

Finding aids to the past: bearing personal witness to traumatic public events  
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The past compels us for what it tells us about the present. It is no wonder, then, that nearly everyone with a voice claims territoriality for it - wide-ranging collectives like nation-states; large-scale interested groups bonded by ethnicity, class and race; professional communities driven by expertise, like historians, filmmakers or journalists. Each strives to colonize connections to the past as a way of lending credence, cohesion or even a simple perspective to life in the present.

But the past's compelling aspects - in particular, its lived and experienced dimensions - do not begin when we position ourselves as members of groups. Rather, they draw us already as individuals, amateur presences who connect through a personal need to interact with the past. This need makes us act in atypical ways, particularly when we face public events of a traumatic nature. Situated as bystanders to history-in-the-making, individuals in such cases often respond in ways that are out of the ordinary. They hoard and store newspapers from events of days long past. They compile personal videotape archives of television news broadcasts from events as wide-ranging as the Kennedy assassination, the Gulf War or the death of Princess Diana. And, as in the recent case of thousands of New Yorkers and others who painfully plodded to the site of the World Trade Center attacks, they allow time to stand still as they search for a way to respond to the trauma that unfolded there.

What is it, then, that propels actions that are so out of the ordinary yet patterned in their typicality across space and time? This article attempts to clarify what it means to forge a personal connection with a traumatic public past. It ponders whether there is a space for connecting as individuals to the past that in turn shapes its ensuing collective appropriations. The project is unevenly structured, considering two very different kinds of traumatic pasts - one long gone, the other which we are still experiencing. It uses the responses by individual liberators to the liberation of the concentration camps in the Second World War as a template for considering the responses now being shaped to the 11 September World Trade Center attacks by residents, firefighters, police and emergency medical personnel. In each case, the personal need to respond to traumatic public events generates individual acts of bearing witness that unify the collective, forged primarily through one mode of documentation - photography. Photography, and the ritual practices it involves, helps individuals establish moral accountability in a way that helps them move on, and in so doing they reinstate the collective after traumatic events temporarily shatter its boundaries.

### Bearing witness to a traumatic past

Although trauma initially denoted a term for the physical wounds causing pain and suffering, it now reflects a range of cognitive-emotional states caused by suffering and existential pain. Scholarship on public trauma first drew attention during the late 19th century, when spreading industrialization and the use of technology produced industrial accidents to which the public was unaccustomed (Young, 1996). Technology both increased the occurrence of traumatic acts and access to them.

The responses to traumatic events unfold in patterned ways. Public trauma occurs when actions - wars, major disasters or other large-scale cataclysmic events - rattle default notions of what it means morally to remain members of a collective. Individual response is key here, for individuals face fundamental questions about the collective's capacity to accommodate both the personal and group needs arising from the trauma at hand. It is no surprise, then, that when faced with public trauma, people work towards recovery by drawing upon personal aspects of their identity, which remain at the core of recovery's three stages -establishing safety, engaging in remembrance and mourning, and reconnecting

with ordinary life (Herman, 1992: 155; also Caruth, 1996; Crane, 1997; Owen and Ehrenhaus, n.d.). The connection between the individual and collective remains interdependent throughout this recovery process: while the sense of self is rebuilt necessarily in connection with others, with recovery taking place 'in the context of relationships', groups are rarely the first resource to consider in the aftermath of a traumatic event (Herman, 1992: 133, 218). Instead, the individual remains the lynchpin through which the upheaval and dislocation caused by trauma begin to be replaced by shared social meanings and a renewed sense of collective purpose.

Personal response thereby marks the process of recovering from trauma. Individuals experiencing trauma tend to respond first in individuated states connected to personal roles - as parents, children or spouses - even when asked to activate professional roles in connection with the trauma at hand.<sup>1</sup> A space is created by which individuals work through the encounter with trauma first as individuals and only afterward as members of a broader collective. In the cases under discussion here, photographs fill that space, facilitating the work by which individuals establish moral accountability, move on from the trauma, and in so doing help return the collective to its pre-traumatic unified state.

