effect on Siegel, her husband Gary Schwartz would note after her death (Schwartz 2022). But it may have been the events of September 11, 2001, that influenced one of her most compelling, personal artworks.

Titled *Missing*, this biographical project assumed form as a wall-and-floor installation that incorporates images of and text about the lives of 60 victims of the 9/11 World Trade Center attack. "The images of the missing people ... and the installation as a whole is a form of retablo," Siegel wrote,

referencing a kind of votive image. In connection with the work's first public exhibition, she described it as "a memorial to tragedy and loss, but also to our shared belief in the need to survive and affirm life" (Siegel 2002, A12).

She began working on this project during the fall of 2001, as people were still grappling with the unthinkable scale of the terrorist attacks. Over a period of several weeks, Siegel began photographing the arresting missing person posters pervasively pinned up throughout her neighborhood. From this profusion of poignant notices, she selected an eclectic sampling of individual victims to commemorate—food servers, traders, elevator operators, and firefighters—because, in her words, "diversity is what [she] value[d] most about New York City" (Siegel 2002, A12). After making electrophotographic prints (photocopies or laser prints) derived from these photographs, she then utilized various techniques to collage and transfer them onto paper and wax substrates. Accompanying the prints is a poem about the attack written in graphite by Schwartz, "Os Urubus," in which vultures (*os urubus* in Portuguese) are the disturbing, central metaphor.¹ In Siegel's own words, the ensemble served as "a memorial biography of lives cut short," as well as an emotional catharsis for the artist (Siegel 2015). The work now shapes our perception of the past as a historiographic document (fig. 1).

In 2022, seven years after Siegel's death, Schwartz donated *Missing* to the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. The piece had only been displayed once during her lifetime, in 2002, at the Lehman College Art Gallery in the Bronx. This made obtaining documentation about the work challenging. Unfortunately, the Museum only received from Schwartz and the artist's gallery a single out-of-focus image of that installation, along with limited other creative instructions about the artwork. However, additional images of *Missing* found on the artist's now-defunct website via the *Wayback Machine* helped clarify the work's arrangement.

Siegel designed *Missing* as a related wall and floor installation, evoking the overflowing makeshift memorials prevalent in the cityscape after 9/11. Even though the artist conceived the installation to simultaneously conjure the contours of an

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Fig. 1. Exhibition view, Barbara Siegel, *Investigations: Remembering Barbara Siegel*, curated by Kathleen Schneider and Nancy Storrow, 2021, A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of Matthew Sherman, the artist, and A.I.R. Gallery.

airplane, a vulture, and a phoenix (the airplane and vulture symbolize 9/11's devastation; the phoenix represents hope and humanity), her intended placement of some of the missing-poster prints cannot be readily discerned from the available documentation. It is unclear whether the work deliberately sought to create meaningful adjacencies among the images—like Michael Arad's *Reflecting Absence*, in which victims were

grouped according to personal connections that could be deduced among them—or whether Siegel's placements were fluid and open to variation among different installations.

This article explores characteristics of Siegel's *Missing* that are likely to shape its future meaning, including display criteria specific to its inclusion in the 9/11 Memorial & Museum's collection. It also considers requirements for sustaining a

memorial artwork's essential purpose and original values—that is, maintaining its authenticity and ongoing resonance well beyond its time of creation. Moreover, delving into *Missing*'s story, from its making to its institutional acquisition, allows us to consider the ethical concerns that attend exhibiting an artwork that contains images of actual people killed on 9/11 in a memorial museum committed to outreach to, and trust-building discourse with, 9/11 community members and victims' families. This extends to the question of whether Siegel's *Missing* should even be displayed without the awareness and consent of those whose loved ones are depicted in the artist's composition.

BACKGROUND

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Barbara Siegel was working in her studio on Washington Street, one block south of Canal Street. She assumed the loud explosion she heard shortly before 9:00 a.m. came from a collision on the West Side Highway. As a longtime Lower Manhattan resident, she was largely oblivious to the cacophony of city noise. Siegel had lived through, among other events, the 1981 morning rush hour crash of a Staten Island Ferry into a Norwegian freighter, the 1988 Tompkins Square Park riot, and the 1993 terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center. When she learned that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center, she rushed to the street, thinking that perhaps “a distracted pilot [had flown] too low [and] hit one of the towers” (Siegel 2001). However, a neighbor's radio soon reported the crash of a second plane into the South Tower, making it clear that a more sinister reality—an extraordinary act of terrorism—was unfolding. Transfixed, Siegel watched the burning towers and saw “hundreds of people...silently pouring...up Greenwich Street, many in business suits, some carrying small children and all looking grim and numb, like refugees” (Siegel 2001).

