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## **Mapping the New Britain Museum of American Art: Mental and visual Landscapes from the Past and in the post-9/11 World**

Joseph Beuys captured the brainwaves of his artistic mind 1971 in a visual depiction on a large chalkboard. Sharp lines of erratic seaming (and screaming) scribble, sections of words, fluid letters, arrows and circles, numbers, boxes, small and large icons, spots of color, horizontal and vertical moves, lines and bubbles, are all condensed within an artificial space, contained within the dark frame of the blackboard, the invisible made visible, and for everybody to see.<sup>1</sup> What usually occurs in a privately conscious or sub-conscious monologue in one's head, is translated into scripture, legible features and recognizable patterns. It gains a physical form that can be stored and moved, eventually exhibited in an international forum of modern art, thirty some odd years later. What was originally erasable with a quick swish of a wet sponge (after finishing a lecture or presentation), turned into preserveable music of the mind. The title of the piece: «Unterrichtstafel aus dem Büro für Direkte Demokratie» («Blackboard from the Office of Direct Democracy», 1971, Collection Adolf-Luther-Foundation, Krefeld, Germany). I encountered this specific one of Beuys' possibly more methodological mental landscapes, apparently famous in the mid 1970s, rather haphazardly when roaming in an art exhibit, turning around the corner in the Art Gallery of South Wales at the Biennale of Sydney, Australia in the summer 2008. Suddenly the concept of an actual, physical mental landscape made complete sense to me. Abstract though evocative in its immediacy, he had preserved a fleeting moment in time, filled with doubts about post-War German identity.

Beuys' scribble, while grandiose due to sheer size of the imposing blackboard, in and off itself a relic of the past because hardly anybody uses a chalk board for wri-

1 The online version of the Biennale catalogue, still accessible on the web, explains about this particular work of art: «Joseph Beuys was one of the most revolutionary artists of the sixties and seventies. For Beuys, art and activism were inseparable. According to his radical notion of free democratic socialism and ecology, every person was potentially an artist able to transform society creatively. In 1970 he founded the Organization for Direct Democracy by Referendum in Dusseldorf, Beuys became a charismatic leader. The transformation of society itself, and the set of relations between people to achieve that, was a new form of sculpture, a «social sculpture». When he was invited to Documenta in Kassel in 1972, Beuys transferred the Organization's office to the museum gallery for the duration of the three-month exhibition. During these meetings/performances, Beuys would annotate his thoughts through diagrams on blackboards. Today, these blackboards are among Beuys' most important works, as they illustrate formally and conceptually his revolutionary thought processes and the importance of dialogue and discussion as an artform». Biennale of Sydney, June 18 to September 7, 2008. Art Gallery of New South Wales.

ting at the university anymore – we replaced this archaic form of representation and note keeping with a so-called «white board» and erasable markers – , and verbose in some way also seemed very teutonic, riddled with issues of self consciousness and angst, and a certain dull linearity that is familiar to the Western mind, trained to read from left to right and functioning within the structure of an alphabet. This particular version seems also strangely detached from the «real» from nature and environment.<sup>2</sup> It is the world of an enclosed mind, aggressive, angry, evocative because it is supposed to visualize possibly community oriented «direct» democracy but not an orderly version, a complicated, still unintelligible one. If leading statesmen had this idea in their minds when designing the future of post-War Europe, I would find that quietly worrisome. I wanted more. I was dreaming about an array of completely different and unfamiliar visual maps ... I was interested in the way *A BEAUTIFUL MIND* worked as in the famous film by Gus van Sant about Nobel Prize winning Mathematician John Nash, a plot where a genius lives in his own psychotic/schizophrenic world and keeps writing on surfaces to document what he is thinking about. Nash played by Australian actor Russell Crowe attempts to crack the codes of governmental agencies but gets lost in his own brilliantly imaginative fantasies and delusions.<sup>3</sup> I wanted to bring this idea home to evoke a form of discussion or dialogue among colleagues in academia.

- 2 The *National Geographic* published a special issue on neuroscience and brain surgery in March 2005. It showed a serene looking buddist monk on the front cover whose head is covered with what looks like a helmet of electrodes to catch brainwaves. The actual article by James Shreeve with photographs by Cary Wolinsky provides a fascinating look into the increasingly sophisticated accomplishments of brain science. They explain: «Mapping brain functions requires innovative tools. With an electroencephalograph researchers analyze electrical currents to trace brain activity at blazing speed» (p. 14). In the context of this special issue on science and nature, one could certainly contribute an entire essay on the fascinating visual depictions of brain surgery and research. Interestingly enough, the 30 page essay on the brain in this special issue of the *National Geographic* is followed by an in-depth photo essay on the spiritual visions of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted who developed the concept of Central Park among many other sites across the United States. The first image shows a birds' eye view of Central Park with the subtext: «Sunbathers catch the last rays of the day in New York's Central Park, a vale tranquility amid the metropolis. Here and in hundreds of public spaces across the country, Olmsted helped bring the soothing beauty of nature to rich and poor alike». In: John G. Mitchell: Passion for Parks. In: *National Geographic* 3, 2005, pp. 32–51. The *National Geographic* concludes the article with a little inserted box: «Oasis in the City. Frederick Law Olmsted's magestic contributions continue to inspire awe and offer respite to city dwellers. Witness the beauty of his landscapes at [nationalgeographic.com/magazine/0503](http://nationalgeographic.com/magazine/0503). »
- 3 German film scholar and journalist Maurice Lahde has written about the film by Ron Howard, *A BEAUTIFUL MIND* (2006) as well as David Cronenberg's *SPIDER* to articulate the difference between cinematic depictions of mental health and hallucinations compared with the «real» medical occurrences of the same condition. Lahde explains in the second footnote of his essay: «das Erscheinungsbild von Halluzinationen im Film hat zumeist nur wenig mit der klinischen Realität zu tun. Die meisten Filme zeigen sie als äußerst komplexe audiovisuelle Erscheinungen. Tatsächlich treffen visuelle Halluzinationen bei psychotischen Erkrankungen weitaus seltener auf als akustische und sind weit weniger spektakulär, als man es sich allgemein vorstellt; größtenteils handelt es sich um flüchtige Erscheinungen (Blitze, undifferenzierte Lichter, Farben etc.), nicht um szenarisch ausgestaltete Bilder, wie sie im Film meist anzutreffen sind.» In: Maurice Lahde: Den Wahn erlebbar machen. Zur Insze-