It has long been argued that bearing witness offers one way of working through the difficulties that arise from traumatic experience, by bringing individuals together on their way to collective recovery. Defined as an act of witnessing that enables people to take responsibility for what they see (Zelizer, 1998: 10; also Irwin-Zarecka, 1994), bearing witness moves individuals from the personal act of 'seeing' to the adoption of a public stance by which they become part of a collective working through trauma together. In Shoshana Felman's words, bearing witness is 'not merely to narrate, but to commit oneself and . . . the narrative to others: to take responsibility for history or for the truth of the occurrence . . . [it is] an appeal to community' (Felman, 1992: 204). The act of bearing witness helps individuals cement their association with the collective as a post hoc response to the trauma of public events that, however temporarily, shatter the collective. By assuming responsibility for the events that occurred and reinstating a shared post hoc order, bearing witness thus becomes a mark of the collective's willingness to move toward recovery.

It is fair to assume, however, that despite the impulse to come together with others, individuals remain central actors in the movement from trauma to recovery. For even as time moves on and bearing witness moves into mediated forms, the personal need to respond to trauma does not disappear. Rather, it shapes and is shaped by the collective appropriations at its side. What, then, is the personal dimension of bearing witness? And what role does photography play in its shaping?

### Photography and bearing witness

For many, seeing at some level constitutes believing. In that regard, photos offer a vehicle by which individuals can see and continue to see until the shock and trauma associated with disbelieving can be worked through. This suggests that the movement from trauma to a post-traumatic space may be facilitated at least in part by photography, not only in its strategic relay - the making of photographs - but in its usage over time as well.

The capacity to forge a personal connection with a traumatic public past depends first on the materiality of photographs, whereby photographic images stand in for the larger event, issue or setting they are called to represent. Photographs concretize memory in an accessible and easily understandable fashion, externalizing events in a way that allows us to recognize them as real, concrete proof of the events being depicted. Photography thereby aids the recall of things and events past so effectively that

photos often become the primary markers of memory itself. We need only think of the broad familiarity of the image of Lee Harvey Oswald being shot by Jack Ruby to recognize how far a photograph can go when standing in for a depicted event.

Yet invoking photographs to shape a collective past has its limitations. Photos at best offer arbitrary, composite, conventionalized and simplified glimpses of the past. They are conventionalized, because the image has to be meaningful for an entire group; simplified, because in order to be generally meaningful and capable of transmission, the complexity of the image must be reduced as far as possible' (Fentress and Wickham, 1992: 47-8). They are also schematic, lacking the detail of the images of personal memory. Collectively held images thus act as signposts within definitive limitations, directing rememberers to preferred meaning by the fastest if not the most all-encompassing route. When taken together, these aspects of the image create a mnemonic frame in which people can remember with others.

The collective's ability to remember through images also depends on a recognized means of storage. For unless cultures have the 'means to freeze the memory of the past, the natural tendency of social memory is to suppress what is not meaningful or intuitively satisfying . . . and substitute what seems more appropriate or more in keeping with their particular conception of the world' (Fentress and Wickham, 1992: 58-9). The capacity in modern cultures to freeze, replay and store visual memories for large numbers of people - facilitated by museums, art galleries, television archives and other visual data banks - has enhanced our ability to make the past work for present aims. But both display and storage have personal dimensions, and, indeed, perhaps for no one has the photograph proved as valuable as it has for the individual.

Literature on amateur photography stresses the importance of making and using images for individual purposes. Amateur photographers take photos for fun, as records, and to satisfy personal obligations. Amateur photographs help people order their memories and demonstrate cultural membership (Chalfen, 1987). They offer therapeutic value in events associated with death and grieving (Ruby, 1995). And even in families with traumatized pasts, they unify (Hirsch, 1997). Photography thus helps individuals mobilize with others in a way that is necessary for collectively working through events experienced in common.

