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November 15, 2001

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"ELLEN CAREY'S MOURNING WALL"

ON VIEW AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY,  
COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO,

MARCH 22 THROUGH MAY 18, 2002

Nothing quite prepares one for the experience of the installation Mourning Wall, by Ellen Carey (United States, born 1952). Created as a millennial lament for society's collective loss through death, war, ethnic cleansing, the AIDS epidemic, other illnesses, accidents, murders, natural causes, and disasters as well as a grieving piece for her deceased mother, brother, and father, Carey's work expresses loss through the photographic metaphor of positive and negative. Following the tragic events of September 11, the work resonates with even greater poignancy.

The installation is assembled as a vast grid made up of 100 Polaroid negatives created in New York City with the large-format, Polaroid 20 by 24-inch camera. This instant Polaroid film process produces a one-of-a-kind positive image and a negative. Carey exposed each film frame to a white surface illuminated by a bright light, then kept the negative and discarded the positive. Covered in pock- marks and streaks reminiscent of paint with a silvery sheen, the negative's black to grayish surfaces depict no discernible images. The chemicals that make up the surface of the piece are still changing: oxidizing, forming ghostly shapes and bleak images that create metaphors for the absence of life as well as a living memorial. Critic Andy Grundberg, who wrote the brochure accompanying the exhibition, compares the amorphous shapes to Alfred Stieglitz's clouds in his Equivalents. To others it calls to mind the dark surfaces of Mark Rothko's chapel paintings or Ad Reinhardt's black paintings. Grundberg also observes that this work challenges the very nature of photography as a medium able to "mimic the world as an ink finger print mimics the pattern of ridges and valleys of a real finger." Rather, it provides a subjective experience; it is metaphor substituting one thing for another: sky for spirit, for example, as Stieglitz attempted in his series of cloud pictures.

Staring at the floor each of the one-of-a-kind negatives is attached to the wall with push pens to create a rectangular grid. Their placement is not random but sequential in shifts of visual nuances. This wall of paper conjures up other walls - the artist Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial or Jerusalem's Wailing associated with loss, longing, and grieving.

Mourning Wall, Carey's largest installation piece in her twenty-year career will be on view at The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago, March 22 through May 18, 2002. The opening reception will be held March 21, 2002 from 5:00 -7:00 pm in the galleries of the museum. It is free and open to the public.

Currently Carey resides in Hartford, Connecticut, and teaches at the Hartford Art School. She holds a B.F.A. from the Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri, and an M.F.A. from State University of New York at Buffalo. Her photographs have been exhibited at numerous galleries and museums, including Photography Degree Zero, New Haven, Connecticut; Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut; Paesaggio Gallery, West Hartford, Connecticut; Maresca Gallery, New York; Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art; The John Good Gallery, New York; the International Center for Photography, New York; University Art Museum of New Mexico, Albuquerque; the Concord Gallery, New York; and the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She has received many grants from her home state of Connecticut as well as the Massachusetts Council of the Arts, New Works Grant, New York State Federation for Artists Grant; and a National Endowment for the Arts Award. Her photographs are in the permanent collections of The Art Institute of Chicago; the Baltimore Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum of Arts; Chase Manhattan Bank; Coca Cola Corporation; Fogg Art Museum; George Eastman House; International Center for Photography; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others.

This exhibition is partially sponsored by the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts. This ongoing series of exhibitions is principally sponsored by American Airlines, the official airlines of The Museum of Contemporary Photography.