

Scolding the Art World for Showcasing ‘Conspiracy Theories,’ The Nation Doubles Down on Its Defense of the Official 9/11 Narrative

By [Ted Walter](#)

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Last week, I came across something I didn't think I would ever see. But in hindsight, it shouldn't have surprised me: one of the country's leading left publications, The Nation, rebuking New York art museums and galleries for showcasing critical perspectives on official narratives of major events — or what we've come to know as “conspiracy theories” ever since the media's [embrace of the CIA campaign](#) in the 1960s to discredit critics of the Warren Commission.

The article, “[Conspiracy Theories Are Not Entertainment](#),” takes aim mainly at two exhibitions that opened in September: “[Everything Is Connected: Art and Conspiracy](#),” on display at the Met Breuer until January 6, 2019, and Fredric Riskin's “[9/11: The Collapse of Conscience](#),” which ran from September 11 to October 13 at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in Soho.

[Zachary Small](#), a young “arts journalist” and “theatremaker,” purports to be writing art criticism, but his overarching point is a purely political one: Art institutions should not legitimize, intentionally or unintentionally, anything considered by the mainstream to be “conspiracy theory.” Doing so, he argues, “mutes the destabilizing and degrading effects of conspiracy on democracy.”

Small is not entirely opposed to the idea of “Everything Is Connected.” His complaint, rather, is against the show's combining of pieces that “take an investigative approach,” documenting things like “the very real existence of government-sanctioned torture and money laundering,” with works of “artistic interpretation” that “revel in the passion of discontent” or that “glorify the notion that the September 11 attacks were an inside job.” (The latter are the paintings of [Sue Williams](#), one of which shows the Twin Towers with the word “nano-thermite,” somewhat smudged out, hovering almost playfully above them.) Small insists that this mix “helps mollify the viewer toward conspiracy.”

But who decides what is “very real” versus “conspiracy” toward which *the viewer must not be mollified*? Perhaps that line is not so sharply defined for curators Douglas Eklund and Ian Alteveer, who apparently want to nudge viewers to be more skeptical of official narratives. In the final moment of the show's [video preview](#), Eklund affirms: “I would like to bring back the idea of art as a way of jolting people to get rid of their preconceived notions and to hopefully question more.”

Instead of probing his own preconceived notions about the topics explored in the art, Small

berates Eklund and Alteveer for believing “there is value in scavenging through the most contested chapters of American history to find plausible alternatives to today’s hard truths.” In Small’s view of the world, it seems, everything he believes is “hard truth.” Everything he doesn’t believe is “conspiracy theory.”

The blinding effect and harsh consequences of Small’s immovable boundary between truth and falsehood are on full display in the second part of his piece for *The Nation*, which turns into a diatribe against Fredric Riskin and his installation “9/11: The Collapse of Conscience.” The primary target of Small’s attack is Riskin’s contention that the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers and Building 7 collapsed not because of the airplane crashes, but from controlled demolition.

Partway into his assault, Small lays bare his extreme lack of knowledge about the science of the World Trade Center’s destruction when he alleges that Riskin “baldly ignores the available evidence, produced by [MIT’s Civil Engineering Department](#) less than a month after the attack.” Small goes on to call the omission of this evidence “purposefully irresponsible.”

In fact, the article by MIT professor Thomas Eagar and his research assistant, Christopher Musso, was positing a theory of the Twin Towers’ collapse that was in vogue in the first year after 9/11 but that official investigators would [rule out by 2004](#). Eagar was hypothesizing that the “weak points . . . were the angle clips that held the floor joists between the columns on the perimeter wall and the core structure.” “As the joists . . . gave way and the outer box columns began to bow outward,” Eagar speculated, “the floors above them also fell.”

The government’s [present-day explanation](#), though just as [devoid of evidentiary support](#), is diametrically contrary to Eagar’s scenario. Today, the story goes that the angle clips connecting the floors and columns did *not* fail. Consequently, the floor trusses, sagging from the heat of the fires, pulled the perimeter columns inward — not outward — until they buckled. The failure of one wall of columns then caused the other columns to fail. The top section of each tower then fell straight down and completely destroyed the lower 60 and 90 stories of intact structure, respectively. (Never mind that the South Tower’s top section actually tips away from the rest of the structure before [spontaneously disintegrating](#) into a midair fireworks display of pulverized concrete and [steel projectiles](#).)