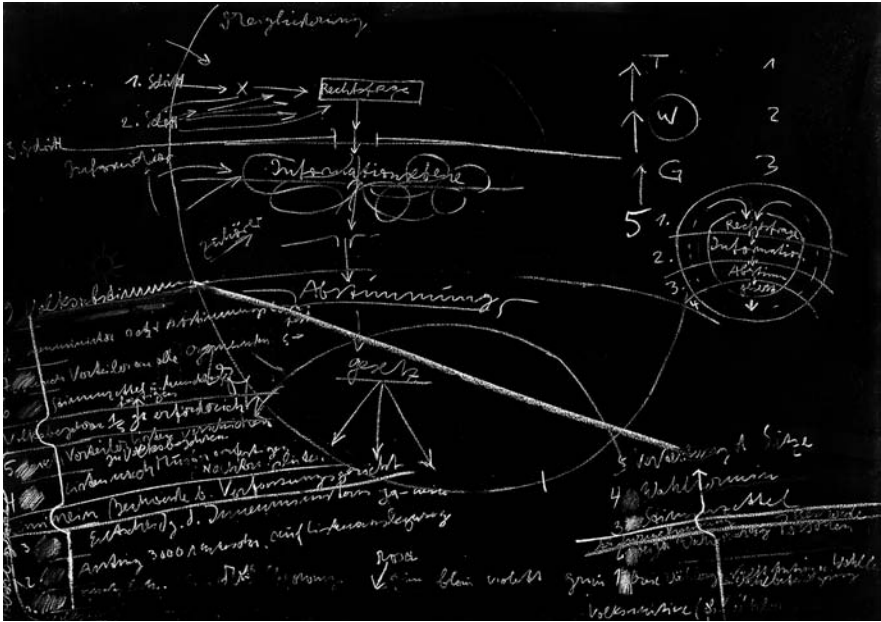


Fig. 1: «Black board from the Office of Direct Democracy»

If we were able to capture how our minds theorize and grasp concepts (every educator encounters the challenge to have to translate his or her views so they become intelligible to students in an act of learning), I dreamed, maybe we could communicate better. Or cherish our differences. An additional challenge: the responses to the concept of mental landscapes would have to be evoked in one’s own creative mind, not in dialogue with a given mental or visual landscape which seemed much more ambitious at the time but turned out to be far less daunting in the long run.

Whereas in our daily lives we seldom experiment with our mental images, several mainstream and independent Hollywood feature films, documentaries and even international films, have described the challenge of evoking creativity in children and young adults. The films, although greatly different in the way they depict the creative process, deliver often a similar message: they frequently conclude that children of different means and sometimes lower economic status are capable of outstanding performances but that cultural challenges in the understanding between facilitators and the students cannot be underestimated. An example for the latter point is the emotionally riveting French feature film: LA CLASSE (2008) about a group of teenage students, mostly with North African immigrant background, in an urban suburb of Paris who will drive their well meaning French literature teacher over the edge, actually the very

nierung von Halluzinationen in Ron Howards A BEAUTIFUL MIND und David Cronenbergs SPIDER. In: Jörg Helbig (Ed.): Camera Doesn’t Lie. Spielarten erzählerischer Unzuverlässigkeit im Film. Band 04. Trier 2006. p.2.

same teacher who facilitated, shot and post-produced the film that gained worldwide distribution. Other feature films that evoke the challenge between innovative pedagogy and the educational status quo are: *MISTER HOLLAND'S OPUS* (1995), *MUSIC OF THE HEART* (1999), *GOODWILL HUNTING* (1997), *DEAD POETS SOCIETY* (1989), *STAND AND DELIVER* (1988), *LEAN ON ME* (1989) or the documentary *MAD HOT BALLROOM* (2005) about children in urban New York who succeed in ballroom competitions. Films that describe the complexity of the human brain are *GOODWILL HUNTING*, *A BEAUTIFUL MIND* but also a new documentary by director Petra Seeger, *IN SEARCH OF MEMORY* about the American-Austrian Nobel Prize winner Eric Kandel who is a neuroscientist at Columbia University. The film will

be released in 2010. I would like to thank German Neuro-Scientist Martin Theis from the University of Bonn who alerted me to the work of his post-doctoral advisor Eric Kandel, the (shared) Nobel Prize winner for Medicine in 2000, at Columbia University. Eric Kandel as well as Nobel Prize winner John Nash have written memoirs about their creative life journeys. Kandel's *IN SEARCH OF MEMORY* (2009) has been adapted into documentary as well as the fiction film, *A BEAUTIFUL MIND*, attesting to an enduring interest in the origins and generations of creative processes.

Along the lines of visually depicting the machinations of the human mind, our plans to hand out chalk boards to individual members of different academic disciplines and have our colleagues respond in new and «outside the box» ways failed. But other unexpected results materialized in the next nine months and culminated in a flurry of events that is the basis for this essay.