On such impulses are predicated the personal dimensions to the response of bearing witness. The private person is involved in the two activities crucial to photography - making and using images. Bearing witness succeeds when images are made and used by individuals in patterned, often ritualized personal behavior that in turn helps cement the collective.

#### Ground performance: bearing witness to the Holocaust

The role of individuals in bearing witness was aptly illustrated following the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in 1945. The circumstances surrounding the camps' liberation created a fertile environment for recognizing the role of photography. The liberation of the camps was the first major traumatic event to occur after the consolidation of photography in daily news. It took place when miniature cameras were on the rise, and many soldiers went into battle with cameras in their pockets. When the camps on the western front were liberated in the spring of 1945, there was a mandate to 'see' what was going on in the camps so as to help people believe the circulating stories of Nazi atrocities. General Dwight Eisenhower ordered photographers within 100 miles to change course and tour the camps so as to take pictures of what they found inside. He arranged junkets of journalists, editors and parliamentarians into the camps. And, on the home front, newspapers and journals were urged to print the images, with people encouraged to attend pavement exhibits of poster-size atrocity photographs.

This made the act of bearing witness into a mission to which most Americans subscribed for both individual and collective reasons, and photography helped them do so.

Liberators were not the only agent responsible for bearing witness; certainly, much has been made of the role of the media themselves in creating public awareness about the camps and Nazi atrocity (Zelizer, 1998). However, one of the untold pieces of the visual documentation of the liberation of the camps was that of amateur photography. The liberators who 'opened' the concentration camps to the free world became the involuntary holders of what remains one of the most atrocious and unbelievable memories in recent history and became a group in need of working through the trauma caused by what they saw. Facing scenes that were unexpected, horrific and beyond belief, these individuals needed personally to engage in the act of bearing witness in order to work through to recovery. The availability of cameras made the act of taking pictures an obvious way to respond personally to trauma.

Thus, as liberators entered the camps, they took snapshot after snapshot of what they saw, to the extent that making and using photos would become a standard response to later traumatic public events. A veritable cottage industry emerged from the need to bear witness. This amateur photographic record produced numerous memory pamphlets, military booklets (such as *Yank*), organs of specific divisions or pamphlets (such as the Rainbow Division's *The Badge*) and military unit histories (such as *Timberwolf Tracks*, the history of the 104th Infantry Division). Each included images taken by soldiers with private cameras during the camps' liberation. Furthermore, individual liberators compiled personal albums of the shots they took of the camps.

The amateur mission in snapping shots of the camps was largely personal, motivated by a desire to record the scenes for posterity. 'What I took was there', offered one former soldier. 'It was fact' (Kushlis, 1979). Photos were taken often by company commanders, who positioned members of their units so that they could be seen against the display of Nazi atrocity, and later made into duplicates for unit members. At times, soldiers alternated, taking photographs with each other's cameras alongside the bodies (Mercer, 1980).

This reflected a desire to record the scenes for history. As one soldier later put it, 'we weren't taking pictures of each other. We were taking pictures of conditions' (Baker, 1980). One liberator, when asked to share photos he had taken of the camps, described them in a matter-of-fact fashion:

Oh yeah. This right here is Omar Bradley. This is Walton Walker. These are some of the dead bodies, as you can see here. And this is General Patton right here. . . . I took these photos myself. These photos are so well-done that there is no grain in the picture because I took them with aerial photography film.

On the back of the photo, he had scribbled 'I took these pictures. Send them home to mother after you have seen them. Look in *Time* magazine of 14 May 1945 and you will see General Eisenhower talking to the man under the arrow' (Figure 1). After sharing another photograph, he pointed out to his interviewer that 'this is General Eisenhower, as you can see. I walked right up to him and took the picture' (Mercer, 1980).

FIGURE 1



Credit: Fred Mercer Collection, courtesy of the Witness to the Holocaust Project, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University

Amateur photographs of the liberation took on a patterned photographic aesthetic, that echoed the aesthetic set in place by professional photographers (see Zelizer, 1998: 86-140). The aim here was clear: to construct a visual template that could help individuals take responsibility for what they saw. This was the template necessary for bearing witness.

