JOEL MEYEROWITZ'S GROUND ZERO ARCHIVE

words: DANIEL KUNITZ

SUMMING UP ZERO

***AFTERMATH*, JOEL MEYEROWITZ'S NEW BOOK OF PHOTOGRAPHS, opens with four images of Lower Manhattan, south-facing vistas captured from the New Yorker's loft on 19th Street. Taken from the same vantage point in different light – violet darkness; a sunny, cirrus-streaked morning; a rose-tinted evening; hazy midday – each features a low horizon from which jut unmistakably the twin towers of the World Trade Center. On 11 September 2001 the photographer was hundreds of miles away on Cape Cod, editing a book on the downtown prospects from his window. His plans quickly changed.**

During the massive rescue, recovery and clean-up effort that followed – an endeavour the size of which remained, until now, impossible to grasp, even by those of us who lived nearby – all photographers were officially and inexplicably banned. In the weeks that followed the 11th Meyerowitz, partly through connections though mainly as a result of utter determination, managed to insinuate himself into this heavily guarded camp, staying for some six months and producing 8,500 images that document what went on at Ground Zero during that period. The images capture the people involved and the physical challenge of sifting through and then removing what had been destroyed. Trained as a street photographer – which Meyerowitz, who played an important role in pioneering the use of colour photography during the 1960s and 70s, defines as "someone who is not driven by editorialising or making pictures for the page" – he stuck neither to one genre nor one avenue of investigation: among the many images, one finds impromptu portraits of firemen, policemen and ironworkers; volunteers serving food; a landscape with three mechanical excavators – in orange, red and yellow – bent, like dinosaurs drinking from a stream, in front of the blasted web of a cathedral-like wall from the towers' façade; a still life of dust-covered fruit rotting on the counter of a bodega; a crowd of firemen lit in the darkness by an acetylene torch and looking, as the photographer notes, like the burghers in Rembrandt's *Night Watch* (1642).

"When I set this task for myself initially," he explains, "I used as my guide the FSA [Farm Security Administration] photographs from back in the Depression. Roy Stryker, the head of the FSA Historical Section, had created a shooting script for all of those photographers – Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee – to walk around with. And I did the same thing." He even appealed to then mayor Rudolph Guiliani to form "a miniature FSA here in New York with six other photographers. I wasn't looking to do this for myself or for glory – it was a bigger task than I could handle. The mayor had no response; he just passed on it. I ultimately had to go in myself and do this work." Of course, it was not like the work he had done previously. "As I went around I would think, Well this has to be for history," he continues. "So I would look at everything with some kind of historical perspective: how are people going to read this 30 years from now, 50 years from now? When we don't have diesel-driven cranes and tractors, it's going to look quaint. In a way I functioned more like a historian." Then again, he says, taking these pictures did have one fundamental thing in common with his earlier work: "If I was a Magnum photographer, I would have been looking to make gutsy double-page spreads that would sell worldwide, but since I wasn't doing that, I had the liberty, the luxury, to walk slowly around the site and to stand in awe. I think that my capacity for awe is the thing that has underscored all of my photography. I'm still enough of a bumpkin to stand someplace and say, 'Oh my God, that's *phenomenal*.'"

He shot most of the pictures with a 4 x 5" wooden camera (he also had a small 35mm Leica), though he usually uses an 8x10", a format that was impossible because, he claims, "of certain physical limitations. People don't know this, but the ground shook all the time, as if a subway was running under your feet. There were so many machines in there and there was such a fretwork of wires and steel, all jumbled together, the whole pile vibrated all the time. So a big camera would have been a total loss."

Instead, little seems to have escaped his lens. And, with all this archival material, he has created a database of all the images, 1000 of which he has already donated to the Museum of the City of New York. Perhaps looking at these pictures will alter the lives of viewers as taking them has transformed the photographer. "Having done this as a social gesture, a socially conscious gesture, I've come out of it," he says, "after eight and a half months there, with the sense that there's more that I should do with my life. What's changed for me is my sense of responsibility."

Aftermath: The World Trade Center Archive *is published by Phaidon Press in September.* Joel Meyerowitz: Out of the Ordinary, 1970–1980 *will be on show at the Jeu de Paume, Paris from 3 October 2006 to 14 January 2007*

previous page:
South Tower
looking west

above:
A crane being
erected

right:
The Winter Garden

below:
Inside the pile
looking west.
All images from
Aftermath: The World Trade Center Archive
by Joel Meyerowitz,
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