What worked, though, was another move: we founded a triangular relationship between the University, Museum and Community and called it the UMC New Bri-

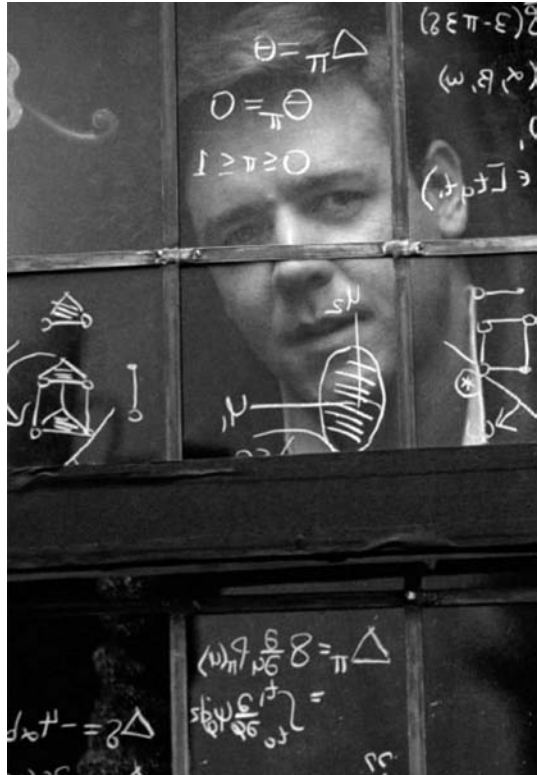


Fig. 2: *Cracking the Code?* Russell Crowe as Nobel Prize Winner John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* by American director Gus Van Sant (2006).

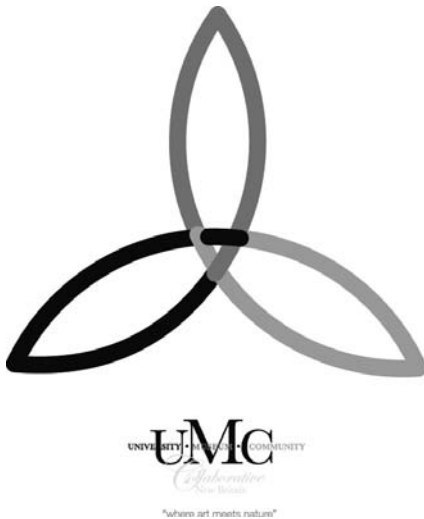


Fig. 3: Logo of the University-Museum-Community New Britain Collaborative. The three rings symbolize the intersecting strands of ideas.

tain Collaborative. Its goal was and continues to be to use the contained space of the New Britain Museum of American Art, a gem located two hours north of New York and two hours south of Boston on the American East Coast. In this place the unique «CCSU Night the Museum» took place in April 2009 and had the working title «Nature and Environment» to streamline our interdisciplinary activities with an international symposium on sustainability. 200 faculty and students were involved. About 1000 people attended a set of related events, concerts, exhibits, performances in a two day window that brought people across campus and the community together to celebrate the arts.

Apart from soliciting musicians, actors, artists and students with special

skills from different parts of the university, we also put out a call for original responses by students, a so-called «student creative arts competition» where the winners would be getting prizes. In the end, we gave out a set of ten gift coupons to buy free books at our campus bookstore. About 120 students answered this call to choose a painting, sculpture, object or subject matter in the museum collections and translate their responses into their own media. The increased accessibility of video camcorders and editing software has allowed young adults (kids, teenagers, students) to participate in a global visual flow of information.

We had successfully tried an earlier «CCSU Night at the Museum» in November 2007 where the topic was less abstract because we focused on the murals by Thomas Hart Benton, housed in the New Britain Museum of American Art, and asked students to relate to the images and reenact any of the characters in the murals, in the tradition of social realism of the Thirties, living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What would he, she or they look like? Theater plays, poetry, paintings, photo collages, photography projects resulted in that earlier call, but the 2008-2009 student creative arts competition was more difficult because the theme was so broadly conceived as «Nature and Environment» (Our 2011 topic is «Water» which may also allow for more flexibility). In 2009, our students handed in videos, memory banks of photographs, paintings, drawings, sculptures, pottery, poetry, even a quilt and a dress sewn out of «Whole Foods» recyclable bags. Maybe one of the most impressive responses came from an Italian visiting professor in the School of Engineering and Technology, Antonio Scontrino. He re-conceptualized the infamous 9/11 mural in the permanent



Fig. 4: Graydon Parrish «The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy: September 11, 2001»



Fig. 5a-f:  
Details of Graydon Parrish's  
«Cycle of Terror and Tragedy»

collections of the New Britain Museum of Art that had been commissioned by the museum's board in 2002 from a young and then quite unknown American artist, Graydon Parrish, who was asked to paint an allegory of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers on 9/11, a trauma for America. «The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy: September 11, 2001» is a huge work of art that fills an entire museum wall and comes



*Fig. 6: Thomas Hart Benton's 1932 Mural*

along with matching sitting banks, engraved with somewhat kitschy roses, to invite viewers to contemplate.