Besides providing an outdated theory and a few corrections to some common misconceptions — indeed, jet fuel fires *cannot* burn hot enough to melt steel and steel *doesn’t* need to melt in order for structural failures to occur — Eagar’s article offers little substance compared with today’s large body of literature about the World Trade Center’s destruction. If Small had done any meaningful research on the subject, he surely would not have presented Eagar’s article as the totality of “available evidence.” Nor would he have implied that all of the available evidence, or even a sufficient amount of evidence to draw any conclusions, could be produced less than a month after the event. This notion flies in the face of [forensic investigation principles](#).

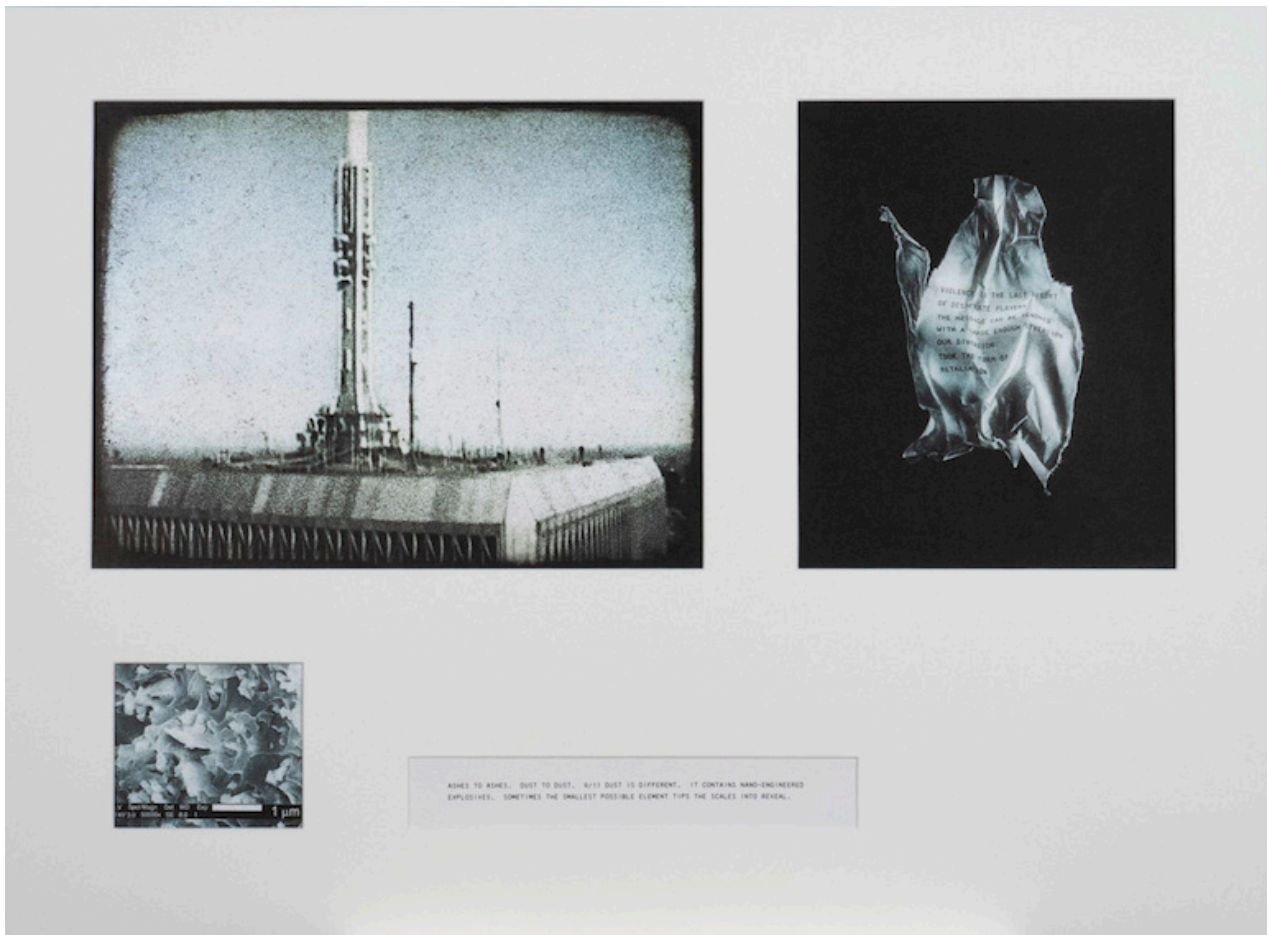
Nevertheless, Small is unrestrained in his criticism of Riskin, accusing him of “pseudo-scientific observations” that devolve into “vengeful incoherence.” On the evidence of his scant research, Small is probably unaware (or he chooses to omit) that each of the statements included in Riskin’s three panels on the World Trade Center’s destruction — while delivered in Riskin’s own idiosyncratic, poetic style — echoes the arguments made by thousands of architects, engineers, and scientists.