Siegel returned inside to call her husband and son to confirm that they were safe (they were, respectively, at work in the Bronx and at school on the Upper East Side), not expecting the imminent collapse of the two 110-story-high steel rulers dominating the Manhattan skyline, in which thousands of people would perish. Despite her relative physical safety from the disaster site, Siegel's home was located in what subsequently was deemed the World Trade Center Exposure Zone, referring to the geographical area whose residents and workers would meet eligibility criteria for the 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund and the World Trade Center Health Program due to their exposure to toxins. Siegel and her family were among the estimated 400,000 people exposed to the harmful contaminants that filled the air when the Twin Towers collapsed and the ensuing environmental catastrophe that persisted for months, if not years, thereafter (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

Evidence of the attack was inescapable in the ensuing days and weeks. Dust from the pulverized buildings turned the city grayscale. A seemingly infinite amount of office paper scattered into the air when the towers were hit, eventually settling onto rooftops, apartment balconies, and streets. And an unforgettable smell of decay permeated Lower Manhattan. Susan Meiselas, a photographer who arrived at Ground Zero just after the North Tower collapsed, described the scene as “total chaos,” which also somehow coexisted with “a bizarre calmness” (Basbanes 2014, 356). It was a cityscape in flux. People responded to the unfathomable trauma by creating impromptu public shrines assembled from materials that were both modest and fragile, including candles, flowers, flags, postcards, stuffed animals, and “I Love New York” messages. Philosopher Arthur Danto later wrote that “[b]y nightfall on 9/11, New York was complex of vernacular altars...the city was transformed into a ritual precinct, dense with improvised sites of mourning” (Danto 2005, paragraph 1) (fig. 2).

According to art historian Harriet Senie, mourners initially left mostly impersonal items without a specific connection to the dead—likely because the victims' identities and the number of casualties were still unknown (Senie 2003). But missing posters, made by friends and families searching for unaccounted-for people, quickly intermingled with the offerings comprising these more generic shrines. Generally depicting the “missing” with pictures from happier times, they were often annotated with handwritten personal details, like what someone was wearing on 9/11; where they worked or were last seen; their faith; the color of their hair, skin, and eyes; and whether they had identifying marks or scars on their bodies. As recounted by Dr. Jan Ramirez, chief curator of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, “given the complete crippling of the telephone and electrical systems” in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, “[these posters] became the only urgent and most efficient mode of communication” (Basbanes 2014, 360) (fig. 3).

Collectively reproduced via tens of thousands of photocopies made in color and black and white, the missing person posters quickly covered Manhattan electrical poles, bus shelters, commuting hubs, and building facades. The exteriors of local hospitals, such as Bellevue and St. Vincent's, proved particularly popular posting sites. Families searching for loved ones also left fliers at the Pier 94 Family Assistance Center, the New Jersey Family Assistance Center, well-trafficked subway and train stops (including Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal), and the Lexington Avenue Armory on 23rd Street, which provided free printing and copying services. Families could report their missing loved ones at the Armory, which led to the accumulation of numerous posters on its façade. (The Armory was not designated or open for that purpose until 24 hours after the Tuesday attack) (Edkins 2011, 18–19). As time passed, the 9/11 missing person posters came to exist in a liminal state, something “between a call for information and a death notice” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2003, 11) (fig. 4).



Fig. 2. Spontaneous memorial for the victims of September 11, New York, 2001. Courtesy of David Finn. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002717255/>.

Today, it is hard to imagine a crisis situation or breaking tragedy where information is not communicated or shared instantly via social media platforms, e-mail, and text messages. At the time of the 9/11 attacks, however, unfolding news circulated at a far different pace and often was printed on paper—the cost, reproducibility, and accessibility of photocopy technology made it an efficient method for disseminating information. The “copy,” in other words, was still king. Fliers and posters were papered all over New York City,

advertising products and date-specific events. They were also deployed as a form of art. In the 1990s, for example, “xeroxes,” or photostatic processes, were used by David Wojanrowicz and Felix Gonzalez-Torres to create works for widespread dissemination and to protest AIDS bias.

Missing posters have become ingrained in our collective consciousness at least since 1979 when six-year-old Etan Patz went missing while walking to his school bus stop in Manhattan. Patz’s endearing photograph was the first to



Fig. 3. Post September 11 World Trade Center attack, memorials and photos of missing loved ones, New York City. Courtesy of Joan Slatkin/UCG/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.



Fig. 4. Three nuns viewing a wall covered with missing person posters after September 11, New York, 2001. Courtesy of David Finn. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002717254/>.

be placed on milk cartons in an effort to elicit information about his disappearance and, more broadly, to raise awareness that his abduction was not an isolated event. However, as pointed out by political scholar Jenny Edkins, missing person posters have a much longer provenance. “In the aftermath of the Second World War, missing posters prepared by the German Red Cross appeared in post offices and railway stations. [And] [i]n the . . . Kosovo crisis of the later 1900s similar forms of missing posters were found” (Edkins 2011, 21). Along the same lines, in 2023, paper fliers of people abducted in Israel by Hamas terrorists have been posted by the thousands throughout public streetscapes around the world. For Siegel and Schwartz, the prevalence of missing person posters in their Tribeca neighborhood profoundly affected them. Aside from the volume and scale of human loss the posters communicated, their poignant, elegiac quality established a personal connection between their viewers and the people at the tragedy’s center. The posters’ complex mix of “ineffable sadness and irrepressible optimism” moved Siegel (2002, A12), who could easily empathize with those depicted: people very much like herself—friends, mothers, wives, neighbors, and teachers (Siegel was an adjunct professor at Parsons).