Parrish's work is a visual antidote to Thomas Hart Benton's mural in the adjacent room of the museum. Benton invites the viewer to become part of the flurry of activities that he represents with American people in different locales such as flimsy actresses, crooks, big bosomed opera singers and homeless people, a handicapped man, jazz saxophone player or common tart in front of a mirror all congregate in the metropolitan hotbed; then there is the idealized Western world, the religious, racially segregated South or scandalous and bigoted world of Washington politics (a depiction that caused much controversy for its supposed underlying anti-Semitism) as well as the romanticized American-Indian heritage. Graydon Parrish paints a rather flat picture, remiss of vibrancy or song. Its main aural feature are the wide open mouths of two Caucasian men, young and athletic whose exposed upper torsos are almost identical. These two men are allegories for the Twin Towers. They are well shaped, adherent to classic Greek body proportions, are covered with a white loin cloth (reminding the viewer of a religious depiction of Jesus' suffering on the cross) and their arms are contorted into an artificial pose of agony and pain. Their eyes are veiled with red shawls and their mouths wide open in screams of gaping terror. To their feet one can track two different sites: to their left, an African-American man stretches out with his eyes turned towards the sky, blinded by the sight. His hands are also opened and seem to resist reaching out to anybody even though Graydon Parrish explains in his own interpretation of his work that is available at the New Britain Museum of Art upon request that this person is supposed to stand

symbolically for all those people on the ground, the firefighters, medical support personnel and volunteers on the day of 9-11-2001, many of whom sacrificed their own lives when trying to rescue victims from the collapsing Towers. To his left are three children: their eyes are veiled with blue cloth. Two of them, one Caucasian and one African-American boy, hold hands. A little cherub behind them who is entirely naked also carries a large airplane that is pointing towards the sand where this entire scene is located, supposedly on a shallow bank in the middle of the Long Island Sound. The African-American boy points with a second huge toy airplane towards the left figure of the Twin Tower allegory. The children are not looking at each other but are directed physically in their poses towards the Twin Towers. There are opposing responses: some contend that these children stand for the terrorists who were misguided by ill-conceived violent ideology to want to commit heinous crimes not being fully aware of the consequences.<sup>4</sup> The other interpretation that Graydon Parrish himself seems to favor is that the children are representative of the innocent victims who were deeply affected by the tragedy because their parents and family members perished in the catastrophe.

To the right of the Twin Towers two more vignettes are visible. One entails three nude women, two of whom are clasped together with shackles. The woman in the middle is African-American, young and beautiful. She could be the mother of the little boy with the plane and/or the partner of the contorted figure on the ground. Immediately adjacent to her leans the nude body of a young woman who is nestled behind her; she is also cupping her right hand to shout out to the two young men who represent the Twin Towers. Her cheeks flushed, she yells, repeating the gesture of sound waves that emanate from the Twin Tower screams. Crouched on the bottom of the two other women is a slightly heavier female nude figure who holds a large white candle that is lit. While the left side of the painting is covered with ripped up pieces of the American Declaration of Independence, the right side of the mural is covered with lush pink and white roses. The last group in the picture is difficult to interpret. A young girl is sitting on the sand bank, slightly off the side, and looks down while her hands, too, are open and tensely contorted. Her eyes are covered with a long red deep dark piece of cloth that is being held, similar to an umbilical cord by an old man with a blue facemask. Next to the man who stretches out on the floor and whose bare legs face the viewer, is a skull, a dead bird and an isolated empty glass bottle that looks like an infusion container in an intensive care unit. The old man is looking at the hands of the young girl but there is no physical contact between the two other than the large waving ribbon. In the back, almost on the very edge of the frame, one can detect the Statue of Liberty, her flame lit, who is sinking into the water, similar to a sci-fi depiction of a drowning humanity, used as a visual cliché

4 Mural artist Prof. Mike Alewitz from the Department of Art at Central Connecticut State University provided this interpretation during a guided tour to students of an honors course on «Western Thought» in the fall semester 2009.





Fig. 7a-e:  
Antonio Scontrino's reinterpretation  
of «The Cycle of Terror»

in several dystopian Hollywood productions.<sup>5</sup> The silhouette of a broken city similar to the bombed shells after an air raid during a war, is displayed in the background. There is no connection between the figurines and the backdrop of the destroyed cityscape that evokes the skyline of Manhattan. Scontrino uses elements of the visual landscape to interpret it with a new set of players: children (the author's three kids), faculty, his African-American partner at the time, and two female theater students who are fraternal twins and majors in Communication. All figures in Scontrino's reinterpretation of «The Cycle of Terror» are fully dressed and he uses scarce props to recall the visual particularities of the Graydon Parrish mural.

5 Examples are: *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW* (2004) or the recently release 2012 (2009), both directed by Roland Emmerich.



*Fig. 8: Scontrino with his «players» in front of the 9/11 mural*

This response to the 9/11 mural allows for several speculations on the role of art in evoking reflection and possibly interpretation. In some ways, Scontrino also translates the large canvas in a set of visual codes that were accessible to him: he is teaching graphic design as well as photography in a skills oriented program within the School of Engineering and Technology at Central Connecticut State University and has worked on his own photo exhibits parallel to his then full time employment at the college. Different from our students, Scontrino cannot be considered a lay-person since he is a highly trained photographer in his own right. But he also offered his own reading of an already mediated event. In this way, choosing photography, video or powerpoint presentations as a visual means to contemplate on communication offers new and exciting ways of stretching the concept of our academic field of inquiry. Similar to the call by Angela Krewani and Astrid Schwarz who would like their electronic database on images of science be used by students and fellow researchers alike, the possibility for pedagogical applications when allowing students to dive into their own repertoire of visual images and representation seems endless. Our University-Museum-Community New Britain Collaborative has decided to cut loose from replicating established art interpretations and thoughts and encourage students instead to explore their own creativity. In a century where manual labor and skills can easily be accomplished with less money and cheaper labor in post-industrialized societies overseas, American industry seems to appeal to human creativity again as a uniquely American force and passion.<sup>6</sup> One of

6 Microsoft has launched an advertisement campaign for several years now where young people with creative inclinations are being depicted, while painting, designing, making music. Behind their

the enduring charm (if you may want to call it like that) of American ingenuity is the dismissal of established norms such as historically correct thinking, for example. Instead of begging for an authentic art historical interpretation of an image or sculpture, we encouraged students to search for answers and responses that did not have to be measurable by standardized conventions of representation, evoking a flurry of activities, some of them very successful and compelling, others less so. The less convincing ones were also displayed during the «CCSU Night at the Museum», just not as well exposed as Antonio Scontrino's oeuvre that was placed next to the original 9/11 mural.

