



JOEL MEYEROWITZ

AFTERMATH: WORLD TRADE CENTER ARCHIVE

September 11, 2006

The Deborah, Jonathan F. P., Samuel Priest, and Adam R. Rose Main Reading Room

The New York Public Library

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library. The Library, as you know, according to Walt Whitman, contains multitudes, and tonight we are here to celebrate, to commemorate, an extraordinary event. And I think it's quite remarkable that we find ourselves in the Library to do so. An open and free place to the public, eighteen million people come and visit this library every year. And we bring people together tonight, in a space that is usually devoted to silence. We bring it to life in a different way. It is a great pleasure, obviously, to welcome Joel Meyerowitz tonight, and he will be speaking to you shortly.

The great French historian once said, Jules Michelet once said, that the historian's role is to bring the silences alive, to make the silences speak, and Joel Meyerowitz has done this through images. As you know, he had a very difficult time photographing Ground Zero. It was considered a crime scene. If it had not been for his perseverance, we would not have these images today. He will talk, I am sure, about how this experience changed his life. The existentialists once said that man is a useless passion. Obviously this project counters that definition. You will see to what extent this work is a work of devotion and courage, much like the men who worked on the site.

The mayor would have very much liked to be here tonight, but couldn't, and would like me to read this letter to you. "Five years have passed since September 11, 2001. Yet for those of us who lived through that terrible day, the recollection of it continued to be achingly vivid and the sorrow that we feel for the loved ones, neighbors, and friends we lost remains etched in our hearts. This is a day of remembrance, reflection, and renewal. Once again, we draw together just as we did on 9/11 and in the days and weeks that followed. Once again our memories unite us, memories not only of grief and anger but also of extraordinary valor and compassion, and once again we pay tribute to those whose lives were taken in a singularly vicious and criminal act, and we extend our comfort to all those who still mourn their loss. Today is a time for prayer and requiem. It is also an occasion to recommit ourselves to the remarkable, unwavering spirit that carried us through the worst day in our city's history and that has driven our remarkable recovery in the five years since. By continuing to show that spirit, by continuing to embrace our

freedoms, live with courage, and make this an even better city for all our children, we will truly honor the memory of all those we lost. Sincerely, Michael Bloomberg.”

I have a few thanks to make, warm thanks to Altria, particularly, to Diane Eidman, to Duggal Visual Solutions for making the monumental photographs on exhibit today. In 2001 Baldev Duggal worked with Joel and the State Department, created thirty-five exhibitions of the work which traveled throughout the world, as the State Department said, to our friends and enemies alike, and was seen by four million people. To Ceco International for the installation of the photographs and to the Juilliard, and the President of the Juilliard, Dr. Robert Polisi, for graciously giving us the Juilliard Chamber Orchestra for this evening. To Phaidon, the publisher of this most remarkable book, to Liz Thompson in particular. To Ember Rilleau, the studio director for Joel Meyerowitz. To my assistants, who try to keep my life on time—I live my life somewhere between chaos and entropy and they help greatly—Meg Stemmler and Kim Irwin. And to Joel Meyerowitz, who brought this project to my attention. It is an honor to have him here tonight.

(applause)

JOEL MEYEROWITZ: Thank you, Paul. Thank you for LIVE at the New York Public Library, for opening this magnificent room to us. When I was sitting in the room next door, waiting to enter, I could hear the hum of your voices. There was good-hearted warmth in it, a kind of community sense, and it made me think about five years ago

tonight, and the silence that filled our lives and our homes. No laughter. Little conversation. A great deal of fear. Something has returned. Life feels good to us again. This room, which is, as Paul said, devoted to silence and meditation and thought and history and remembrance, suddenly was filled with all of the good energy that the community brings together. That was very heartwarming to both of us in there.

Five years ago, we were all changed. Great sadness fell over us. A day just like today. When I awakened this morning and I saw that sky, I remembered what it was like to be in 2001. I wasn't in New York at that time. I was on Cape Cod. When I heard about the tragedy, I tried to come back to New York, and I couldn't come back to New York. They had closed the city. My wife Maggie and I stayed in Provincetown, waiting for the time to return. And that time was probably similar to what all of you were feeling. We experienced a kind of helplessness. There was little that we could do. Making out a check didn't seem like enough. I felt the frustration. When we came back to New York, five days later, I went down to Ground Zero. I wanted to see for myself, what was it like? That small act of curiosity changed my life.