The record produced by the amateur photographers was uneven. On the one hand, certain liberator shots were blurred and unclear. One American GI recalled that the photos he took were 'dim, for I was not a photographer' (Young, n.d.). Yet others resembled the shots of professional photographers, reproducing familiar scenes of boxcars of dead bodies outside Dachau, pits of bodies in Belsen, and stacks of bodies in Buchenwald, that differed only by the addition of a soldier in one corner of the photo. Sometimes the amateur photos were printed in the press, though generally after considerable delay. After returning home, years later soldiers sent their personal photos of the camps to local newspapers for publication. One such photo, printed as part of a letter to the editor 33 years after the camps were liberated, was published in response to a book review on Dachau that then appeared in the paper (Raper, n.d.).

As with the professional photos (Zelizer, 1998), the amateur images of bearing witness produced four kinds of depictions. To begin with, they extensively and repeatedly depicted the trauma at hand. The patterned depiction of stacks of bodies, piles of human bones, and human carnage that was displayed in the popular press was repeated here. Numerous shots depicted similar views of human carnage, suggesting that soldiers lined up by turn to take snapshots of the atrocities at their side.

The act of bearing witness produced three other kinds of depictions, each of which also appeared in the popular press: depictions of people bearing witness by looking at the cause of the trauma; people looking at the cause of the trauma without evidence of the trauma; and people taking photographs of

the trauma and of other people bearing witness. In the depictions of people bearing witness, the horrified faces, shocked eyes and often gaping mouths become testament to the core difficulties involved in the act itself. Former liberators took shots of corpses spilling from the train cars at Dachau, with GIs standing in the photo's midspace and staring at the bodies or standing around bodies in Ohrdruf (see Figure 2). Such photos had a resonance that persisted over time. For instance, in 1979 a New York Rockland County paper ran - in its sports section - a personal photo of a former liberator, a Manhattan College track coach, as he looked over the ovens in Dachau in 1945 (Varner, 1979).

FIGURE 2



Credit: John Baker Collection, courtesy of the Witness to the Holocaust Project, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University

Amateur photos also depicted people looking at the trauma without evidence of the trauma itself. This kind of depiction - by which the act of bearing witness was visually separated from the trauma people were experiencing and thereby given a prolonged space within the representation - was crucial in the capacity to work through trauma. Pictures of this sort were prevalent in the popular press of 1945, when numerous photos appeared with the atrocities positioned beyond the camera frame. Here too, liberators took and kept photos of themselves looking at the atrocities that appeared nowhere in the frame. Numerous liberators kept images of themselves looking over boxcars at Dachau or stacks of

bodies at Buchenwald. This kind of photo had a specific function that was relevant to the larger aims of working through the trauma; it forced viewers to fill in the blanks by connecting what they were seeing with what they did not see but knew was beyond the frame.

Finally, personally bearing witness produced depictions that showed persons looking at or taking photos of the atrocities. These depictions played a key role in working through the trauma of Nazi atrocity. For instance, one liberator was pictured in 1984 looking at personal photos he had taken of Dachau before turning them over for museum display. The accompanying story told of how he had searched for the photos for three years, until he found where he had carefully hidden them in his attic (Markowitz, 1984).

Following the war, the photos took on a patterned importance that highlighted their ritual use for the individuals who had taken them. Many liberators hoarded their photos in places set off from the space of everyday life - in attics, basements, locked closets. One told of how he had kept his photographs in an old file cabinet in the basement and retrieved them only when interviewed about his experiences. Another kept the images 'helter skelter' in a cigar box and arranged them once called upon to do so. Still other liberators participated in the voluntary destruction of their photos, tearing up the images while maintaining that they were too graphic and painful. As one liberator later recalled:  
I have destroyed many of [the photographs], and particularly those that were taken up very close to the bodies and the expressions on the faces, because of small children from time to time seeing them in my collection of pictures.  
(Baker, 1980)

Yet others hauled their images out for periodic public viewing, at liberators' conferences or reunions of military units.