One of the key elements that Scontrino evokes in the background of the 9/11 mural is the devastation caused by human hands. In the original panel by Graydon Parrish heavy dust seems to have settled over a lifeless skyline. Just between the twin men, a sort of empty shell has cracked open and split in two. The skyline looks as if it is going to drown in the water that has already covered the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in the back. Whereas the key scene of the mural is set on a thin stripe of sand that is reaching out of the sound, the figures are also surrounded by water, more like a puddle than dangerous waves who could engulf this group that has survived the tragedy. Graydon Parrish has called the painting a «cycle of terror and tragedy» because it is supposed to be interpreted as a cycle where the ends on the left and on the right connect. Similar to a flat world map where one is supposed to imagine that the edges connect to form the globe. This evocation of roundness is an abstraction that is difficult to imagine, especially since Parrish has painted the idealized beautiful bodies of the human subjects all in the foreground, like the figurines in a Christmas nativity scene, they are simply placed next to each other. Even though there is contact among the sets of people (the two boys are holding hands, two women are shackled together and the third woman has placed her lower arm and hand on the back of the woman in the middle), the vignettes themselves are detached. There is a suggested bond with the red ribbon between generations because the old man is holding on to a cloth that winds around the young girl's head, but there is no contact between any of the figures that would provide some kind of resolve. And there is no evident contact either to the world behind these people who do not wear visual markers that would indicate them belonging to the Twin Towers such as suits, ties, briefcases etc. The fact that all of them are more or less nude, suggests some kind of essentializing

backs, white drawings of potential software icons are super imposed. The text of one such ad, for example, featured in the same issue of the *National Geographic* that includes the article on brain science and the national parks by landscape architect Olmsted reads: «Your creativity may someday thrill the world. Start by finding your talent, developing it, then expressing it. The point is we all have the potential to do new things. A song, a drawing, a story, wherever your talent takes you, you inspire us to create software that helps you reach your potential. Microsoft.com/potential». (Microsoft ad. Your potential. Our passion. *National Geographic* 3, 2005). The idea of this ad is that American corporations can help you develop your individual skills because that is their «passion». A similar strategy is used when marketing electronic devices such as the blackberry. The marketing message is that great individualization allows for greater productivity and creativity.

gesture to depict the human species at the end of time... or as one of the trailers in Roland Emmerich's newly released dystopian science fiction action film *2012* (2009) says «The end is just the beginning», a banal truth to describe the fact that even if humans destroy themselves, something will emerge out of the rubble.

As fierce as the film critics bolted into Roland Emmerich's visualization of social angst, it may be useful to take a quick look at his «Endzeitvisionen», his visions of the end of the world. Of course, the main reference in a movie that spends 2.5 hours showing the end of the world in the year 2012 is the anxiety that built up after the major 21<sup>st</sup> century trauma for Americans, the fall of the Twin Towers. Roland Emmerich imagines a world that cracks open, where the surfaces break apart, similar to the cracked skyrise between the twin tower allegories in Graydon Parrish's mural. In the Hollywood blockbuster version of the end of the world, only a family can be saved, and a few lucky ones who are managing to board planes that the United States' government has supposedly built like the Arch Noah because they anticipated the end of the world coming. And decided to not tell anybody outside Washington about it. «So when will you tell the people», asks one of the government aides and gets shushed off. What is significant for this paper is the fact that Roland Emmerich does not employ aliens this time as in the first of this dystopian trilogy *Independence Day* (1996). It is nature itself that does the destruction of the human race, not an outside force. While tidal waves are crushing into Nepal where a lone Buddhist monk is trying to warn mankind of the coming disaster and his diminished figure gets simply washed away – his monastery on the tip of a mountain is being crushed like a house of matches – other parts of the earth are also breaking apart. Fireballs fall from the sky, the crust of the globe is ripped open by natural forces and the world erupts with one big lasting bang, wiping out years of civilization, including Saint Peter's Dome in Rome where tightly assembled catholics are desperately trying to pray the end of the world away. The icons of American superpower status such as a sophisticated aircraft transporter (yes, the same kind where George W. Bush announced theatrically the success of the Iraq Invasion on May 1, 2003 in his «Mission Accomplished» speech on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln) is tossed around by approaching waves and is assisting nature in destroying Washington where the White House and other key icons are tumbling like a house of cards before getting swooped up in the ferocious forces of destructive nature.