I stood in a crowd of people on the corner of Chambers and Greenwich Street. Nothing to see. There was a Cyclone fence covered with a scrim of canvas, smoke rising in the distance. I took my Leica off my shoulder and raised it to my eye. And that moment, from behind me, a female police officer poked me in the shoulder, and she said, "No photographs, buddy, this is a crime scene."

One never knows when the road of your life will divide. When she said that to me, I had a sudden current of energy come up, thinking, “This is impossible”—the crime scene was in there and I was on the public thoroughfare, and why shouldn’t I be able to raise my camera? And then she said, “If you do that, I’ll take that camera away. No photography allowed.” Something happened. The thought appeared to me. “I know how I could be helpful. I could find my way inside Ground Zero and make an archive of the efforts of all of those men and women who had immediately run to Ground Zero to help.” The construction workers, firemen, policemen, ironworkers. Everyone who could do something went there, out of a kind of generosity of spirit that seemed just waiting to be tapped. And I thought I could make a small contribution.

I would like to share with you tonight some of the photographs that are in this book, *Aftermath: The World Trade Center Archive*, and tell you some of the stories about some of the people and the events that were in there. But two things before I do that. One, I would personally like to thank Richard Schlagman, who is the publisher of Phaidon Books. You probably all know these books, they are the most wonderfully produced art books in the world. Five years ago, in November, Richard flew to New York to see me. He had seen a few photographs, and he came and said, “Someday, this book, these pictures, should be in an archive. And I want to publish those pictures when the time is right. Don’t rush,” he said, “Feel it out. Let yourself understand what it is you’re doing, and one day we’ll make a book.” So here it is. Eight and a half pounds. Nine months in the making and five years to deliver. Thank you, Richard.

Before we begin, could we observe a few seconds of silence for all those who are no longer here?

Thank you.

In the summer of 2001, two things happened to me. I was married to my wife Maggie in Tuscany, a joyous beginning of the summer, and then I prepared for an exhibition at my daughter Ariel's gallery in Chelsea. And the exhibition was called, "Looking South: New York City Landscapes," pictures I had made over a fifteen-year period from a studio I had in Chelsea. And, although the World Trade Center played the role of the exclamation mark in all of those pictures, they were really about big sky country in New York, about the seasons passing, about the fact that we are an island sitting on the edge of an ocean. There were systems that I was observing as if for the first time.

During that summer, I was surrounded by these large-scale photographs in the small studio I use in Provincetown. Perhaps that was what gave me some kind of inner momentum to address the issues in Ground Zero. The fact that I had lived with those buildings in an intimate way for so many months. On September 7th, I made this photograph. I was in New York to work with a laboratory to make some prints and I went back to my old studio just to see what things looked like. And I remember about dusk I made this picture, thinking: "It's a relatively plain day, not much going on. I'll come back next week, they'll always be here." The way we say that in a kind of familiar way, take things for granted. Of course, they no longer are.

After that police officer awakened me, I tried to figure out how to get into Ground Zero. It was impossible. I called the director of the Museum of the City of New York, and said, "I would like to make an archive for you. Can you write me a letter? Can you help me get in?" He did. Graciously wrote the letter. I waved it in front of the first officer I saw the next day, and he basically said, "What kind of scam is this? This letter isn't going to get you in. Anybody could forge this letter." So I went back and I searched through my few friends and contacts on the edge of the bureaucracy, and I found somebody I knew and I called him up and said, "Do you think you could do anything for me? Who do you know in the government who could help me?" He was the Commissioner of Parks in the Borough of Manhattan. He said to me, "I am the government." "Well, great, what can you do?" He said, "I'm going to give you a worker's pass."