Over time, the extensive images of the trauma had a long-standing impact on the liberators' capacity to remember what had happened. Retelling the story of the liberation of the camps took on two focal points: one, in conjunction with the photograph; two, in conjunction with the collective. In other words, liberators remembered the camps in a way that both relied on photographs and played to shared memories of the collective. When called upon to recount what they had seen decades earlier, many liberators opted to tell their story of liberation through the photographic lens, offering testimony that paid tribute to specific photographs as a way of remembering the events they had experienced. For instance, in one archival attempt to secure testimony from liberators during the 1970s and 1980s, none of the liberators interviewed were asked to bring photographs to their sessions with their interviewers; yet many did so.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, close to 85 percent of the liberators structured their recollections around the photographs that they had brought with them, sharing photographs that had been taken by other people in their military unit. In a sense, then, they substituted their own individual, personalized memory for a shared, collective memory, as it had been documented for the group by one of its members. As one of the liberators told it, 'we have a few pictures that some of my men took at the time, and gave me copies of them at the end of the war' (Baker, 1980). Thus, despite the interviewer's expectations that each liberator would provide his or her own experience of the liberation, many liberators instead offered the collective interpretations, as facilitated by the group photos.

Many testimonies were structured as stories of the photographs that the liberators had taken. At times the images authenticated events that were difficult to recount in words. As one liberator who had served with the combat engineers entering Dachau said:

You're in combat, you're mentally geared to kill, and things of this sort, but you see things like that . . . in fact, I've got some pictures somewhere. I didn't have a chance to look them up before you came. . . .

They're similar to what you've seen in all the magazines and everything, where these bodies are just stacked up there like cordwood. (Allen, 1978)

In other cases, photographs were invoked as stabilizers against challenges to the authenticity of what had happened. When asked about the fact that some people were saying that the Holocaust never occurred, one former Dachau liberator offered the following observation: 'Well, I can testify to the fact that it happened. There are photographs of it. It happened' (Allison, 1979). The irony here was that, even when he had personal memory to contradict the Holocaust deniers, the former GI preferred to invoke the photograph as a tool of memory. In that the photograph externalized memory, it somehow seemed preferable to the personalized, internal memories of individuals.

All of this suggests that for individuals undergoing personal trauma following the camps' liberation, personal acts of bearing witness offered a way to move toward recovery. Bearing witness involved the display and use of personal images in a way that made such images important both individually and to the collective. In other words, photographs helped make recovery possible.

Repeat performance: bearing witness to the World Trade Center attacks

The intersection between photography and bearing witness, set in place so aptly after the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, has been repeated in numerous events in the years that have lapsed since the unfolding of that traumatic event. It is no surprise, then, that following the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center, photography played a central role in helping both individuals and groups work through the trauma.

The parallel here was twofold: on the one hand, the popular press turned over enormous amounts of space to photographic images in a way that paralleled the display of images appearing after the liberation of the camps in 1945 (Zelizer, 2000). On the other, the actions of individuals - amateur presences who themselves experienced personal trauma as residents, firefighters, emergency medical personnel - paralleled the responses displayed by liberators of the camps. Individuals took scores of pictures of what they saw. They shared them with friends, compiled personal albums, scribbled personal notations, borrowed negatives, and at times displayed them in public settings for others to see as well. These practices, which comprise the familiar template for bearing witness, helped individuals work through the trauma associated with the event. As one person who took over 20 amateur photographs of ground zero said, 'I feel guilty in some way taking a picture of this, but I don't know what else to do. . . . I think I need to record it visually so maybe I can understand it' ('Many Come . . .', 2001).

The amateur photographic record of the disaster took on public proportions almost immediately. Impromptu grieving spaces of the missing were structured around the display of personal home photos and other amateur images, often blown up to poster size. Countless individuals trekked to the explosion site to pay homage, taking snapshots of what they found there. In the words of one volunteer rescue worker, interviewed on Oprah after he quit his job in Kentucky and traveled to New York City to help in recovery, 'I took pictures. That way I wouldn't have any doubt about what I had seen' (Branham, 2001). Individuals lauded the capacity of personal photographs to make the events real in a way that the media could not.