In Graydon Parrish's allegorical painting one has to look for the culprits as well. There are no evil terrorists who have committed these crimes.<sup>7</sup> There are only props, two big toy airplanes that the children are holding. In Parrish's case of dysto-

7 When asked about the significance of the children in the 9/11 mural, students and faculty often disagree. Some see the children as being indicative for the lost innocence after the 9/11 trauma and the fact that children whose parents perished were left to carry the burden of the disaster. Others argue that the kids holding the airplanes are like the terrorists who did not know what they were doing when they flew the jets into the Twin Towers on 9/11 committing suicide in the cause of a fanatic idea and harming all passengers, woman, men and children while also destroying all those who happened to have entered the Twin Towers that morning.

pia, nature cannot be the source of evil because the waves in the foreground are as shallow as rain puddles. However, nature has also gone amok. The sky is filled with daunting reddish and grey powdery clouds (no chance of meatballs there!) that allude to dust. There is no sun or moon. This scenario is situated in a post-9/11 world where there is no more livable housing but where a small fraction of humanity has survived the tragedy, suffering from trauma and despair and unable to speak or share their experience apart from bewildered gestures of despair. One of the boys, the African-American man on the ground, the third Caucasian woman and the twin men themselves are all screaming in agony. But to whom? For what? They are reduced to essentials in their humanity like the human race before language? Their nudity confirms the suggestion that they are thrown back in time, even though the two boys and the young woman on the right are wearing t-shirts that belong there less so than the loin cloths of the male adults. However, the human beings are unscathed and there is not a drop of blood anywhere apart from the bandaged hand of the old man with a little blood stain that reaches up and visually helps to support the triangular composition of the painting where the Towers are the peak on top. The lighting on the bodies is perfect and there are hardly any shadows. It is not clear where this light is supposed to come from, given the cloudy-dusty background where not a single ray of sun can reach down to illuminate the grey facades of the broken human dwellings in the background.

Graydon Parrish's painting about «The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy» is a mental map, an artificial landscape to visualize what life after 9/11 or an even larger disaster (a la Roland Emmerich) could look like. In some ways it is rather cinematic because Parrish also deals with a screen, a flat surface that has little depth to it like a close-up on human kind in a lower end camera that does not produce good depth of field. It is similar to the depiction of a landscape in cartography as discussed in the article by Angela Krewani in this special issue because it takes stock of the world after 9/11 in an almost abstract way. This is not to say that the quality of the oil canvas with its lush colors of human flesh is not sophisticated but the composition of the remaining humans is very linear and artificial, almost naive. The cartouches of old world maps also visualize the inhabitants of the colonized countries in the foreground while developing a map of the continent in the background.

In Graydon Parrish's assembly of 9/11 survivors, race and gender are articulated because people with different colored skin are being shown. But the Twin Towers are white, young, athletic men and display no hint of cultural diversity. This fact was one of the driving forces behind Antonio Scontrino's re-articulation of the twins by choosing fraternal female students to represent the same idea but changing the sex of the towers and keeping them dressed in jeans and t-shirts to allow for a more contemporary adaptation. The twins now look like potential bystanders who were affected by the fall of the Twin Towers, not like young aspiring white professionals on Wall Street who have made sure that they are visiting their gym on the way back from work to keep in shape.

The scenario in «The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy» is obviously detached from reality and metaphorically evokes themes that are already burned into the memory bank, the databank of humanity. This is the fact that makes this painting appealing to a generation of students who were old enough to have experienced the fall of the Twin Towers although they are so removed from the period of the Cold War, the author of this article clearly remembers, that the fall of the Berlin Wall, celebrated in November 2009, does not mean anything to them. But 9/11 means everything to a society, deeply inflicted by a war in Iraq and Afghanistan that has not come to a foreseeable end. 9/11 is a turning point in American society when the sense of security and superiority was ripped apart. E. Ann Kaplan, one of several keynote speakers at the annual ANZASA conference in Sydney articulated this issue in her talk in 2008. She contends that Americans are haunted by a sense of having lost innocence, and are now paranoid by the idea of homeland security that is supposed to generate trust in government and the capacity of American intelligence again, pumping up hopes that the decrease of personal freedom and increase of surveillance strategies to detect signs of terrorism in civil society at its earliest stage would help guarantee a future to them and to their children. Kaplan describes this false hope as a form of paranoia, instigated by a government, eager to invade private spaces in the name of the public good. Of course, none of the figurines in Graydon Parrish's painting are holding a cell phone or are text-messaging to contact their loved ones in the falling towers. These humans are of a different time, pre-technology in a hypothetical age when people were not yet addicted to electronics, social networking and instant communication practices. The guttural screams of the main protagonists would not work well when blasted in a cell phone receiver.

To whom do they call out? The position of the viewer is on the same level as the cracked tower in the background of the image. Spectators of the 9/11 mural are asked to look up to the towers and are drawn to the center of the image. As Mike Alewitz points out when he guides student tours, the viewer is not invited into the frame as Thomas Hart Benton does with his «Art of Life in America» from the 1930s. Benton appeals to the spectator to enter the painting by inviting the gaze to wander around the mural. Hands reach into the frame without a body attached as if those were the spectators' hands, for example (see Fig. 6). There are elements that are unfinished to invite the viewer to complete the thought. Graydon Parrish's highly artificial world, though evocative of thought, does not allow the viewer much wiggle room for interpretation. The actual scene is flat and gives little space – quite literally only a little sandbank surrounded by shallow water – to let the viewer wander. This lack of depth is similar to the dystopian fantasies of science fiction mainstream Hollywood directors: the world is coming to an end but there is no visible culprit. Ergo, we did it to ourselves. In 2012 nature has taken on the role of assassin and villain. Instead of seeking refuge in nature to recharge the batteries after a long day of work (before going to the gym to work out), the nature in Emmerich's sci-fi world is hostile, eager to divulge human kind with all its technological accomplishments (ie iconic buildings

such as the Vatican and St. Peter's Dome, the White House, downtown Manhattan etc) that crumble under its force like a house of cards. Graydon Parrish evokes such a detached relationship between humans and their environment as well. Half the floor of the painting is covered with shredded pieces of paper, the ripped up Declaration of Independence, a key document that constitutes and symbolizes American identity. It is also reminiscent of the millions of scattered pieces of paper that sailed like small paper airplanes down from the Towers when they went up into smoke. The other half of the ground is covered by lush, opened roses, the kind one would find on a Hallmark Sympathy card to indicate that the deceased person had a rich and fully lived life that had now come to a (hopefully) beautiful end. Rose pedals at the feet of the old man are alluding to decay and faded beauty but the other roses are still fully in bloom, despite the fact that they do not have a source of water and are therefore doomed as well. Empty hands of the twin tower allegories as well as the man on the ground and the old man as well as the young woman leave the question what they are trying to grasp? A reason for this disaster? Contortion of the hands is supposed to symbolize the artifice of suffering, similar to depictions of Jesus on the cross whose hands were nailed to the wood? But as mentioned before there is no blood apart from the hand of the old man.