So with that pass, and the letter, and a certain degree of chutzpah, I entered the site on September 23rd, twelve days after the fall. And it was, I think, an unspeakable, unimaginable experience, initially. I was driven in in a small three-wheel vehicle by a Parks Department ranger who abandoned me as soon as he could, knowing that I would be getting into trouble any moment, and he didn't want to be around to be part of it. I stood there bareheaded and I could use all the help I could get, and I thought to myself, "This is a dangerous place, and what am I doing here?" Hanging on a piece of scaffolding fifteen feet away was a hardhat, which I managed to liberate and put on, and noticed that it said on the front, "NYPD," and I thought, "This is a great start. Things are auspicious

already.” That and a mask and some gloves and as I thought to myself, “all I need is a tattoo and some muscle and I’ll fit right in here.”

Nonetheless, standing in front of the enormity of the collapsed hundred-and-ten-story North Tower was to witness the sheer horrific power of the fall. There was no concrete to speak of. It was steel and rebar and aluminum and wiring and cables and plumbing and everything hard and sharp and dangerous, and one felt one’s own fleshy vulnerability in the face of such a catastrophe.

I had written to Mayor Giuliani the week before, composed a four-page proposal about what I wanted to do in Ground Zero, and I based it on the Farm Security Administration photographs of the Depression. I enumerated all of the assets that were down there. Building facades, lampposts, trees and parks, subway entrances, news kiosks. I wanted to make a description of everything in and around Ground Zero, as well as the lives of the workers who came to do the task of cleaning up and making the recovery.

This is the front of the Winter Garden, where a bridge leaped out of that hole and crossed the highway onto the mezzanine of the plaza. To stand in front of this building, once a glittering marble atrium and now a shaggy room glazed by sunlight was incredibly moving, and I was back there just this morning and was amazed to see and hear the sounds of children, the children of Battery Park City, playing in this atrium again, an atrium peopled with men in business suits and kids in diapers, a real community again.

This is the American Express Building and the World Financial Center and in it, stuck up twenty stories above ground, is a three-story piece of the World Trade Center. Those buildings were built in three-story modules so they could be erected by cranes that climbed up the side, kangaroo cranes they were called. And this stick, as the ironworkers called the steel, this stick was snapped out of one of the towers as it collapsed and was hurled, like a javelin, into the side of the building and then it ratcheted its way down, down, to stop in the corner offices.

I'm taking you on a little tour around the site, so you can see some of the buildings that played a role.

This was October 7th and I have to share with you two events that gave shape to my existence down there. I was photographing north of where I'm standing here and two officers came over to me and threw me out. This happened to me two or three times a day, every day, because everybody followed the edict of the mayor and the police commissioner, "no photography allowed." And I wasn't hiding my cameras. I was using an old wooden camera to make my images because I wanted a certain authenticity. That didn't stop them, anyway, they said, "Out, no photographs." And I said, "Come on, guys, I'm making a historical collection for the Museum of the City of New York." They said, "It doesn't matter. Chief Fellini wants you outta here now." I said, "Please, let me talk to the Chief, I'll explain to him, he'll understand." "He doesn't want to talk to you, he wants

you gone, now.” I said, “Okay, I’ll have to go this way.” So they let me, and they admonished me, “No more photographs.”

I came to this point, and I stood there, witnessing this extraordinary red, white, and blue day, and I set up my camera. I got under the dark cloth and no sooner did I ready myself than I heard the crunch of tires on the gravel next to me, and a voice say, “What are you doing?” I came out and I was greeted by a fireman, and I said, “I’m photographing here.” He said, “No photographs allowed.” And I said, “Wait a second. I was just over with Chief Fellini.” And he said, “Oh, no problem.” **(laughter)** Little bit of wisdom. And, at that moment, I realized that from now on every day when I come in here, I’m going to find out who is the chief on duty and where his trailer is so I can give them that, pointing, “Oh yes, Chief Esposito said it was okay.” Name-dropping was never a better *modus operandi*.