It soon became clear that the majority of the people represented on these missing person posters were not, in fact, missing; they were dead. Nevertheless, the fliers remained intact—in some cases, for years. (How could anyone bear to take them down? As one New Yorker later wrote, “No one dared to touch them. To do so would be sacrilegious” [Fitzpatrick 2001]). The staff at St. Vincent’s Hospital, for example, took great care to maintain their condition. Initially, the posters had been displayed on a wooden structure on the hospital’s south wall. When the weather and other conditions became untenable, hospital personnel respectfully deinstalled and transferred them to binders, where they remained until the hospital closed in 2010. They were subsequently given to the 9/11 Memorial & Museum (Langer 2010).² Through donations like this, the Museum came to possess many, if not all, of the missing person posters utilized by Siegel in *Missing*—although in some cases, even though the subject sought by the poster maker is the same, the posters themselves vary. These differences may simply reflect the condition of the posters she encountered, or that sometimes more than one version of a missing poster was created for the same individual.

The explanation generally given for this sense of reverence attached to the missing posters is that “by the time people realized that for ‘missing’ they should read ‘presumed dead,’ the posters had become shrines where people could remember those killed” (Edkins 2011, 33). They did this by embellishing the fliers with messages and poems, and leaving flowers, candles, and other offerings, evincing historian Ittai Weinryb’s theory that mourning rituals and votive objects

can reveal how human sentiment is embodied in artifacts (Weinryb 2018, xii). Mary O’Neill has likewise emphasized the importance of engaging in rituals when death occurs outside the accepted natural sequence of generations, such as with victims of terrorism and other crimes against humanity. In those moments, art can help us divine meaning from these affronts to our “notion of ourselves as [generally] good and caring” (O’Neill 2008, 96).

People also photographed the shrines, endowing them with a kind of immortality that transcended their ephemeral nature. The artist Jeffrey Lohn photographed several missing posters as they began to deteriorate from weather exposure and other elements. As the subjects’ faces faded and became disfigured, to Lohn the individuals depicted seemed to die “a second death” (Danto 2005). Siegel’s and Lohn’s artworks help to index time by documenting the evolution and destruction or dematerialization of these objects and, of course, the people they depicted. In this subtle performance, they offer a striking counterpoint to the infamous images ingrained in our collective memory of the towers burning and human beings falling from them, the dust clouds, and the piles of steel debris. Susan Sontag said that photographs serve as reminders of the passage of time, acting as “memento mori.” They further enable us to “participate in another person’s (or a thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, and mutability” (Sontag 2005, 15). Thus, when we view pictures of the 9/11 missing person posters (and the derivative artworks made from them), it helps us personalize and comprehend another human being’s suffering, which in turn makes the tragedy more visceral and real.³

Although official memorials like the 9/11 Memorial & Museum now exist to honor those killed on 9/11 and promote a respectful and accurate understanding of history, vestiges of the makeshift memorials are still extant (many are now preserved in museum collections). These memorials and the related information about the people these shrines honored convey powerful messages about contemporary commemoration practices and how individuals respond to trauma long before permanent institutions are organized to commemorate traumatic events. Siegel’s creation of *Missing* can be understood as stemming from a uniquely human desire to express memory and emotion concretely. Her artwork can also be seen as a counter-monument, using James Young’s concept in that it is “ethically certain of [its] duty to remember, but aesthetically skeptical of the assumptions underpinning traditional memorial forms” (Young 2022, 453). *Missing* indeed defies conventional modes of commemorating significant historical events with its relatively intimate scale and use of modest, ephemeral materials. The missing person poster medium is likewise relatable and facilitates a personal connection. *Missing* defies a reductive single-point perspective of history, privileging space for viewers to reflect on the complexities of human identity and loss.

Artworks like *Missing* can be seen as containers of people's experiences which can also hold the essence of tragedy. By studying these fragments of history, we gain valuable knowledge beyond their physical attributes. To develop a preservation strategy for *Missing*, it is necessary to understand its historical context. However, to ensure its continued vitality, it is equally important to recognize the significance of the piece as a work of social engagement; part of its essential value and virtue is the audience's experience of *Missing*. We must therefore consider how the work continues to impact public memory rather than freeze it as a static remnant of the past.

THE 9/11 MEMORIAL & MUSEUM'S ACQUISITION OF *MISSING*

When a contemporary artwork—like *Missing*—is acquired by a museum, it is critical to establish its primary identity beyond the usual cycles of decay and transformation. Like most accredited museums, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum has set criteria for evaluating items for permanent collection consideration. These were first established by the World Trade Center Site Memorial Center Advisory Committee Recommendations in 2004, before the physical museum existed. These guidelines emphasize the importance of acquiring materials expressing a range of perspectives and personal stories from victims and eyewitnesses, survivors, responders, and area residents. The Museum's historical and memorial exhibitions are perhaps the most prominent showcases for these artifacts and visual items, but the institution also collects response artwork. Candidates for the latter must, however, fit into several specified categories, such as “work created by eyewitnesses and artists who lived in [L]ower Manhattan during the terrorist attacks of 1993 and 2001” (9/11 Memorial & Museum 2018).

In 2022, when the 9/11 Memorial & Museum acquired *Missing*, it arrived as several organized folders that were assumed to have been created by the artist. These were labeled with annotations such as “1–14, top three rows” and “55–64, floor pieces.” The prints themselves, however, did not have corresponding numbers written on them. Moreover, the number of prints in each folder was inconsistent with the annotations, making it difficult to use them as installation instructions. There were also folders labeled “injured” and “documentation texts” with several prints enclosed; however, there were no further instructions. In this sense, Siegel can be understood as an artist who, as conservator Pip Laurenson put it, only “‘thinly’ specif[ie]d” her works (Laurenson 2006). Laurenson categorized installation artists into two groups for preservation purposes based on the work of Stephen Davies, a philosopher of music: “Artists who ‘thickly’ specify their works are those who determine precise details of the installation of a work through instructions that fully determine how the work can be manifested, while artists who ‘thinly’ specify

their artworks tend to be more open about how the artwork can be installed” (Laurenson 2006).