Photographic booklets and memorial pamphlets connected with firefighters' unions and police station units began to appear within weeks of the disaster, celebrating through a 'moving photographic tribute . . . every engine, ladder, and battalion that lost its brother on that fateful, terrible day' (McCourt, 2001:



cover; also Barron, 2001). Amateur photos were featured as part of the more professional visual record being set into place. One tribute to persons who died in the line of duty used a cover image and two internal photos by a police department photographer, not identified as such in the text, who took pictures of NYPD personnel clearing out the rubble from the Trade Center (In the Line., 2001). Even a commemorative volume produced by Magnum Photographers included images by individuals not employed by Magnum. A six-shot series of images, called by the New York Times 'a Zapruder film for our time' (Boxer, 2001), was included with the following explanation:

Cameraman Evan Fairbanks had been working in downtown Manhattan on the morning of the attack and ran out with his video camera when he heard the commotion. As he was filming the towers, the second airplane appeared and crashed into 2 World Trade Center. Fairbanks called us that evening, and when we saw his extraordinary footage we concurred that it was a good fit with our documentary tradition. So Magnum agreed to distribute his videotape and the still images from that shoot, including those reproduced on these pages. (Magnum, 2001: 5)

From mid-November, Fairbanks' video film was also shown on an endless loop at the New York Historical Society as part of its 11 September exhibit. The images of two additional amateur photographers - one a darkroom printer and the other a Magnum intern - were also included in the collection. Said one of the amateurs: 'I wasn't really experiencing what was happening. I really feel I was hiding behind my camera. It was my camera that was bearing witness' (Magnum, 2001: 64).

Here too individuals involved in the act of bearing witness structured their images around the photographic aesthetic set in place with Nazi atrocity. The four types of shots that proliferated following the liberation of the concentration camps reappeared in the later event - extensive depictions of the site of trauma, depictions of people viewing the site of trauma, depictions of people viewing the site of trauma without evidence of the trauma, and depictions of people taking and viewing photographs of the site of trauma. Together, they provided the visual template associated with bearing witness.

To begin with, depictions of the explosion site were manifold, with images taken from every possible perspective. Varying minimally but in patterned ways - distance, angle, temporal positioning and focus - nearly every photo centered on the site as it transformed from burning towers to smoking rubble. Though different from the photos of Nazi atrocity due to the absence of bodies, the photos in every other respect - scope, number, prominence and focus - were remarkably similar.

Depictions of people bearing witness to the World Trade Center immediately appeared. Amateur and personal photos quickly made their way into the popular press and were positioned in impromptu galleries around the country. For instance, the Washington Post at some delay published a jarring amateur photo of a woman's body outlined against her porch, watching the towers smoke in the distance (White, 2001). The photo, taken by an amateur photographer of his girlfriend, was his way of 'taking a picture of what was happening in a way that it would mean more in the future' (Nederlander, 2002; see figure 3).

Individuals also took photos of people looking at the atrocities without evidence of the atrocities. For instance, one photographer, not on assignment, walked outside his apartment and snapped shots of people looking upward at some undepicted horror. The photograph, he said, was a reflection of what he saw as he walked the streets (Witty, 2002; see figure 4). Similar depictions showed people looking presumably either at the site itself or at its mediated representations, such as the television screen. These shots showed no evidence of the disaster site itself, forcing spectators to fill in what they knew

rested beyond the camera's frame. The cause of the trauma, again, was undepicted but necessary to understand what was being shown.