Anyway, when I stood here, I had a second experience. It was chilly in the shadows and warm in the sunlight, and I had that feeling of, “what a beautiful day, it’s so good to be alive,” and then I remembered where I was, and I had that moment of hesitation: “Dare I make this picture, is it right for me to feel this way? This is a tragedy. This feels so beautiful, the day is so gorgeous.” And then I thought, “I must make this picture,” because time and nature, indifferent to our activities on earth, are the impulses, are the surround, that will ultimately help us get some perspective on this, and that in fact we need beauty, beauty gives us hope, and perhaps that’s why some of these pictures have

the fragrance of beauty in them, some need of my own, faced with the painful realities of every day in Ground Zero, made me open up to that possibility.

These are the men of the Arson and Explosion Squad, detectives, who I met in Ground Zero. They, and they alone, are responsible for this book that I hold in my hands today. When I met them that first night, and they showed me curiosity and friendship before they decided to throw me out, and they asked what I was doing with that old wooden camera, I explained to them that I was making this historical document, and I remember clearly someone saying to me, “Oh, yes, we need this for our kids and our grandchildren. We have to have this.” And I said, in all innocence, “I wish every cop was like you guys, because I’m thrown out every single day.” And they said to me, “Oh, that’s going to stop, we’re going to take care of you. Here’s our cell phone numbers. Any time someone stops you, you just call us and we’re going to come and get you.” Now, many of these men are in the room tonight, and I would be honored if you would please stand, and let us see who you are.

(applause)

And perhaps this is the moment to share that response with the others who are in this room. There are Port Authority policemen, and firemen, and chaplains, and ironworkers, and construction workers, and family members, all of whom have sacrificed, and worked hard, and lost family members and friends, and if you would be willing to stand in the

room so that we can recognize your sacrifices, too, I would be honored. Please. All, please.

(applause)

I thank you for your generosity. So many of these people worked for months on end without being recognized, and part of what I thought I was doing by making these photographs was to bring to all of us the things that we couldn't see inside that forbidden city, to share with us the visceral connection, so that we would understand better what it was like for them. And I should say, before I take this picture off the screen, that the first gift they gave me, besides the gift of friendship, was to take me and my equipment up to the top of the lower stories of the World Financial Center and bring me to the edge, where I made the photograph that graces the cover of this book and that is spread out behind the orchestra here behind us. It was a great start, my friends.

The ironworkers, many of them men who put the buildings up thirty-five years ago, never thinking they would be here to take them apart, came back in huge numbers, and they did that heavy, dirty work of burning down the standing steel, disconnecting everything, winching it up, and hauling it away. And they worked with incredible safety. There were no deaths from working on the site during the nine months.

This is a moment that I think of as "five more found." One night around ten-thirty or so, I saw a stream of firemen running through the rubble of the South Tower, up over the hills

of steel, and down into a little gully. They had made a recovery. And I followed them, and went into this little place, and when I came over the crest this is what I saw. As I worked my way down, closer to that center spot, which was a void in all of the debris, a stairwell. When I arrived there, I heard somebody come out of the stairwell and say, “The men are intact,” and it says on this stairwell that this stairway is from the North Tower. And there was a palpable hush that pushed outward into this gang of men, as I imagine they were all feeling that flight themselves and their comrades’ last moments.

Every day in the first three or four months, while the fires were raging down below, any time a piece of steel was pulled out of the framework of the pile, oxygen would race in and explode and usually huge clouds of ash and debris would rise up. And it happened here, just a few moments before, and as that cloud rose, it sailed past the building off of which sunlight was glinting on a sharp edge and came through the clouds in this kind of penumbra of light, somewhat like a nineteenth-century Romantic painting, so I’ve been told.

There’s some question now about a staircase that is being thought of as a monument, a survivors’ staircase, down which people fled from the mezzanine of the plaza down to the streets below. While that staircase was intact, with its escalators, I went up it one day, and climbed through a broken window into a preschool program space and wandered around among the tumbled cribs and the racks of kids’ jackets and their lunchboxes and came upon this scene of an ambulance and a police car on the street in the dust of the floor of the preschool and thought how it mimicked what happened outside.