After examining the prints, our collections team was able to ascertain both the materials and techniques Siegel had used to create the artwork. Our analysis indicated that, in making the prints, she employed transfer methods utilizing solvent and acrylic gel. By studying her photographs of the posters, we deduced that she most likely used a black-and-white laser print or photocopy as her printing matrix. Siegel then likely modified her original photographs before transferring them. (Regrettably, the originals are no longer available to allow for cross-referencing or comparison.) The transferred pictures were smaller than the original missing person posters, which were all 8.5 × 11 in. To avoid reverse printing when transferred onto paper and acrylic substrates, the images were rotated by 180 degrees. Additionally, Siegel applied beeswax to the prints to give them an aged or somewhat removed appearance. We also determined that the folder labeled “injured” contained process prints. Some differed in tone and image clarity from their final print versions, as evidenced by the several proofs depicting Celeste Torres Victoria, a 41-year-old single mother who, on 9/11, was attending a conference held by her employer, Risk Waters Group, at Windows on the World near the top of the North Tower (fig. 5). Interestingly, by converting all the original missing posters into black-and-white prints, Siegel effectively minimized their differences, freezing them in time due to the stability of the electrostatic print.

To complete the installation, Siegel handwrote Schwartz's short 20-line poem 12 times in an expressive style, then placed six copies on the work's left- and right-hand sides, starting at floor level and extending upward in two columns of three. In addition, a printed version of the poem was cut into several pieces, which were then appended to certain missing posters.

The artwork displays various traces of printing techniques that uncover its complex identity and the significance of printmaking to Siegel's concept. Each process presents distinct characteristics that unveil multiple stories interwoven in the prints. Embedded in the work is the story of the original missing posters, Siegel's photographs of them, and features of the solvent transfer process, and “the pixilation and distortion of a text or image as it is copied and recopied requires [the viewer] to become increasingly active in the reading process” (Eichhorn 2016, 9–10) (fig. 6). After inventorying the prints, we determined that there were more than the 60 missing person posters required for the installation. This suggests the possibility that Siegel was open to some variation in the work across successive installations or had simply experimented with other prints at some point in *Missing*'s development.

Interestingly, the folder labeled “documentation texts” contained several prints that combined newspaper articles about the victims with Siegel's own typewritten notes. These



Fig. 5. Detail of *Missing*, Celeste Torres Victoria, transfer print (left). Working proofs, Celeste Torres Victoria, transfer print (center and right). Collection of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, Gift of Gary Schwartz. Source: Photography by Samantha Tepper.

were formatted differently than the missing-poster prints, generating confidence that they were part of Siegel's process but not meant for inclusion in the installation. In one example, Siegel mentions reading in the *New York Times* that a poster

she had photographed—purportedly depicting a child named Mya Braker, which the artist had found particularly upsetting because of the victim's youth—was fraudulent (fig. 7). There was, in fact, no such child victim. (There were eight children



Fig. 6. Detail of *Missing*, Hugo Sanay, transfer print (left). Collection of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, Gift of Gary Schwartz. Missing Person Poster of Hugo Sanay, inkjet print (right). Collection of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, Gift of Sisters of Charity of New York, St. Vincent's Hospital. Source: Photography by Samantha Tepper.