FIGURE 3



Credit: 'Woman in the Window 9-11-01' Photo by Eric Nederlander

FIGURE 4



Credit: Photo by Patrick Witty

Finally, bearing witness produced depictions that showed people engaged in the basic act of taking photos or looking at photos of the attacks. Published pictures showed hordes of people at ground zero, snapping images of the site and of each other, often in throngs of people ten-strong. One such image showed police officers taking pictures of each other, angled against the altered New York skyline. The caption told readers that they had come from Homestead, Florida to serve as volunteers for the city (Ung and Hill, 2001). In unpublished pictures too, individuals snapped hundreds of images of people bearing witness to the photos. This particular photographer said she took scores of shots of the act of bearing witness (Martin, 2001; see figure 5).

FIGURE 5



Credit: Photo by Jane Martin

But the making of photos did not deplete the value of the image in working through trauma. Rather, such photos provided a setting that established photography's presence as an integral part of the act of bearing witness over time. Photography's positioning as a coping mechanism for trauma allowed for numerous ritualized activities that compounded and elaborated on its presence. Those activities in turn helped individuals over time reconnect with the collective.

Again, these activities paralleled those displayed by the liberators after the Second World War. People saved, stored and shared photos. As with the liberation of the camps, exhibits of the photos sprouted up in almost every corner of the country. Such exhibits displayed a wide range of images, including both life-size portraits and photographs of firefighters, combined displays of photographs and artwork, and historic collections of images of events similar to the World Trade Center attacks.<sup>3</sup>

One such exhibit in Soho, which took over two Prince Street storerooms under the title 'HereIs New York: A Democracy of Photographs', became one of the most active sites for bearing witness to the tragedy. Begun in early October, the exhibit sold digital copies of photos for \$25 apiece (to be donated to charity), collecting over 4000 images submitted by over 500 photographers. The exhibit instantly became an event (Smith, 2001; also Sozanski, 2001). Packed to capacity, individuals crowded the space and the pavements outside, taking pictures of people looking at the photos strung on wires across the wall and under the ceiling. Significantly, in the New York Times' words, the exhibit was:

. . . a major archive in the making, one that reflects history in a new, egalitarian way, containing images by professionals and amateurs alike . . . the show represents the photography world's attempt to experience one of many signal facts about the tragedy: that it was witnessed and photographed by more people than any event of a similar magnitude. (Smith, 2001: E1)

Displaying photos by amateurs and professionals side by side, the exhibit depicted primarily images of the event's aftermath, with the organizers taking one photo from all who submitted. Photography's importance to the mission of repairing the broken community was explicitly articulated. In the words of one of the organizers, 'the gathering of work - not only of famous photographers but of policemen, firemen and amateurs alike - is a cathartic expression and helps to unify us all' (Traub, 2001). The Times proclaimed that the amateur and professional photographers were no different from the 'big soup

kitchens set up by Tribeca restaurateurs to feed the rescue workers', another instance of 'New Yorkers trying to contribute to the physical or emotional mending of the city by pursuing their usual lines of work, only differently' (Smith, 2001: E1; see figure 6).

Taken by 'ordinary people, students . . . witnesses helplessly watching. And some . . . by those caught up in the havoc - people running for their lives, relief and rescue workers, a subway motorman' (Smith, 2001: E1), the photos were displayed in the exhibit without captions or labels. Identified only by number, in a way that reinforced the collective over the identity of its constitutive members, the images, said one critic, were 'chilling in their duality, [offering] a measure of the enormity of the event in single, personal units. They also testify to the taking of a photograph as a common human response, a way to deal with a reality almost beyond comprehension.' In that light, many of the photographs were delivered with stories about how they had been taken. According to the exhibit's organizers, 'People want us to see these pictures. They know we probably won't hang any more pictures of the towers on fire, but they want us to see their pictures of the towers on fire so that we know they were there' (all in White, 2001: C4). Or in another's words, 'the photographs are the memorial to September 11' (Traub, 2001). Not surprisingly, the exhibit met resistance when it attempted to close. Months after its original closing date, it not only remained open but spawned additional displays of parts of its collection both across the United States and around the world, with 500 images set to go to Berlin, Germany in late January for an exhibit sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior and 1500 images being lent to the city of Chicago for a public exhibit (Wentz, 2002). The act of bearing witness, created from primarily amateur individual acts of taking and displaying photos, generated a symbolic space in which to bear witness. And in so doing, individuals were able to work through the trauma induced by the event, gradually coming together as a collective once again.