It was one Sunday, I think in November, when the city opened Church Street for a memorial service. Seven thousand family members came. And it was not a political event, there were no speeches. There were prayers, and there was song and music, and it was a solemn outpouring of feeling. And afterwards, as people left, they passed by the barriers that had cordoned off the street and behind the barriers there were numerous firemen, and people started handing over photographs and flowers and stuffed animals, and asking the firemen to put them somewhere, and out of the rubble, this little monument, a temporary monument, arose, and it was exquisite for me to watch the firemen, each and every one of them, come to the barrier and take a photograph and hold it in their hands and look at it, carefully, caringly, deeply, connecting to it, and then to the person who brought it, and then carrying it at a dirge speed back to this pile and putting it to rest there.

Last year I had an exhibition. I don't think we can see here, no, just below where the fireman is placing his flowers is a tiny picture. And last year I had an exhibition, and a woman called me up and said, "Mr. Meyerowitz, go the exhibition and look behind this photograph and you will see something." So I went back to the exhibition, and I looked behind the photograph and this card fell out, that I'm holding here. And this card is the card that that fireman had just placed on the pile, and it is the portrait of a young woman and her child. She perished on Flight 93. I keep this close.

Among the great scale of the debris at the pile we tend to forget the small things. Parking meters that were bent over by the wind and whose glass faces literally melted from the heat that roared up the street. Trees that were scythed down by huge pieces of steel flying through the dust cloud. I thought that this was a reminder that these humble things were also destroyed.

One night, one evening actually, just around dusk, I was standing with my friends from the Arson and Explosion Squad, you can see our shadows, and we were just looking over the pile, and it suddenly went quiet—the shift must have changed—and the sun had just gone out of the sky, and it went from pink to purple to blue, and then the most amazing thing happened. [**“Taps” is played.**] That sound filled the grand amphitheatre of Ground Zero. A Broadway musician had convinced a cop on the perimeter to let him come in to play “Taps” for the dead.

Within moments of that sound, this worker came walking up the hill, and I noticed the tears in his eyes, and I stepped in front of him and asked to make his portrait. And as we talked, he said, “This morning, I was in the Customs Building, and I was burning the steel, and my torch ignited some buried ammunition and it exploded.” He said, “I have some shrapnel in my face. I’ve got five stitches underneath this bandage.” But he went right back to work.

This is Lieutenant John Ryan of the Port Authority Police. He pretty much ran the site from the Port Authority point of view during the months I was down there. He was a

great friend and help to me. One afternoon, when I was down several levels in the pit, a grapppler machine reached into the rubble and pulled out some stuff, and suddenly fluttering to the ground were hundreds of photographs. It was the Port Authority archive—bridges, tunnels, roadways, events, all of it fluttering. I asked the guy in the grapppler to wait a second and I ran up the hill looking for Lieutenant Ryan. I found him and he and his men went down and effectively saved the archive. Three or four hours later, I bump into John on the site again, and he said, “Hey, Joel, look at this,” and he showed me his graduation photographs from the police academy. He had found them in the pile, the needle in the haystack.

This is a woman named Pia Hofmann, who deserves our special attention. She is the only woman operating engineer, which means she can drive any big machine, a grapppler or a crane. She is licensed to do so. During the recovery process, when remains were found, if they were remains from the uniformed services, they were generally treated in a military fashion and covered with a flag and carried out on a Stokes basket, a small stretcher. Civilians were treated differently. Their remains were placed in red body bags. And so, on the site, when remains were uncovered, people would say, “Flag or bag?” to know what to do. I should say that with the uniformed services, there was often an honor guard to bring the recovery out. One day, Pia was operating a grapppler, and she uncovered the body of a woman, and she called one of the recovery people to come and help her and he called out for a bag, and she said, “No. This is a woman. We want an honor guard and a flag.” And there was a little bit of indecision, I guess, and Pia put the claw of her machine down very gently and covered the remains and said, “She’s not moving until you bring an

honor guard and a flag.” And that one gesture of consciousness and recognition and compassion changed the way things operated at the site, so I think she deserves our special commendation for being so open-hearted. Thank you, Pia.