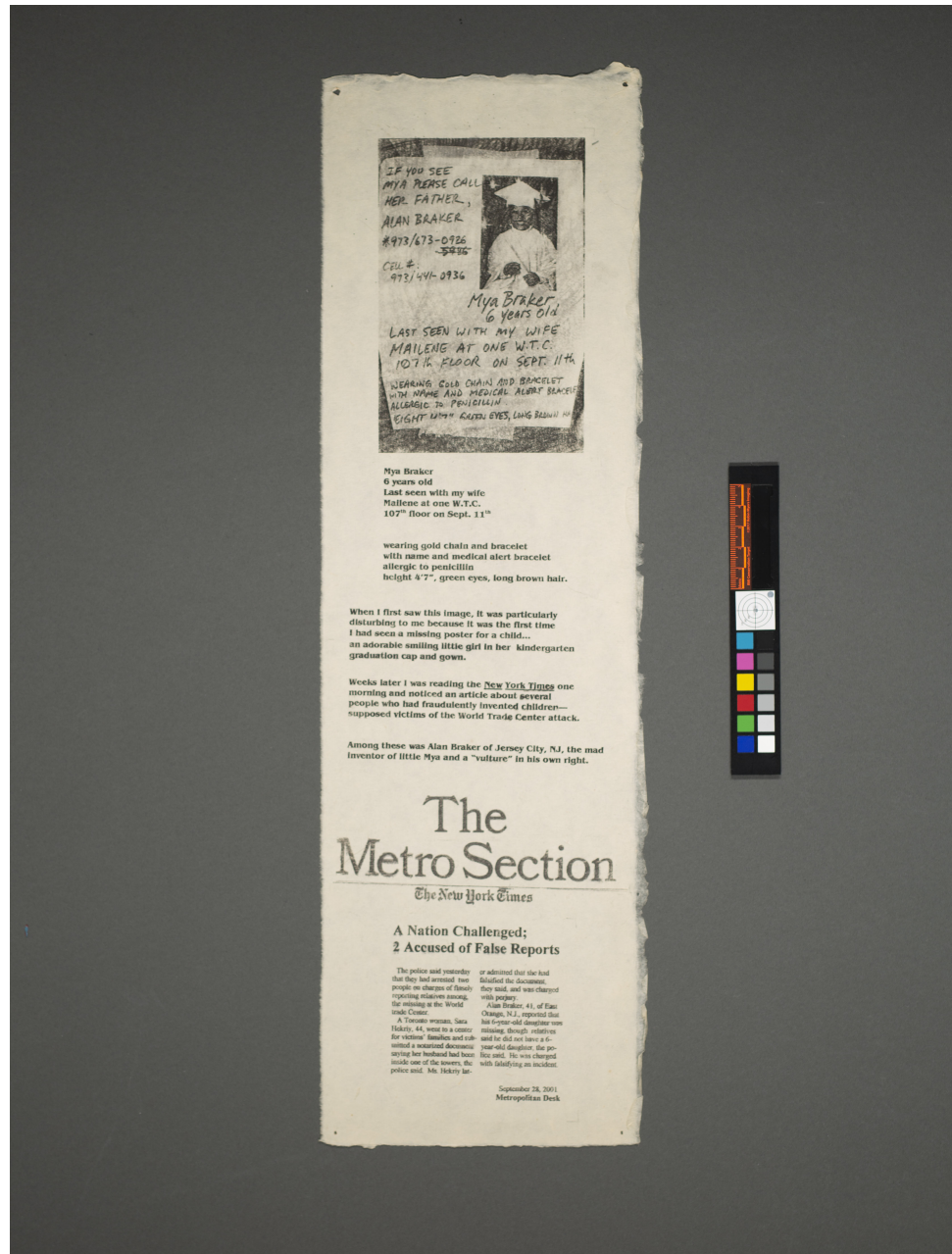


Fig. 7. Barbara Siegel, *Documentation Text* about missing poster depicting “Mya Braker,” solvent transfer. Collection of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, Gift of Gary Schwartz. Source: Photography by Samantha Tepper.

aboard three of the four hijacked flights, but none were ever confirmed as a casualty at or around the World Trade Center.) It is worth noting that the print of Braker was featured in both exhibitions of the artwork.

RECONSTRUCTING *MISSING*

Missing has been shown twice—first, in 2002 at Lehman College, where Siegel personally installed the work. The

artist’s statement for this show includes the only image of the work’s exhibition that she supervised, albeit a highly pixelated one (fig. 8). This photograph, along with Siegel’s statement (as well as the image from the *Wayback Machine*), makes clear that *Missing* was intended to be installed on both the wall and adjoining floor. Notations on the folders combined with the blurry shapes discernible in the photograph allow one to reconstruct the grid conceived by the artist (i.e., the number of columns and rows, and the number of prints in each).



Fig. 8. Exhibition view, Barbara Siegel, *Missing: An Installation*, 2002, Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY. Courtesy of Matthew Sherman, the artist, and A.I.R. Gallery.

With this information and using the copies of corresponding missing person posters in the 9/11 Memorial & Museum's collection, the arrangement of prints can largely be deduced. As discussed earlier, some variations exist between Siegel's prints and the missing person posters now preserved in the Museum's larger collection. These variables are probably related to environmental-related changes that evolved in the latter holdings and because, for some victims, different posters were created. It is nonetheless possible in many cases to compare the Museum's posters against those reflected in the Lehman College installation image and then try to reconstruct their placement. Of the 72 total works that comprise the inaugural installation overseen by Siegel—60 prints of missing person posters, plus the 12 sheets comprising the poem—about 85% of the original placements can be ascertained (fig. 9).

In 2021, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and some years after the artist's death, *Missing* was installed again at the Brooklyn-based A.I.R. Gallery, established in 1972 as the first not-for-profit, artist-directed-and-maintained gallery for women artists in the United States. The work was included as part of *Investigations: Remembering Barbara Siegel*,