FIGURE 6



Snapshots Of Sept. 11: A Gathering Of Witnesses  
By ROBERTA SMITH

The images are the core of "Here Is New York; A Democracy of Photographs/ an unusual exhibition that is the latest form of grass-roots public mourning, like the shrines, sidewalk drawings and expanses of writ-Credit: 'N. Siesel/The New York Times'

Conclusion: finding aids to the past

While it is impossible to predict what role the photos of the World Trade Center attacks will play over time, the personal response to the liberation of the concentration camps is undeniably being repeated here. Photographs provide the setting for bearing witness that is necessary for both individual and collective recovery. The act of seeing and taking responsibility for the horrors depicted in the images helps the collective move on, its boundaries gradually reinstated.

Significantly, though, this is a first in contemporary memory: for such a nearly complete photographic template for bearing witness, originally set in place after the Second World War, has been repeated in none of the major atrocities that occurred in the years since. Rather, the events of 11 September offer the first set of circumstances since 1945 that imitates almost completely the earlier photographic aesthetic. Although the 11 September depictions do not offer the images of human carnage that we saw in 1945, in every other respect the contemporary act of bearing witness is virtually identical to that witnessed half a century ago.

Why is photography so important here? Bearing witness requires a space for visualizing trauma in a fashion that can move individuals - and by extension collectives - toward and through recovery. Photographs are an instrumental part of making that happen. They offer a way to travel from the highly individuated experience of trauma to a post-traumatic space where the collective can again emerge. Numerous ritualized practices associated with the image - displaying photos, talking about photos, visiting exhibits of photos - help individuals cement associations with others as a post hoc response to trauma. Thus, by taking personal snapshots at the time of a traumatic event's unfolding, people move toward recovery, and they use the images in ritualized ways that in turn help reinstate the boundaries of the collective.

This suggests that photographs are a crucial vehicle for bearing witness, moving individuals to the post-traumatic reinstallation of the collective. In this respect, photography acts like the finding aids of archives. Much like finding aids force archival researchers to separate long enough from the larger research project so as to momentarily develop its discrete details, photographs force the creation of a personal space for as long as necessary before reintegrating as part of the larger collective. Photographs ease the work of reintegration after trauma. And in that sense, they are not only finding aids to the past but to the future as well.

Notes

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1. Examples here abound: when Oprah interviewed journalists covering the World Trade Center attacks, she asked for professional stories and instead received personal tales of retrieving children from school, checking on spouses, and securing the homefront (Oprah, 3 October 2001). ABC's Peter Jennings choked up on air on 11 September 2001 while talking about calling his children. Walter Cronkite told of how he needed to check on his personal effects when interviewed by Larry King (Larry King Live, 5 October 2001). Also see 'Ground Zero' (TV Guide, 29 September-5 October, 2001: 12-16).

2. The testimony referred to here included interviews taken during the 1970s and 1980s with liberators at the Fred R. Crawford Witness to the Holocaust Project at Emory University. The project's then-associate director, Terry Anderson, said that while no one was specifically asked to bring photographs, many of the liberators themselves offered to bring their own snapshots to the interview sessions. When they volunteered such information, they were urged to bring whatever they felt was relevant to the interview (Personal communication with author, 16 November 1994).

3. Examples included 'Faces of Ground Zero', an 87-photo exhibit displayed in January 2002 in New York City's Grand Central Terminal, that offered life-size photos of emergency workers, survivors, and relatives of victims of the World Trade Center; 'Remembering September 11: A Series of Exhibitions', a photographic exhibit displayed in December 2001 at Haverford College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that combined 11 September photography with photography from earlier tragedies; 'Unsung Heroes', a portrait exhibit presented in November 2001 in Philadelphia's Old City, that featured large-scale portraits of New York City firefighters.

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