



Heartbreaking Work

Dave Eggers on creativity in the wake of tragedy.

By Karen E. Steen

The Metropolis Observed

December 2001

American culture has been in a holding pattern of sorts since September 11: we are still waiting to see how the terrorist attacks of that morning might change our sensibilities over the long term. Although it's too soon to predict what effect we might see on the work of designers and other creative people, we at *Metropolis* found ourselves reconsidering visual culture in this new context. To continue that conversation, we called on Dave Eggers. As the author of the autobiographical novel *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers grappled with life-changing tragedy and the art--and even humor--that sometimes results from it. As the designer and editor of the literary journal *McSweeney's*, he inspired an antidigital movement during the middle of the digital age: his seemingly antiquated aesthetic has influenced designers everywhere from Random House to IBM. Who better to comment on the direction of design, visual culture, and humor in these uncertain times? *Metropolis* senior editor Karen E. Steen e-mailed Eggers some September 11--themed questions, and he was good enough to answer them despite their admittedly unanswerable nature.



KS: It's been said that the terrorist attacks of September 11 began a war of symbols: instead of fighting over land or resources, we're in a conflict because of what we represent. The World Trade Center and the Pentagon were targeted because of what they signify. This reductiveness feels really dangerous, and yet designers engage symbols all the time. How do we draw the line about what we reduce to symbols and what we don't?

DE: Well, the people who used symbols in this case were subhuman terrorists. They made 6,000 people, all with families and loves and dreams, into one amorphous symbol. The challenge now is for us to refrain from the same thing. Those lost do not, I don't think, symbolize anything, nor does the attack. No act of murder can be symbolic--it's always barbaric and should never be dignified in any such way at all. Six thousand individuals were murdered, and the best way to dignify the victims is to resist making sense of a mass murder.

Some say the twin towers should be rebuilt, not because they were good, important, or useful as buildings but as a symbolic triumph over the terrorists. What do you want to see represented at that site?

Not that my opinion is worth anything at all here--because it isn't--but if there were some kind of vote, with all Americans participating, I would vote for rebuilding the towers exactly as they were with a memorial in the middle including pictures and names of every victim. It should resemble the walls in downtown New York where the flyers of those missing were posted. That was the most immediate and devastating memorial I've ever seen; every victim was allowed to be human again, not just a name or a number. The fact that the flyers were made by their loved ones is the most significant thing--it makes their memory even more personal and tangible. Everyone should witness this.

Many people are feeling a new affinity for the American flag right now. How do you feel about the flag--and has that changed since the attacks? Does a symbol's transformability weaken or strengthen it?

I was just in Washington, D.C., and saw the protests there. I saw a young man with a sign that read "Flags Kill," which is probably the stupidest thing I've ever seen. We live in a country, and we have a flag. All

countries have a flag. Anyone who thinks that displaying a flag of the country where they live is somehow jingoistic or militaristic is--well, it's absurd. Our country has one flag to symbolize the umbrella under which we all live. It is the one thing we all agree on--that we're Americans. Right now the flags--those just added to cars and lapels--indicate that the wearer is honoring those lost and is united with them, their relatives, and the great interlocking lattice that is our country. There's nothing wrong with that.

A lot of things that were perfectly acceptable on September 10 now feel inappropriate: for example, Asymptote's conceptual design for a capsule hotel shaped like an atomic bomb has been taken out of an upcoming exhibition. Some designers are predicting a new mood of seriousness and social consciousness in their work. Are we about to become more earnest?

People will always need to laugh. And they'll need to laugh even during hard times. But there is already a new sensitivity to references to bombings, assassinations, guns, et cetera, that I think is healthy and warranted. I'm of the unpopular opinion that gratuitous violence in popular media makes for a more violent society, so if we pull back from that a bit it can only have positive effects.

Commentators have suggested that our culture's preoccupation with sarcasm and knowing humor will be on the decline now. Graydon Carter even announced the "end of the age of irony." What do you think? Are you ready for the sensibility you've been associated with to fade?

David Letterman is the man who popularized what these commentators are talking about. It's basically humor with a little sarcasm thrown in. He has now been on the air for 20-odd years, and people act like this sense of humor just popped up two years ago and will be gone tomorrow. But humor is humor. Watch *The Honeymooners*, watch Jack Benny. Humor has always contained sarcasm and always will. What else is there? Pies in the face? Lapel flowers that squirt water? And the notable thing is that Letterman is one of our most devout patriots and an extremely responsible citizen. He used to be called cynical and cold, but his heart has always been in the right place, and always will be. Those who say all humor, knowing humor, or semisarcasmic humor is "out"--I'm so curious to know what kind of humor will replace it. If you excise this kind of humor you must start with Letterman and then immediately move on to his disciples--Conan and Kilborn and Jon Stewart--and then move on to *the Onion*, and of course Woody Allen (who is more knowing?), and most of Ben Stiller's work, and Wes Anderson and Spike Jonze, and where do you stop? I guess you stop when you get to Gallagher and the Three Stooges. That's the only humor I know of that's not knowing.

Two weeks after the attacks, *the Onion* was running headlines like "Hugging Up 76,000 Percent" and "Hijackers Surprised to Find Selves in Hell." How do we determine the role and appropriateness of humor during and after tragedy--something you must have considered in writing about the deaths of your parents in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*?

I just don't know. You have a feel for it, I guess, or you don't. With the book, I was years away from my own familial losses, and they were mine to comment on. With the attacks, well, I haven't found anything funny yet. I'm paralyzed and utterly overwhelmed. In a few months maybe we'll be able to laugh. *The Onion* guys are very sincere in their intentions, and they're not approaching it from a cynical standpoint--they never do. So I hope their take on it has some healing effects.

Do you think it would be appropriate for *McSweeney's*, which is so relentlessly nontopical, to include some sort of response to September 11?

On the Web site www.mcsweeney.net we've been running very straight stripped-down reportage about the attacks from people whose lives were directly affected, and I'm not sure if we'll go back to the sort of frivolity we published on the site before. I was thinking we'd change it soon anyway, and this just expedites that evolution. As for the journal, I just don't know. We have two issues ready to go to press, and I've been too depressed to finish them. We'll see.