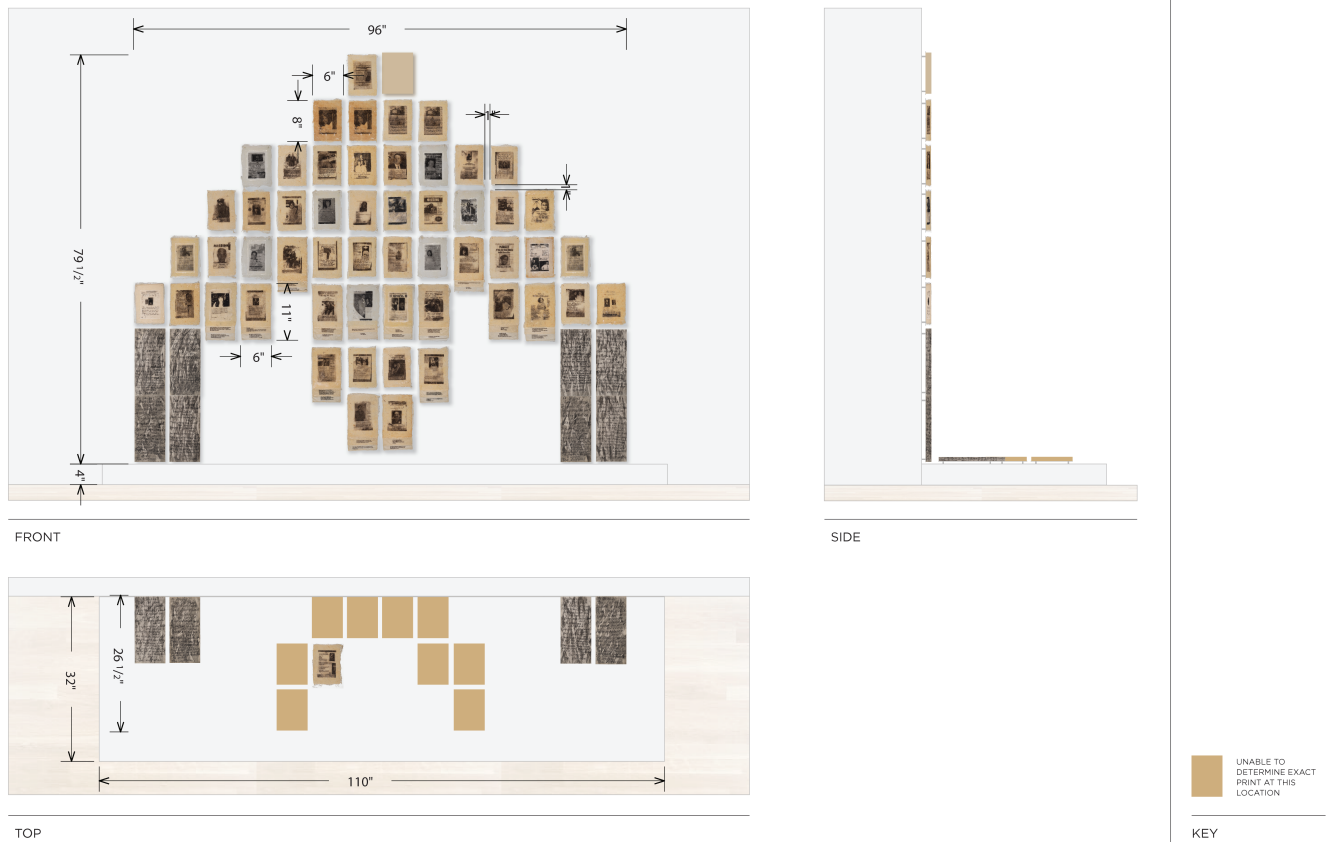


Fig. 9. Elevation drawing, Barbara Siegel, *Missing*. Collection of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, Gift of Gary Schwartz. Source: Drawing by Gayle Ulrich.

a special exhibition celebrating Siegel's legacy. Two of Siegel's friends, Kathryn Schneider and Nancy Storrow, curated the show in collaboration with Taylor Bluestine, A.I.R.'s communications and program associate. Despite having access to the same documentation, at A.I.R., the prints were displayed entirely on the wall because of gallery space constraints. This is not necessarily problematic, although as Laurenson has discussed, there is a certain inherent variability about installation art: "[I]t can and does exist as both object and concept, only actualized through installation" (Laurenson 2006). Additionally, since missing posters were somewhat haphazardly put up on the street in the chaotic hours and days after 9/11, it seems fair to conclude that some variation in their order when displayed should not affect the work's overall meaning or impact nor contradict Siegel's intent.

Indeed, the manner in which the work was displayed at A.I.R. lends some insight into Siegel's intentions, given the curators' familiarity with the piece and their close personal relationship with the artist. In the Brooklyn venue, the prints were displayed without frames and pinned 4 in. from the wall. This provided an unobstructed as well as an intimate viewing experience, similar to how one would observe missing posters on the street. However, since Siegel passed away before the A.I.R. installation, the Lehman College Gallery's iteration is the most reliable record of her intentions.

To learn more about the conceptual underpinnings of *Missing*, we researched some of the other works documented in the artist's personal archives. Based on these findings, we became more confident that the prints should be displayed on both the wall and floor in a way that enabled more direct viewer interaction with them. The artist frequently displayed her works in a fluid manner within gallery spaces, blending them into the pre-existing environment and transforming the viewer's perception of that surrounding space.

APPROACHES TO CONSERVATION

In developing a preservation approach for Siegel's work, analyzing the biography of the piece is essential. This approach focuses on the artwork's exhibition and related interactions with viewers beyond the genesis and physical materials of the end product (Wharton 2015, 4–5). As time passes, an artwork can become associated with new things and people, leading to subtle changes in its function and contemporary meaning. Whereas preservation efforts in the past centered on protecting an artwork's physical materials, multiform works like *Missing* require us to consider the artwork's essence and "mission" as a vital part of any conservation strategy.

