

Artists take on commerce and newspaper headlines

BY ASHLEY WINCHESTER

Beneath the towering gothic spires of the "Cathedral of Commerce," also known as the Woolworth Building, 15 artists have been painting, photographing and collaging for the past five months. They are part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's artist-in-residence program, located on the 33rd floor. They were busy getting ready for last week's three-day exhibit that drew 2,000 visitors. Much of the artists' work is inspired by the building itself and its neighborhood.

The artists have been working in subdivided studio space, donated by the Wiktoff Group, creating an atmosphere designed to encourage free exchange of ideas and techniques. Participants are working on new projects that engage the environment and the exceptional views from the Woolworth Building. Many of the pieces draw from the history and energy of lower Manhattan.

Artist Dianne Meyer was struck by the context of the building as a financial and business focal point in the city. Funded by five-and-dime giant Frank W. Woolworth, the building was the tallest in the world when constructed in 1913. The opulent, gothic-style design of the building, complete with ornate arched entryways, vaulted ceilings, and grinning gargoyles, earned it the nickname "Cathedral of Commerce".

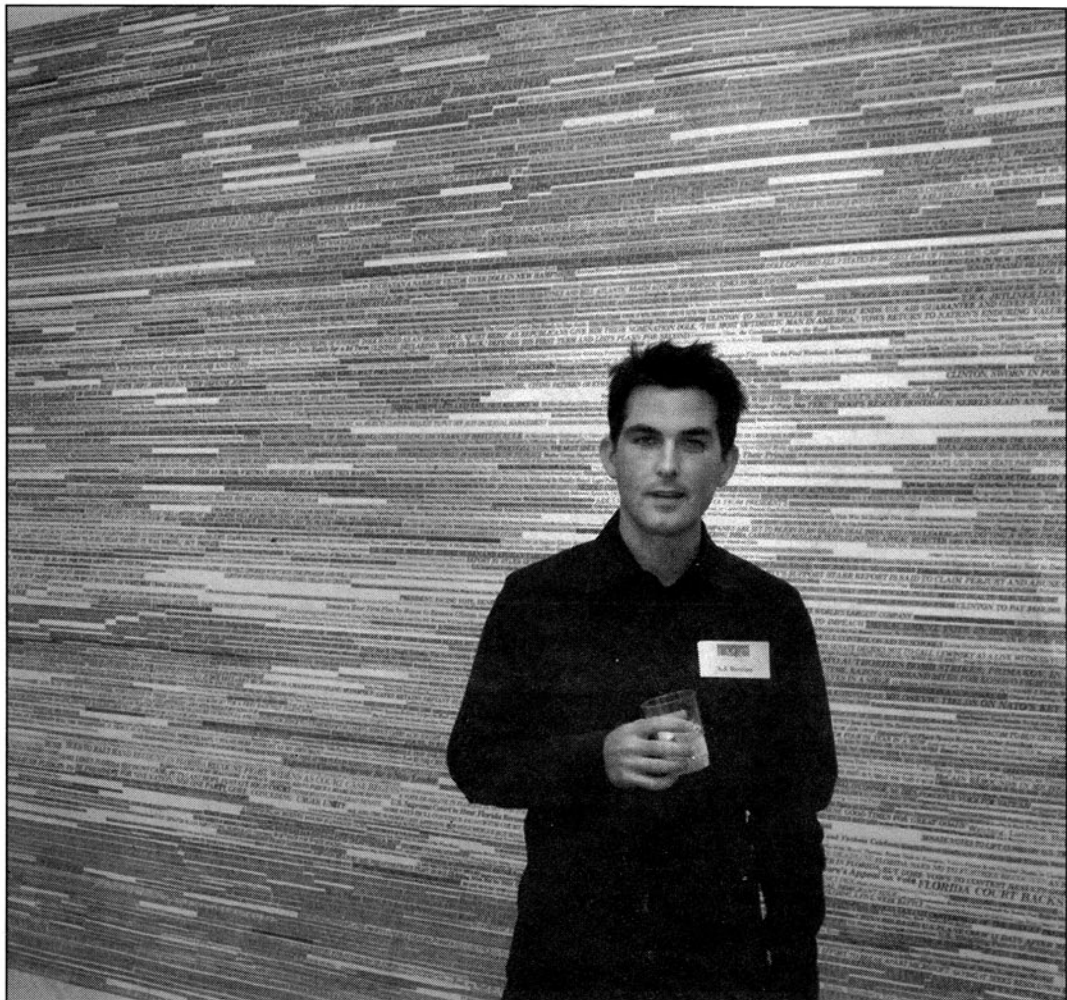
Meyer had an interesting idea. She set out to discover what office workers at the Woolworth Building in 2003 were thinking. Playing on the cathedral theme she constructed a life-size cardboard church confessional and set it up in the lobby. Over the course of several weeks, curious passersby stopped to chat. Some agreed to go on the record with their "confessions" of modern workday life. Their words are displayed next to the confessional now located in Meyers' studio.

"My boss doesn't know I don't have a degree," read one statement. Another reported one person's confession that he hated his job.

"It was interesting to be working downtown, in the building," Meyer said. "I was exposed to that kind of corporate world of suits and briefcases."

Meyer also worked on a series of photographs of people going about their daily lives. In the downtown skyline behind her subjects, Meyer digitally superimposed several tornados tearing through the city. Viewers likened this to the Hurricane Isabel scare, but Moukhtar Kocache, L.M.C.C. Director of Programs, said the work had a deeper meaning.

"(All the artists are) plugged into the anxieties and omnipresence of danger that



Downtown Express photo by Elisabeth Robert

Artist A.J. Bocchino, in front of his collage of New York Times headlines. It is color-coded by themes including "elections" and "9/11." Part of the artists-in-residence program at the Woolworth Building, sponsored by the L.M.C.C.

still exists ... and are able to create new work about issues relevant to the city and neighborhood," Kocache said. The tenants in these photos are unaware of anything going on behind them, but the idea that something might strike at any moment is still there, fueling the storm, he said.

Artist A. J. Bocchino explored this tension directly by examining and dissecting the New York Times. Over a period of ten years, Bocchino collected headlines from the Times and color-coded them based on subject matter, creating a wall-sized collage of topics from "Elections", in yellow,

to "Poverty", a purple. A second, smaller mural, separated into shades of red and orange, covered headlines related to the post-9/11 rebuilding of lower Manhattan. Bocchino then removed the words and isolated the colors on individual sheets of paper to show the attention paid to certain topics over time. The result was a sort of Times timeline.

"I started this project and began to find patterns in the headlines," Bocchino said. "I wasn't trying to make any kind of statement of my own regarding the media. I want the art to speak for itself and provide

its own interpretations."

The Woolworth Building workspace project is the most recent artist-in-residence program offered by the L.M.C.C.

"World Views," the original program, was located in the World Trade Center. One resident artist was killed in the terrorist attack. More recent programs were "New Views" that was headquartered in the World Financial Center and DUMBO in Brooklyn.

The L.M.C.C. is currently in the juried process of selecting new artists for next season's program, which will run from