“Building 7 . . . goes limp in a free-fall descent with pyroclastic flows of dust. Free-fall is impossible for a naturally collapsing building. It becomes the only steel structured skyscraper in the world to ever collapse due to fire.” Support for Riskin’s claims, most of which are undisputed factual observations, can be found in [9/11: Explosive Evidence — Experts Speak Out, World Trade Center 7, Part 5](#), and in several peer-reviewed papers, including “[The collapse of WTC 7: A re-examination of the ‘simple analysis’ approach](#)” in the Challenge Journal of Structural Mechanics. (Fredric Riskin, 9/11 The Collapse of Conscience, 20” X 27”, Panel 24 of 43, Printed on kozo-backed Gampi using pigment inks. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, NY.)



“A structure collapsing upon itself, floor by floor, is not the path of least resistance. How is it the towers didn’t simply snap and fall like a tree struck by lightning? Instead, they pulverized.” Support for Riskin’s claims can be found in 9/11: Explosive Evidence — Experts Speak Out, World Trade Center Twin Towers, [Part 3](#) and [Part 5](#), and in several peer-reviewed papers, including “[Some Misunderstandings Related to WTC Collapse Analysis](#)” in the International Journal of Protective Structures. (Fredric Riskin, 9/11 The Collapse of Conscience, 20” X 27”, Panel 23 of 43, Printed on kozo-backed Gampi using pigment inks. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, NY.)



"9/11 dust is different. It contains nano-engineered explosives. Sometimes the smallest possible element tips the scales into reveal." Support for Riskin's claims can be found in [9/11: Explosive Evidence — Experts Speak Out, Ground Zero, Part 3](#), and in several peer-reviewed papers, including "[Active Thermitic Material Discovered in Dust from the 9/11 World Trade Center Catastrophe](#)" in The Open Chemical Physics Journal. (Fredric Riskin, 9/11 The Collapse of Conscience, 20" X 27", Panel 16 of 43, Printed on kozo-backed Gampi using pigment inks. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, NY.)

When Small is not ineptly attempting to impugn the scientific validity of Riskin's exposition, he is leveling gratuitous insults at so-called "conspiracy theorists," a pejorative meant to degrade and dehumanize its target. As if artwork about 9/11 should not be shown on 9/11, Small blasts the Feldman Gallery for launching its show on the September 11th anniversary, likening the day to "Christmas for conspiracy theorists." I would like to know what is Christmas-like about a [father](#) or a [brother](#) calling out for justice on the anniversary of their loved one's murder.

Sadly for the state of our understanding of what actually took place on 9/11 — a day that almost any *Nation* reader will agree was used to launch a series of unjustified and disastrous wars that continue to this day — Small is not *The Nation's* first writer to spew such vitriol at those who question the official narrative of that seminal event. In a 2006 diatribe, "[The 9/11 Conspiracy Nuts](#)," the late Alexander Cockburn made several remarkable statements wholly negating "the available evidence." The most notable of those was his certain declaration that "People inside who survived the collapse didn't hear a series of explosions."