In the end, Graydon Parrish's painting offers a postcard like snapshot of what he associates with 9/11. Commissioned in 2002, only a year after the Towers fell, it is an immediate response.<sup>8</sup> It provokes the question of what kinds of mental landscapes we produce when trying to capture a memorable event. Neuroscientists in Brooklyn and Brain specialists have just this year developed a substance, called «Skip» that has been successfully tested in mice.<sup>9</sup> When the material is entered into the brain mass, it makes traumatic memories evaporate. Mice who had experienced discomfort when approaching food, for example, forgot their previous experience and approached the same food again even though they were then subjected to electroshocks. As the *New York Times* reported, the neuroscientists who developed the new substance have great hope in the potential of the drug to either erase painful memory or bring back memory to the growing population of Alzheimer patients and the elderly with dementia. So, the idea of what kind of mental landscapes are remaining after humans have been included in the experiments is questionable.

8 Aimee Pozorski, an associate professor in the department of English at Central Connecticut State University, is writing a book-length study of representations of «the falling man» in literary and visual depictions of 9/11. In this work, she considers the sudden and impulsive criticism of 9/11 art (like Graydon Parrish's mural, *The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy*) as somehow failed in their perceived inadequacy to do justice to the event. Grounded in trauma theory, Pozorski's work recuperates these «failed» attempts to depict 9/11, particularly, figures of the falling man, by finding meaning in this crisis of representation. Rather than see these works as failures, she proposes that we consider them more carefully for what they can tell us about our own difficulties in imagining the traumatic impact of a fall.

9 For more information see the articles by Jim Dwyer: *Memories: Good, Bad and Erasable*. In: *The New York Times*, April 8, 2009 or Benedict Carey: *Brain Researchers Open Door to Editing Memory*. In: *The New York Times*, April 6, 2009.

Graydon Parrish's dystopic vision, contrary to Roland Emmerich's movie that will soon be distributed on DVDs before disappearing altogether, has a fixed space in the New Britain Museum of American Art. Its role as having been elevated to the status of a painting in an art museum may not protect it from being eventually discarded. That happened to Thomas Hart Benton as well. The mentor and teacher of Jackson Pollock was deemed unfashionable in the 1950s and the Whitney Museum in New York wanted to get rid of the large tableaus quickly and forever. The then director of the New Britain Museum, a muralist himself, seized the opportunity, grabbed the panels of the Benton mural and drove them back to Connecticut in a moving van, following in a cab behind. This is how «The Art of Life of America» made its way to New Britain. There, it is now in dialogue with its dystopic but equally idealized twin in the adjacent room in a beautiful new addition to the museum that has been opened for four years. Whereas Benton visualized the ideal of the good American in the 1930s who could pull him or herself up again by the shoestrings, Graydon Parrish has a less optimistic view of the future of mankind. Either allegorical vision of the world in 1932 or 2001 allows observers to ponder how his or her mental landscape is similar or differs from these artistic visions. This is why the idea of creating one's own mental landscapes in response to art is at the core of this article on applied responses to nature and environment.

Our students who voluntarily participated in the 2008-2009 student creative arts competition looked for themes and motives in existing paintings in the holdings of the museum to respond to them. Their goal was to find «nature and environment» in the objects/subjects. Of course, the many and frequent paintings of lush landscapes and sea-scapes, reaching back to the sophisticated strokes by internationally famous American members of the Hudson River School, dominate the museum holdings.<sup>10</sup> Students were drawn to a contemporary installation by Lisa Hoke who is a New Britain artist. She assembled a large amount of colorful paper-cups in the hallway of the staircase that leads up to the contemporary and temporary exhibits on the second floor of the NBMAA. Students are mesmerized by Hoke's idea to have the paper-cups explode in rainbow colors from a center and mixing the everyday material of party goods with a larger idea of recycling or waste. It is also a response to the American everyday life but with innovative and different means. Hoke provokes the question, for example, how an average American family celebrates key moments in a year – St. Patrick's Day, Superbowl Sunday, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Children's Birthday Parties, Graduation Parties etc. All these events are being represented by party goods that hold images and visual references (smiley faces, glover, Santa Claus etc). Instead of using familiar icons that belong to our repertoire of language as Joseph Beuys did in 1971, Lisa Hoke develops a new visual language, equally as fleeting as the vanishing scribble on Beuys' blackboard. Hoke's paper-cups are already collecting dust (and are certainly a challenge to clean because they are mounted high up) but they

10 To get a better idea of the museum collection you can visit the website of the New Britain Museum of American Art at [www.nbmaa.org](http://www.nbmaa.org). There is a virtual tour available online.





Fig. 9: Middletown Bridge. Photo collage by Amy Roy

are a rather impressionistic view of contemporary American culture. Students found the fact to have an installation with the retail value of about \$300 Dollars in paper-cups mounted in an art museum fascinating and amusing. They started building similar responses, one student even replicated the entire installation with little colorful beads that he glued on a folding surface. We exhibited his work and interpretation on the balustrade of the second floor to show that he invoked some of the same ideas. When the student saw that we had found a special exposed spot for his work, he immediately called his parents and grandparents on his cell phone to ask them to join us during the «CCSU Night at the Museum» to admire his success.

