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TOWERS OF LIGHT

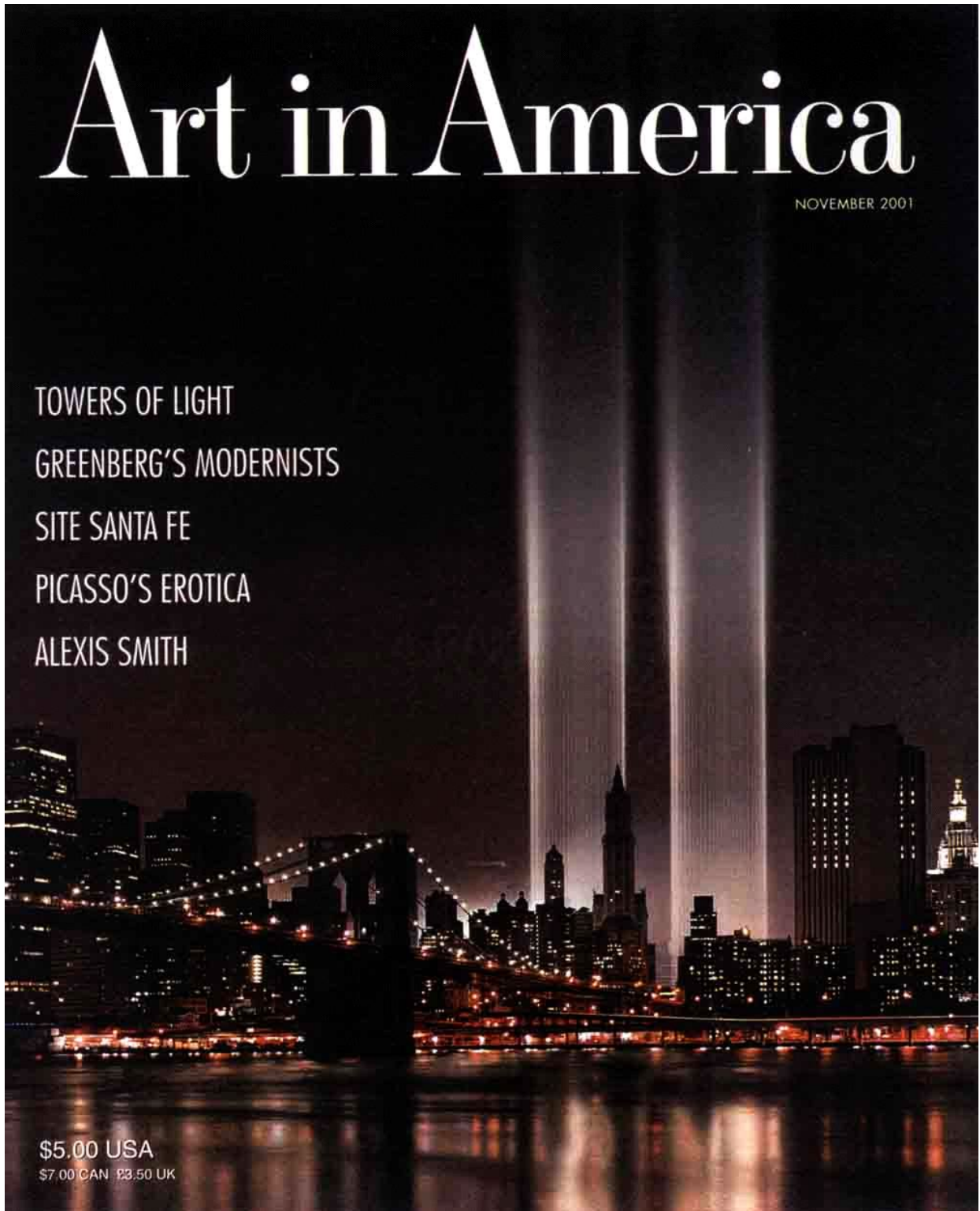
GREENBERG'S MODERNISTS

SITE SANTA FE

PICASSO'S EROTICA

ALEXIS SMITH

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Towers of Light for New York City
By David Ebony

In the wake of the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center, many architects, artists and designers offered suggestions regarding the best way to reclaim ground zero, the Lower Manhattan site where the twin towers once stood. Some proposed a 16-acre park as the most appropriate tribute to the thousands lost in the catastrophe. Others insisted that the best response to terrorism would be to defiantly build identical structures—or ones even more imposing than before. Metropolitan Museum director Philippe de Montebello, among others, suggested that a piece of the ruined facade from one of the towers be preserved as part of a monument to the fallen and a reminder of the tragedy of war, in the manner of England's Coventry Cathedral or Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial.