(applause)

On the other hand there was Eddie, newly released from confinement, or just out of jail, and Eddie had a voice that was in **[switches to gruff, gravelly voice]** this range, you see, a lifetime of screaming, I’m sure. But he was a good-humored, funny guy and I made this portrait of him and the portrait ran in the *New Yorker* magazine and Eddie bought up all the copies of the *New Yorker* he could find and when next I saw him in the site, he said, “Oh, Joel, I’m a made man now. Even my mother loves me now.” He said, “Listen, anything I can do for you, I will.” He says, “You know, I do slice and dice, if ever you want a little lime and a little, some roses, I’ll take care of things, anything for you, Joelly boy.” I’m happy to say I haven’t had a chance to take him up on this. But don’t get on my wrong side.

This is a photograph of a man named Charlie Vitchers, who was the Bovis superintendent who consolidated the site from the four different construction companies that were running it all under his aegis and we are in a double-wide trailer here, and these are the representatives of the various trades that were running the site: security and water and electrical and ironworkers and everyone concerned, far more than I can name, and

Charlie welcomed me into that world, and certainly educated me to the way the process was and I've enjoyed his company. I hope he's here tonight.

Throughout the nine months, the one consistent act one could see everywhere on the site, the most emblematic image, were men and women raking, either on their hands and knees with a small hand tool, sifting it through screens, or standing up and raking the debris fields that were prepared for them and they did this from when it was a pile till when it came down, down, seventy-two feet below street level to bedrock in Manhattan. And you see here two firemen who I became friendly with. Paul Geidel, on the right, retired, and his son, Ralph, and they spent their months finding the remains of many others but searching for the missing member, Gary. Paul is here tonight with his wife, Barbara. I want to say that their consistency, their strength, their morality was incredibly powerful to be around.

We are near the end. The site was to close in a day or so. Dusk is falling and there is a man on his hands and knees looking at one square foot of rubble, sifting through it, asking the question "Bone or stone?", weighing each pebble in his hand, to see if it was something that might still have vital DNA that might bring some kind of recognition and consolation to a family member. And this seemed to me to be the act that I saw every day, an act of devotion, on their hands and knees, almost no different than prayer.

At the end of May, they closed the site, and the workers had recommended that they retain one core column of the South Tower, as a model, as a metaphor for the last body

out, and that night they cut it down. One of the men who cut it down is here, Willie Quinlan, who actually stood on top of that column one afternoon while I was in one of those man baskets, and I photographed him there. He invited me to stand on that column. Terrifying to me. To him it was—that's his turf, as comfortable on this three-foot piece of steel sixty feet above the ground as being in his living room. Anyway, when they cut it down, hundreds and hundreds of workers returned to sign the column. And this column will ultimately be displayed in the memorial museum in Ground Zero.

The next morning, that column, dressed in black nylon, covered with an American flag, was the last piece out. Pipers piped it out. They closed the site the next day. One month later, on June 21st, I went back to Ground Zero, the longest day of the year, a summer's day. I just needed to go and spend the day there. I would like to read to you, since I wrote this book, as well as made the photographs, I think I should behave like an author for a moment and just read what happened to me on that day:

“It seemed fitting to go back into the site on the longest day of the year, a day not unlike 9/11, except that the promise of summer was in the air. The familiar territory within the bathtub walls was unnaturally quiet as I descended. Now empty of the nearly four million pounds of debris that had so recently fallen there. It was a slow, meditative walk, filled with images that randomly flashed across my mind. I felt as if an enormous transparent library soared above me, through which I could see, distributed throughout its layered levels, the eight-thousand-plus images that I had made. First as I walked on my early

rounds over the hills of rubble and later spiraling down and around the site throughout the successive months of its removal.

I crossed over the PATH train tracks, near where the last column had stood. As I stopped for a moment to look at a weathered scrap of newspaper, yellowed and decaying at my feet, my eye caught a touch of unexpected color. There, in the shadow of a railroad tie, some tender shoots of grass were making their way up through the rubble. For thirty-five years, this patch of dirt must have lain there in the dark beneath the rolling wheels and pounding of the trains and now, with a little sun, some rain, and the cycle of day and night and season, back to life it came. If the earth has such resilience, then we, who stand on the grass in the sunlight, are truly blessed.”