

Nine Eleven

The devastating terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 killed nearly 3,000 people and dramatically affected America's relationships with the rest of the world. The shock caused by the event was profound and in the immediate aftermath inevitably little attention focused on the art that was lost with the collapse of the buildings. But the attacks on the Twin Towers and the accompanying damage to the surrounding edifices in the World Trade Centre complex also destroyed large numbers of artworks housed in and around the skyscrapers in this vibrant business area. The exact figure of destroyed works is not known – records were lost along with the works in the corporate offices, private storage vaults and artist studios within the complex – but estimates put the combined value as high as \$100 million. A spokesman for the Art Loss Registry in London described it as 'probably the largest single art loss in history'.

Among the many pieces destroyed, one public work in particular became symbolic of the cultural loss suffered in the attacks, and of the efforts to mitigate the damage in the weeks that followed: Alexander Calder's *Bent Propeller* 1970. Commissioned for the World Trade Center Plaza while the buildings were still being constructed, the seven-metre high steel sculpture was broken and crushed under the debris. But its distinctive red colour offered hope for a period that its pieces could be identified among the building rubble.

Calder became famous for his invention in the early 1930s of the 'mobile' (a coinage of fellow artist Marcel Duchamp), a suspended sculpture with parts moved by a motor or, more commonly, by currents of air. His delicately balanced mobiles were abstract but for Calder they signified important aspects of the workings of the physical universe. In 1932 he wrote about art being made from 'volumes, motion, spaces bounded by the great space, the universe', and about 'abstractions' that were 'like nothing in life except in their manner of reacting'. He also made self-supporting sculptures or 'stabiles', which did not move but created the impression of movement through their dynamic shapes.

A popular and successful artist, Calder exhibited frequently in the United States and became seen as one of the fathers of American modern art. However, he always retained close friendships with artists he had met in Paris before the war; and from the 1950s he lived near Tours in France. Focusing increasingly on making large public sculptures in his later years, he worked with the local Biéumont foundry, which took his maquettes and under his supervision transformed them into large steel constructions, with skilled boilermen undertaking the riveting.

In the late 1960s Calder was commissioned to create a large public sculpture for the Civic Centre in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Painted in Calder's favourite red, *La Grande Vitesse* (or 'grand rapids') was the first public sculpture funded by the Art for Public Places programme of the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1969 Calder was commissioned by the Port Authority of New Jersey to make a stabile for the World Trade Center, then in the course of construction. Reviewing the range of artists commissioned to make works for the new site, curator Dorothy Miller interestingly referred back to the Rockefeller Center project of the early 1930s and, implicitly, to the debacle over the censorship of Diego Rivera's mural showing the face of Lenin:

From its initial plan to its present realization, the fine arts program of the Port Authority has set a splendid example for the inclusion of the arts in a great public building program. In the thirties, New York's Rockefeller Center performed a similar function, incorporating painting and sculpture in the design of its complex of buildings. However, in the half century since the building of the Rockefeller Center, knowledge and acceptance of contemporary art have grown so tremendously that the Port Authority has been able to include in its art collection some of the most advanced art of our time, a goal not readily attainable in the earlier period.

Although not someone followed by younger artists, Calder still counted then as a modernist figure, one whose large, colourful sculptures complemented modern architecture and could be counted on to appeal to a public.

Calder quickly conceived of creating the sculpture from three sheets of metal, curved gracefully like bird wings, or, as he suggested, a bent propeller. The final work was sometimes known as the *World Trade Centre Stabile*, but the artist himself called it *Bent Propeller* and this is the name by which it became known. Like many of his public sculptures it was painted in a distinctive bright red colour. In 1962 Calder said, 'I love red so much that I almost want to paint everything red.'

The World Trade Center was not one building but a complex of seven. WTC1 and WTC2 were the giant Twin Towers, around which were grouped five smaller buildings. Calder's sculpture was first located near the entrance to WTC1 (the North Tower), before being transferred in 1979 to the northeast corner of the World Trade Center Plaza on Vesey Street and Church Street. It was later moved to the footbridge between WTC 6 and the main entrance to WTC 7. It might have escaped the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers but WTC7 collapsed several hours after the twin towers as a result of fire damage, and the sculpture was buried under thousands of tons of debris.

In the aftermath of the attacks some New Yorkers began to visit the site regularly to provide support for the rescue workers. One of these was Victoria Leacock, a friend of Alexander Rower, grandson of Alexander Calder and head of the Calder Foundation. Rower asked Leacock for help in attempting to recover the stabile and they made up fliers to hand out to the workers, reading – with patriotic emphasis – 'Please Help Recover and Preserve Famous AMERICAN SCULPTURE'.

By this point there was no hope of finding more survivors, and workers clearing the site tried to support efforts to locate parts of Calder's sculpture in the shared hope that enough would be recovered to allow it to be restored. 'I was there when they pulled some of the parts out of the ash', Rower was later reported as saying. 'This was October 11. The steel was still red hot, which was shocking to me. The heat, the intensity of that devastation was so incredible.' But it was difficult for the workers to identify the parts. One day later Leacock visited the site and discovered a mechanical grab cutting up a damaged section of the sculpture. Most of the paint had been scorched off in the fire, and the metal had buckled under the weight of collapsing masonry, but the row of rivet holes identified the twisted metal sheet as part of Calder's sculpture.

The dumps used to house and sort debris were searched and, in all, about 40 per cent of the sculpture was recovered. However, this was simply not enough to restore the work, as Calder's grandson had hoped, and the surviving pieces are now kept by the Calder Foundation in storage.

In 2008 one fragment was included as testimony to the destruction wrought by the terrorist attack in an exhibition dedicated to 9/11 held in Caen, France. Although the sculpture cannot be repaired, its damaged parts may yet have an afterlife as a memorial, as there is a deeply felt need to preserve and value artefacts that survived, and bear witness to, the terrorist attacks.

Another public sculpture installed in the World Trade Plaza in the same period as the Calder stabile has had a happier fate. Nearly eight metres high, Fritz Koenig's rotating sculpture *The Sphere* 1971 was intended to symbolise world peace through world trade. While Calder's steel sculpture was mangled beyond recognition, *The Sphere*, though located between the Twin Towers, miraculously survived relatively unscathed. Initially, the artist was opposed to any attempt to reinstall the punctured and dented sculpture, saying it was a 'beautiful corpse'. But six months later Koenig supervised the setting up of the work as a memorial in Battery Park, near the original site. 'It was a sculpture, now it's a monument', he commented. 'It now has a different beauty, one I could never imagine. It has its own life – different from the one I gave to it.'

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Jennifer Mundy