

The Unbuilding

Joel Meyerowitz spent nine months photographing the cleanup at the World Trade Center site.

AFTERMATH

World Trade Center Archive.

By Joel Meyerowitz.

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By JONATHAN MAHLER

“THE Pile,” as the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center were known among rescue workers in the aftermath of 9/11, was effectively off limits to the daily press. The Police Department treated the location as a crime scene and cordoned off the entire area; and with its hazardous topography of gnarled steel, to say nothing of potentially lethal invisible contaminants like carcinogenic fumes, the site was, in addition to so much else, unsafe.

But partly through connections — he was friendly with the father of Manhattan’s parks commissioner — and partly through persistence, the photographer Joel Meyerowitz, who grew up in the Bronx, gained continuous access to ground zero during almost nine months of the cleanup. Armed with a worker’s badge and a large-format wooden camera, he chronicled the unbuilding of the World Trade Center site, producing a collection of images numbering in the thousands, several hundred of which have been brought together in “Aftermath.”

It was an unusual project for Meyerowitz. He is not a photojournalist, and is probably best known for the summer-cottage staple “Cape Light,” a book of color photos of Cape Cod. He compared his task at ground zero to that of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and the other photographers commissioned by the Farm Security Administration in the 1930’s to document the effects of the Depression.

Meyerowitz’s comically old-fashioned-looking camera was a useful ice-breaker with workers as he moved around the 16-acre site, but it also yielded almost purely descriptive photographs of the wreckage, from the charred hulks and smoking mountains of skyscraper detritus, to the thick layer of fine dust covering the cafe tables inside the Winter Garden, to a melted, mangled parking meter on Barclay Street. Meyerowitz also recorded quotidian life in the so-called “forbidden city” — the spray-painted signage on the sides of surviving structures, the conference rooms repurposed as dormitories — and those who lived it: the firefighters, engineers, chaplains, iron workers and other civilians and civil servants who did the job of clearing the area where the twin towers had once stood.

Looking through “Aftermath,” one sees these men and women — sometimes working alone, sometimes in clusters — bearing the nation’s collective grief as they gradually restore order to chaos. Their grim task notwithstanding, the effect is uplifting. They are not just knocking down the vestigial shells of half-destroyed buildings and clearing away mountains of metal, they are reclaiming this hallowed ground, making it possible once again to imagine a future there. □

Jonathan Mahler, a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine, is the author of “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning.”



Column 1001B, from the south tower (photographed March 30, 2002), was “the last ‘body’ out of the site” at the end of May. Top, cars wrecked in the attacks were taken to the Fresh Kills landfill (photographed Jan. 25, 2002).

From “Aftermath”