Conservators' decision-making processes have long focused on authenticity. However, current conservation theory acknowledges that a work of art can embrace multiple authentic states that may change over time (Laurenson 2006; Gordon and Hermens 2013; Marçal 2019). According

to conservator Hélia Marçal, this means that "artworks and conservation 'co-become,' or [develop] together" (Marçal 2019, paragraph 39). This idea is particularly germane for conceptually driven works like *Missing*. Even though the objecthood of the artwork is important in evoking the missing posters, its main purpose is to convey through the ex voto medium a message of collective trauma and loss arising from 9/11, along with gratitude and hope. The artwork can be experienced from multiple perspectives, including the initial emotional shock of 9/11, the haunting visual impact of the missing posters, and the despair and sorrow they invoked. Maybe more to the point, as Danto reflected, acts of piety take many forms. In his article *9/11 Art as A Gloss on Wittgenstein*, Danto (2005) recalled Ludwig Wittgenstein's account of Franz Schubert's brother cutting up Schubert's scores into small pieces after his death and giving them to his favorite students. This, Wittgenstein observed, was just as "understandable" as an act of piety as keeping the scores intact or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, burning them. Variations in future installations of *Missing*, then, can be seen in this same light as people co-create the work based on their unique interactions with it.

Siegel's short statement about the work from the single occasion it was exhibited during her lifetime describes how she felt seeing the missing person posters after 9/11. She articulates the work's concept as "a form of retable... a memorial to tragedy and loss, but also to our shared belief in the need to survive and affirm life" (Siegel 2002, A12). Like the votive art that fascinated Siegel, the interpretation of *Missing* may evolve over time as we move further away from the causal event provoking its creation. After experiencing the trauma of terrorism, Siegel turned to the act of making *Missing* as a way to move forward. But as it was displayed, the artwork's meaning was shaped by the objects around it and people's interactions with it. Siegel hoped that each person who viewed the work would interpret it according to their own understanding of 9/11 and forge a unique meaning for themselves. Eventually, as the artwork inevitably deteriorates, it will also take on a new function as a symbol of its past (Hughes 2016, 32–34).

The act of making ritual offerings at memorial sites, which is similar in some ways to the tradition of votive giving, provides a useful framework for understanding *Missing*. David Morgan—who builds on French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss's notion of the gift and the relationships and obligations that gifts propagate—has suggested that contemporary ritual giving is a way for people to keep "memory alive and sustain a relationship as if paying respect might rescue from oblivion those lost to death" (Morgan 2018, 124). He sees such offerings as not only generous acts but also a response to a gift already given. Accordingly, "[a] letter to a fallen soldier suggests that the living are bound to respond to the gift offered by the dead, even if they feel they can never

properly repay the debt of what the dead have given them” (Morgan 2018, 125).

This sort of exchange can be seen in both unofficial community-driven memorial sites, such as those dedicated to victims of gun and police violence, which often appear spontaneously at the sites of these incidents, as well as state-sponsored ones, like the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, DC. Jeanelle Austin, executive director of the George Floyd Memorial, describes the significance of offerings—the word itself—as a secular way to recognize individual contributions to spontaneous “altars” of remembrance, while also acknowledging the collective belief in the spiritual act of making an offering to a place deemed sacred by a particular community (Austin and Grabow 2023, 129). Similarly, art historian Jaś Elsner has noted that the *ex voto*, when grouped with other objects—like, for example, *Missing's* central constellation of missing person posters—can “create the ethos of a sacred site” and take on the qualities of one through the addition of various sacred votives (Elsner 2018, 16).

Taking care of unofficial memorial sites through the self-elected efforts shouldered by affected community members can likewise be seen as a form of gift exchange. For Austin, caring for the memorial site at George Floyd Square was an expression of protest, a way to stand up for Black lives “that would allow [her] to heal and not add to ... existing trauma” and “care for ... the people who entered the sacred space of the memorial” (Austin and Grabow 2023, 129). In the same vein, after the 9/11 attacks, Gerry McCarthy, who lived in midtown Manhattan near the Fire Department's Engine Company 54, took care of the growing, sprawling impromptu memorial that developed outside the firehouse to mourn and honor the 15 firefighters from that company who gave their lives. By doing so, she also supported those rescue workers who had survived. As McCarthy would later explain, she “[tried] to make the best decision about what [could] be done with [the memorial materials].” She felt that she had “no right to judge whether [it was] good stuff or bad”; she “just want[ed] to make it easier for the guys” (McCarthy 2002). As it turned out, the centerpiece of that memorial, a fiberglass sculpture of the Statue of Liberty adorned with notes, mass cards, rosary beads, and other offerings left by thousands of people from around the world, became the first three-dimensional object officially collected by the nascent 9/11 Memorial & Museum.

The conservation and future display of *Missing* can be seen as a more professionalized undertaking of the same sort and spirit of effort. By preserving *Missing* as something more than a static document of a past tragedy, the work becomes activated from the exchanges between those who participate in its care, those who encounter the work in our public gallery spaces, and the unique individuals whose existence and deaths are memorialized in the missing posters—and the larger National September 11 Memorial.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

When preserving an object like *Missing* in a memorial museum setting, it is crucial to consider its cultural significance along with its artistic and material characteristics. Employing a people-centered conservation approach enables individuals with a personal connection to the object and the story it incarnates to actively participate in the process. Such collaboration is particularly important when dealing with sensitive objects that can invoke violent, traumatic events, present and past. Gathering information about an object's historical significance and personal meaning can enhance understanding of its resonance over time.

As part of the process of acquiring *Missing*, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum sought input from various individuals connected to the work, including Gary Schwartz, fellow artist and friend Nancy Storrow, and Bluestine, from the A.I.R. Gallery. Each shared aspects of the artist's life experiences and knowledge about the work, offering valuable if different perspectives. Storrow, for instance, shared that during the installation of *Missing* at A.I.R., in 2016, after Siegel's death, she felt incredibly close to the artist and thereby gained a new appreciation for the work.

