Duchamp and September 11

A cliché of American culture proclaims that baseball (or any other institution of such popular and iconic stature) imitates life. Any enthusiast must avoid the danger implicit in this remark: the tendency to see a linkage between a favorite subject of one's obsession and absolutely anything else in this enormous world of ours. Thus, even to postulate a relationship between Marcel Duchamp and the tragedy of September 11, 2001 should seem risible *prima facie*. Would Osama shaved look like Marcel? Both had thin faces. . . You see what I mean. Such nonsense goes nowhere.

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Cass Gilbert, Woolworth
Building, New York City, 1911-1913



Woolworth Building
at Night, New York City, between 1910 and 1920

But, in fact, a quite close and reasonable connection does

exist, through the great building that still stands just two blocks from Ground Zero, and Duchamp's provocative suggestion that this structure, the Woolworth Building then the world's tallest, should be proclaimed a readymade by simple inscription. But let me introduce the tale with a personal experience. My wife and I were in the air (returning from Italy to New York) when the Twin Towers fell, and we ended up with an involuntary five-day "vacation" in Halifax before we could get home. As we tried to piece together the tale, from a slurry of rumors and cell-phone conversations on the plane (we were kept on the tarmac for 10 hours before disembarkation), we finally realized that the two towers had indeed collapsed. My first thought went to the horrendous death toll (then feared far higher, for we did not know that the buildings had stood for about an hour each, thus allowing most people inside to escape). My second thought went to our home, (and the nerve-center of ASRL and place of publication for *Tout-Fait*), just a mile from Ground Zero. But my third thought went to my all-time favorite and gorgeous skyscraper in my beloved natal city – the Woolworth Building. Had this great structure fallen too? Surely it must be damaged, probably beyond repair, for the Woolworth Building stands at the very periphery of Ground Zero. Well, this grandest lady of architecture stood tall, bearing nary a scratch, in renewed and secure domination of the still-great skyline of lower Manhattan – all as described in the piece below (written for *Natural History*, and including the Duchampian connection and its meaning to this aficionado).

Incidentally, I must state another connection between ASRL and the events of that tragic day – this time more immediate and heroic (and within my right to say, even as a spouse to the main actor, because my role has been largely limited to observation and advocacy, rather than to action, and I cannot be accused of personal bragging). Rhonda Shearer and her daughter London Allen, realizing that her studio space lay less than a mile north of Ground Zero, converted this ground-floor and high-ceilinged room into a supply depot for storing

and bringing needed safety equipment to rescue workers at Ground Zero (and the Fresh Kills landfill site, where the wreckage is brought and further searched for human remains). Rhonda and London have been working nearly fulltime on this effort since then, often with the help of ASRL personnel, including the compilers and editors of *Tout-Fait* (see their website at http://www.wtcgroundzerorelief.org). They have masterfully weaved in and around an incredible maze of inefficiency (and downright nastiness) in official city supply chains that seem unable to get equipment to the site themselves. So our ASRL cadre has driven trucks, night after night, right down past the Woolworth Building to Ground Zero, delivering the needed supplies into the hands of the workers themselves.

(The following is a reprint of Stephen Jay Gould's "Restoration and the Woolworth Building," in: Natural History 110, 10A (Winter 2001/2002), pp. 96-97)

Restoration and the Woolworth Building

by Stephen Jay Gould

The astronomical motto of New York State—*excelsior* (literally "higher," or, more figuratively, "ever upward")—embodies both the dream and the danger of human achievement in its ambiguous message. In the promise of the dream, we strive to exceed our previous best as we reach upward, literally to the stars, and ethically to knowledge and the pursuit of happiness. In the warnings of danger, any narrowly focused and linear goal can drift, especially when our moral compass fails, into the zealotry of "true belief," and thence to an outright fanaticism that brooks no opposition.

As a naturalist by profession, and a humanist at heart, I have long believed that wisdom dictates an optimal strategy for proper steering towards the dream and away from the danger: as you reach upward, always festoon the structure of your

instrument (whether conceptual or technological) with the rich quirks and contradictions, the foibles and tiny gleamings, of human and natural diversity—for abstract zealotry can never defeat a great dream anchored in the concrete of human warmth and laughter.