Meanwhile, two artists, Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda, have teamed with two architects, John Bennett and Gustavo Bonevardi of Proun Space Studio, to design Towers of Light, a temporary, portable and immediately implementable monument. Using high intensity beams of light projected vertically from sources installed on buildings or in the streets near ground zero, the scheme would generate two tall rectilinear volumes of white light, which would be visible from a great distance. Without interfering with the ongoing recovery efforts, the light beams would add to the Manhattan skyline a suggestion of the commanding physical presence of the twin towers while evoking the immaterial essence of those killed in the attack, many of whose remains may never be found. Rather than a memorial, however, Towers of Light is seen by the group as a symbol of hope and resiliency, a reclamation of New York City's strength and identity.

The project is cosponsored by Creative Time, Inc., and the Municipal Art Society of New York. In 1999, Creative Time commissioned LaVerdiere and Myoda to make a project titled Bioluminescent Beacon, as part of a series addressing issues related to genetic research. The work was to be installed in fall 2002 atop the 360foot-tall radio tower on the roof of Tower One. As participants in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's World Views residency program, the artists worked in a studio they shared on the 91st floor until early this summer. Less than three months before the attacks, they put the finishing touches on drawings and working models that would have been used to construct the piece. The project had the enthusiastic support of the building's then-landlord, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

Over the years, each of these artists has exhibited separately, showing works that deal in varying ways with the confluence of biology, technology and art. Their collaborative project for the World Trade Center focused on an investigation of phosphorescent, single-cell organisms known as dinoflagellates, a species of transparent sea-dwelling plankton that emit a soft, pulsating, greenish blue light when agitated in the water. Many people taking a moonlight dip in the Caribbean have noticed these organisms glittering along the shore.

The artists had planned to construct a 6-foot-high, oval aquarium to breed the creatures and act as a cybernetic cell. Inside the tank, which was to be displayed in a science or art museum, a light sensor would have picked up luminous pulses from the organisms and translated them into electronic impulses. These were to be relayed via computer cable to the top of the World Trade Center's radio mast, thus activating fiber-optic material and/or LED light sources to create a glimmering beacon. For the artists, the work linked sophisticated communications technology with the simple but astonishing power at the disposal of a single-cell organism that has inhabited the earth for millions of years.

After the terrorist attack, Creative Time recommended LaVerdiere and Myoda to New York Times editors who were looking for an appropriate image to accompany a story in the Sunday, Sept. 23, Magazine. The two artists proposed a different kind of light sculpture, which they titled Phantom Towers. Appearing on the Times Magazine cover was a photo of the Manhattan skyline, featuring two hazy, digitally created columns of light rising against a dark blue background from the site where the twin towers stood.

At the same time, architects Bonevardi and Bennett were independently developing a remarkably similar scheme, titled PRISM (Project to Restore Immediately the Skyline of Manhattan). The Proun Space Studio team, known in the New York art world for the video and computer animations that were included in the Mies van der Rohe exhibitions recently on view at the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art [see A.i.A., Oct. '01], had distributed their World Trade Center plan by e-mail to numerous associates before the Times piece appeared. Their scheme, however, called for twin rectangular arrangements of powerful lights pointed skyward from a pair of large barges anchored in the Hudson River near Battery Park City.

When the two like-minded teams discovered each other's proposals, they decided to collaborate on Towers of Light in the hope of hastening its realization. They began to work with lighting designers Paul Marantz and Jules Fisher, along with a number of engineers who are helping with technical aspects of the project.

As we go to press, the proposal calls for at least 80 space cannons (high-intensity, 8,000watt xenon lights) to be installed in a large vacant lot near Battery Park City, the site of a planned high-rise commercial and residential building not far from ground zero. All materials and labor are expected to be loaned or donated; portable generators may also be utilized, as Con Edison's

participation is still being discussed. Pending approval, from the mayor's office and the FM, Towers of Light would be visible beginning in early November for 28 nights, one for each year that the twin towers stood. The project team is also discussing ways to present the work in other cities. In addition to New York, the proposal is currently being reviewed by city officials in Washington, D.C., and London. More information about Towers of Light is available on Creative Time's Web site (www.creativetime.org).