Although Siegel, Schwartz, and their friends and loved ones are integral to *Missing's* creation and meaning, the work also relates to dozens of other individuals whose lives ended abruptly on 9/11. The perspectives of their families and friends are also important, although their views on how to present the human consequences of terrorism will likely diverge in important respects. In contemplating the possibility of a future exhibition of *Missing*, several complicated questions arise. Should all family members of the depicted victims be consulted in advance of deciding whether or how to display the work (if that is even possible)? Additionally, how should museum staff handle disagreements among family members about the artwork's presentation or whether it should be exhibited at all? Do museum workers possess the necessary training to navigate these emotionally fraught issues? What to the general public may appear as an ensemble creation is a piece of exquisitely nuanced private emotions and connotations to those whose loved ones were killed.

Alerting the relatives of the portrayed victims about its future display will pose certain challenges. As a practical matter, the Museum at present simply does not have personal relationships with or contact information for all the families of the individuals portrayed in the work. Some victims' families have chosen not to engage with the Museum, preferring to mourn and remember privately. We always want to respect personal boundaries and not overreach. As time passes, it is conceivable that some reluctant next of kin and relatives may feel more comfortable sharing, especially as distance from the 2001 attacks increases. Regardless, this will always remain an issue that requires sensitivity and a flexible, individualized approach.

There is also the problem surrounding the fabricated young victim, “Mya Braker,” and what to do about the erroneous missing person print depicting her. At the very least, a didactic would be necessary to explain that she was not, in reality, a victim of the 9/11 attacks. But perhaps the subsequent print that Siegel made, as a sort of footnote to her artwork, which included the *New York Times* article that made her aware of this fact, and her own thoughts on the revelation, could be included as part of an exhibition presentation.

One distinction that might be instructive in determining the extent of consultative effort invested in reaching relatives of those featured in the missing person posters used by the artist has been suggested by the Museum’s chief curator, Dr. Ramirez. In her view, it is significant that Siegel’s intentions in creating *Missing* were never commercial; they were, instead, reflective and commemorative. Additionally, since Siegel’s intentions were pure and heartfelt, there is less concern that victims’ families would be disturbed by the work’s exhibition within the setting of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum (Ramirez 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis wrote about the experience of dealing with his wife’s tragic death: “I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don’t stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point, there’s no reason why I should ever stop. There is something new to be chronicled every day” (Lewis 1989, 7). The waves of grief, sorrow, and anger that resulted from the unspeakable tragedy of September 11 may have been felt most acutely in the immediate aftermath of that horrific day. However, the emotions released that fateful Tuesday persisted for years afterward and continue to this day, as more lives are lost to the illnesses linked to exposure to the toxic contaminants that wafted through Lower Manhattan and also infiltrated parts of Brooklyn and Staten Island after the Twin Towers collapsed.

Despite the looming presence of death, *Missing* tells a poignant tale of mourning and recovery in the aftermath of 9/11, bringing us closer to a collective human experience. Additionally, although the work preserves the public memory of several dozen of 9/11’s victims, it also provides a space to consider and cope with emotions of loss and suffering akin to the feelings experienced by every affected family member, co-worker, friend, neighbor, and resident of New York City and beyond at the time of this century-defining event. However, the work is not static. Like the grieving process itself, it is transformed by the unique perspectives of those who encounter it, including museum collection workers tasked with cataloging, housing, and preserving it and contemplating the possibility of its exhibition in the future. Siegel, it seems safe to say, understood this and embraced it.

Accordingly, even though any future installation of *Missing* will inevitably deviate to some extent from the installation overseen by the artist in her own lifetime, as long as the work continues to serve as “a memorial to tragedy and loss, but also to our shared belief in the need to survive and affirm life,” it will honor Barbara Siegel’s creative intentions.

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NOTES

1. “Os Urubus”

They call them
The birds of death
Flying silhouettes black
Heading locked-on
to carrion
Beak and unfeathered
neck
To rupture and pluck
and ravish
Guided by madmen’s
hands
And exquisite conviction of
Their ascents to immortality
To pick the strange fruit
of architecture
They buried themselves
beyond belief beyond belief
One fine day in Manhattan
Os Urubus
The Vultures

2. When a museum acquires an object, a formal deed of gift is typically used to establish ownership and any restrictions on the gift. Although a signed deed of gift is the most straightforward way of proving ownership, other forms of communication such as e-mails or letters may also be accepted as evidence. However, in the case of

spontaneous memorials, which are usually created anonymously, the situation can be more complicated. For example, if a spontaneous memorial is created on a public street in New York, the creator would not have any ownership claim to it, as New York's abandoned property law does not usually apply to such memorials because they do not have any tangible value. Offerings left at public memorials are not owned by their creators in the same way that leaving property on the street would not give someone legal recourse if it were taken. Even though museums may face ethical dilemmas about who owns these memorials and their attendant caretaking, this does not involve proper law principles.

3. If an artist creates a new work based on something that is already protected by copyright, it is referred to as a derivative work. For a derivative work to be protected under copyright law, it must have significant differences from the original or include a substantial amount of new material. The copyright protection for a derivative work only covers the new or altered material, not the pre-existing material. It is unlikely that any of the initial missing posters were copyrighted, and *Missing* as a whole is distinct from any single missing poster, so copyright infringement would not be a concern.

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