Several other student responses were placed adjacent to the work of art that had inspired them: The painting of a large bridge in Middletown, CT, inspired Amy Roy to a photo essay where she visited the site and photographed the bridge from different angles.<sup>11</sup> The large painting of a Chinese geisha that has been purchased by the NBMAA after a temporary exhibit by Chinese-American contemporary artists was re-interpreted by a visiting undergraduate student from China. She crafted a box that opened up to reveal icons such as butterflies that she was able to understand and decode contrary to her American classmates who were not familiar with these

11 Amy Roy also contributed a well edited music video on nature and environment. She was also the lead editor of a short videotape on the environmental musician Michael Pestel from Wesleyan University whose unusual work was on display in the CCSU university art galleries in March 2009. Another exhibit on «Sustainable Art» followed concurrently to the exhibits at the New Britain Museum of American Art in April, 2009, curated and facilitated by CCSU art historian Elizabeth Langhorne.



Fig. 10: Chinese Geisha with little treasure box

allegories of goddesses and beauty. The Chinese student also edited a power-point presentation with flowing images of flowers and butterflies as well as depictions of goddess figures to capture the sense of the mental landscape laid out before her by the young Chinese-American original artist.

Even though the original idea to ask faculty to draw on their own imagination to come up with a visual depiction of their mental landscapes in their respective disciplines did not take hold (not yet at least!), we succeeded with the second «CCSU Night at the Museum» on nature and environment to ask our students to reflect on their immersion into environment and their own (at times marginal) relationship to nature.<sup>12</sup> At the outset of the semester I asked all of my students in four classes if they recalled having been in nature for the last time and how many hours, mi-

12 In his 2008 National bestseller book *Last Child in the Woods. Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv's analyzes the correlation between attention deficit disorder in many American children and relates those phenomena of increasing mental health issues in children to the lack of exposure to nature. The insight that many children in contemporary society do not have opportunities for unstructured free and imaginative play in the woods, encouraged us to launch our most ambitious idea, namely building a NatureScape in an urban New Britain elementary school as one of the activities surrounding the «UMC New Britain Collaborative» on nature and environment. Chez Liley was the spark that set this idea in motion and coordinated the efforts (including writing grants, contacting builders as well as providing free wood and materials from her large farm in rural Connecticut). Her reflections are included with an essay in this volume as well. Chez Liley is a writer and artist. She has been married to Paul Winter, internationally famous jazz saxophonist for fifteen years. Due to her involvement, Paul Winter was available to play a public solo concert in April 2009 to conclude our UMC events in mid April, 2009.

minutes they had spent there? The responses were devastating to hear, especially for somebody of German descent who still holds on to the ritualized elaborate Sunday outings and hikes in nature. Some had been skiing or snowboarding, some recalled having been on a beach in Florida during spring break, but most students claimed not to have any time left in their busy schedules to dwell in nature. I warned them that they would have to spend some time in the outdoors in the coming semester to help us build a so-called «NatureScape», a natural playground made from all natural materials to build a refuge for elementary aged children in the New Britain public school system. Very few followed that call to so-called community engagement.<sup>13</sup> But many students actively participated in our celebration of the arts during the «CCSU Night at the Museum» and were impressed by the level of professionalism their fellow students showcased in their artistic work as well as their performances. Contrary to Graydon Parrish's dystopic vision of speechless humans who are only thrown on an island as a remnant of the human race, the New Britain Museum of American Art allowed us to meet in a safe and rich environment to reflect and learn about the way artists have conceptualized our world and everyday life as well as dare to participate in this creative dialogue actively ourselves.

One can successfully ask lay people and, of course, children, as non-artists to produce responses to art! They will begin to translate their concepts of reality into unexpected new visions (like the one female student, Aril Grain, an outspoken environmental activist, who handed in a self made dress!). This process of re-envisioning can be regarded as a contemplative form of communication but no less creative than researching and writing an academic paper, for example, the more traditional film review or visual analysis of an advertising image that we assign in classes in mass media such as «visual communication», «women and film», «images of gender» and «intro to mass media». Our concept of the University-Museum-Community Collaborative tries to cut loose from containing thoughts and allows free association. Instead of being physically in nature, students were engaging with the reproduced artistic responses to nature and environment that they encountered in the museum collection. These images had been filtered once already in the artistic process and were filtered once more by our own students. Allowing students a productive space to express their creativity (like the Microsoft ad suggests) evokes passion – not only in the instructors but also in the students. It allows for a creative way of applied pedagogy, a form of ubiquitous learning to use a more fashionable term. Not only through powerpoints can students engage with a visual language that they are so increasingly comfortable with but also via video production and creative projects like puzzles, photography and photo collages. The creative arts competition provoked participatory responses, similar to those envisioned by the

13 A 30 minute documentary about the building of the NatureScape and the UMC New Britain Collaborative, entitled «Where Art Meets Nature: The NatureScape Project», is available upon request. It was produced, shot and edited by Ryan Wark with the assistance of Chez Liley, Willis Bowman and Karen Ritzenhoff. For a free copy contact: Ritzenhoffk@CCSU.edu

editors of this special journal with their digital database on scientific images. In our case, the museum holdings provided the so-called database. In a world where manual labor and manufacturing are quickly outsourced to developing countries in a renewed version of colonization, encouraging creativity in our children and youth gains increasing weight.

Maybe this is the key to understanding the value of this case study of applied art education: mental landscapes can be cracked and re-envisioned into new visual landscapes. And that process seems a whole lot easier than getting this generation of twenty-some-year olds back into the woods.

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