For all my conscious life, I have held one object close to my heart as both the abstract symbol and actual incarnation of this great duality: upward thrust tempered by frailty, diversity and contradiction. Let me then confess my enduring love affair with a skyscraper: the Woolworth Building, world's tallest at 792 feet, from its opening in 1913 until its overtopping by the Chrysler Building (another favorite) in 1929. This gorgeous pinnacle on Lower Broadway—set between the Tweed Courthouse to the east (a low artifact of human rapacity) and, until the tragedy of September 11, the Twin Towers to the west (a high artifact of excelsior in all senses)— represents the acme in seamless and utterly harmonious blending of these two components that must unite to achieve the dream, but that seem so inherently unmixable.

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The Woolworth Building
from Beekman Street, 1997

The Woolworth Building surely reaches high enough to embody the goals of *excelsior*. But its lavish embellishments only enhance the effect, giving warmth, breadth, and human scale to the height of transcendance. The outer cladding of glowing

terra-cotta (not stone, as commonly believed) reflects the warmth of baked clay, not the colder gleam of metal. The overtly gothic styling of the lush exterior ornamentation marries an ecclesiastical ideal of past centuries with the verticality of modern life (thus engendering the building's wonderfully contradictory moniker as "cathedral of commerce"). The glorious interior—with a million tiny jewels in a mosaic ceiling, its grand staircase, murals of labor and commerce, and elegantly decorated elevators—inspires jumbled and contradictory feelings of religious awe, technological marvel, and aesthetic beauty, sometimes sublime and sometimes bumptious. Meanwhile, and throughout, high grandeur merges with low comedy, as the glistening ceiling rests upon gargoyles of Mr. Woolworth counting the nickels and dimes that built his empire, and the architect Cass Gilbert, cradling in his arms the building that his image now helps to support.

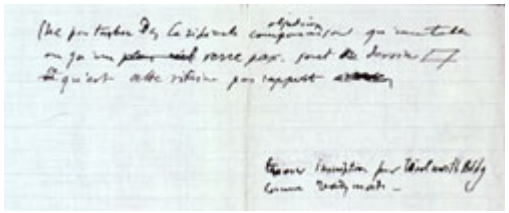
When I was young, the Woolworth Building rose above all its neighbors, casting a warm terra-cotta gleam over lower Manhattan. But I have not seen this optimally tempered glory since the early 1970's because the Twin Towers, rising in utter metallic verticality just to the southwest, either enveloped my love in shadow, or consigned its warmer glow to invisibility within a metallic glare.

There can be no possible bright side to the tragedy of September 11 and the biggest tomb of American lives on any single day since the Battle of Gettysburg nearly 150 years ago. But the fact of human endurance and human goodness stands taller than 100 Twin Towers stacked one atop the other. These facts need symbols for support, so that the dream of *excelsior* will not be extinguished in the perverse utilization of its downside by a few evil men.

I returned to my beloved natal city, following an involuntary week in Halifax (as one of 10,000 passengers in 43 diverted airplanes on September 11), on a glorious day of cloudless sky. I went with my family to ground zero to deliver supplies to rescue workers, and experienced the visceral shock (despite full intellectual foreknowledge and conscious anticipation) of

any loyal New Yorker: my skyline has fractured; they are not there!
But then I looked eastward from the shores of the Hudson and saw the world's most beautiful urban vista, restored for the worst possible reason, but resplendent nonetheless: the Woolworth Building, with its gracious setbacks, its gothic filigrees, and its terra cotta shine, standing bright, tall, and alone again, against the pure blue sky. We cannot be beaten if the spirit holds, and if we celebrate the continuity of a diverse, richly textured, ethically anchored past with the excelsior of a properly tempered reaching towards the stars.

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Marcel Duchamp, a notefrom
À l'Infinitif,1916/1967 [detail]
When Marcel Duchamp moved from Paris to New York as a young and cynical artist, he also dropped his intellectual guard and felt the allure of the world's tallest building, then so new. And he decided to designate this largest structure as an artwork by proclamation: "find inscription for Woolworth Bldg. as readymade" he wrote to himself in January, 1916.

The Reverend S. Parkes Cadman, dedicating the Woolworth Building as a "cathedral of commerce" at its official opening on April 23, 1913 (when President Wilson flipped a switch in Washington and illuminated the structure with 80,000 lightbulbs), paraphrased the last line of Wordworth's famous "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" in stating that this great edifice evoked "feelings too deep even for tears." But I found the words that Duchamp sought as I looked up at this human beauty restored against a sky-blue background on that

bright afternoon of September 18. They belong to the poem's first stanza, and they describe the architectural love of my life, standing so tall against all evil, for all the grandeur and all the foibles of human reality and transcendance—"appareled in celestial light, the glory and the freshness of a dream."

Fig. A note from *À l'Infinitif*

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