Cockburn posed as being well-versed on the claims of the 9/11 Truth Movement. But evidently he did not read, or he chose to ignore, the paper published two weeks earlier by

Graeme MacQueen, a retired professor of Religious Studies and Peace Studies at McMaster University in Canada, titled [“118 Witnesses: The Firefighters’ Testimony to Explosions in the Twin Towers.”](#)

Based on his methodical analysis of transcribed testimonies from 503 members of the New York Fire Department (FDNY), which were made public in 2005 after *The New York Times* [sued the City of New York](#) for their release (no, not all of the evidence could be produced in less than a month), MacQueen found that [118 out of the 503](#) FDNY personnel interviewed “perceived, or thought they perceived, explosions that brought down the Towers.” Still, it’s not difficult to imagine Cockburn reading these oral histories and proceeding to lecture first responders like [Captain Karin DeShore](#) on how the phenomena she witnessed were not explosions taking down the World Trade Center. DeShore recounted in her interview:

“Somewhere around the middle of the World Trade Center, there was this orange and red flash coming out. Initially it was just one flash. Then this flash just kept popping all the way around the building and that building had started to explode. The popping sound, and with each popping sound it was initially an orange and then red flash came out of the building and then it would just go all around the building on both sides as far as I could see. These popping sounds and the explosions were getting bigger, going both up and down and then all around the building.”

The irony is that Cockburn and now Small are guilty of the very thing they seem to be crusading against: people drawing conclusions about world-changing events based more on their biases than on careful evaluation of evidence — what amounts to the ultimate act of hypocrisy for journalists.

Of course, Cockburn and Small are far from the only journalists guilty of this ultimate act of hypocrisy. *The New York Times* [published its review](#) of “Everything Is Connected” one day after *The Nation’s* review was published. More measured and positive in his assessment, *Times*writer Jason Farago reserves his only stridently negative criticism for the aforementioned piece by Sue Williams. It comes as no surprise that he brandishes the same demeaning contempt:

“And sometimes the artists here edge too close to the nutcases’ side for comfort. Sue Williams has recently painted churning, color-saturated works evoking the destruction of the World Trade Center; I bridled at one canvas’s inclusion of the word ‘nanothermite,’ an explosive often mentioned by conspiracy theorists who doubt that planes felled the twin towers.”

It is telling that of all the topics covered in the exhibition, the word “nano-thermite” — an incendiary found in large quantities in the World Trade Center dust, as documented in a 2008 [peer-reviewed academic paper](#) and corroborated by the presence of previously [molten iron spheres](#), by [“Swiss cheese” steel members](#), by numerous [eyewitness accounts](#) of molten metal, and by [liquid metal seen pouring](#) out of the South Tower — is what causes Farago to bridle and resort to epithets like “nutcase” and “conspiracy theorist.” I would wager that Farago has not bothered to investigate why so-called “conspiracy theorists” believe that nano-thermite was used in the World Trade Center’s destruction.

To their immense credit, curators Douglas Eklund and Ian Alteveer refrain almost entirely from using the terms “conspiracy theorist” and even “conspiracy theory” throughout their exhibit. And herein lies the fundamental source of Small’s and Farago’s disgust: Sue

Williams' pieces about 9/11 are featured in a show whose subtitle is "Art and Conspiracy," not "Art and Conspiracy Theory." The exhibit's introductory placard eschews the term "conspiracy theory" in favor of praiseful commentary. The curators write that even the "fantastical works" on display "unearth uncomfortable truths" and that "the exhibition reveals, not coincidentally, conspiracies that turned out not to be theories at all, but truths."

Zachary Small asserts that the Met Breuer and the Feldman Gallery are "whetting their audience's appetite for distrust, disdain, and disaffection," thus feeding "conspiracy theories" that destabilize and degrade our democracy. I assert these developments that Small is concerned about are fed not by the actions of the Met Breuer and the Feldman Gallery, but by the cataclysmic political crimes of the past half century and the refusal of news outlets like *The Nation* to help expose them.

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Featured image: Fredric Riskin, 9/11 The Collapse of Conscience, Installation view. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, NY.

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