

Remembering September 11: photography as cultural diplomacy

LIAM KENNEDY

'We send these chilling photographs out to the world as a remembrance and as a reminder: a remembrance of those who perished, and a reminder of our commitment to pursuing terrorists wherever they may try to hide.'¹ With these words US Secretary of State Colin Powell launched the photographic exhibition *After September 11: Images from Ground Zero* in February 2002. The exhibition, made up of 27 images by the respected American photographer Joel Meyerowitz (the only photographer with unimpeded access to Ground Zero), will travel to more than 60 countries by the end of 2004. Backed by the US State Department and regionally promoted by American embassies and consulates throughout the world, this exhibition is clearly intended to shape and maintain a public memory of the attacks on the World Trade Center and their aftermath. As such, it is a fascinating initiative in cultural diplomacy that both echoes structures of Cold War propagandizing and raises fresh questions about the role of visual culture in American foreign policy—and more particularly about the role of photography in the shadow war of representation that still ensues over the meanings of '9/11'.

Selling America's story to the world

As an initiative in cultural diplomacy, *After September 11* signals a renewal of belief and activity in a wing of American foreign policy that has long been dogged by uncertain support and has shrunk in power and size in the post-Cold War era. The organizational instability and political vulnerability of cultural diplomacy are in large part attributable to the ideological uncertainty within successive American governments about the role of art and culture in the foreign affairs of the United States. (It is also tied to broader perceptions of cultural politics within the United States, with suspicions surrounding support for arts that may not transmit 'American' values.) This uncertainty has not disappeared; but in

¹ 'Remarks by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell at the launch of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Exhibit, "After September 11th: images from Ground Zero"', US Department of State: Office of the Spokesman press release, 27 Feb. 2002.

the wake of the September 11 attacks there has been high-level support for new initiatives to promote the diplomatic role of culture in the 'war on terrorism'.²

After the Second World War, cultural programming became an integral part of the 'campaign of truth' to counter Soviet propaganda. In 1948 the Smith–Mundt Act stated that the aim of educational and cultural programming was to 'increase mutual understanding', but mutuality was not at the forefront of policy as the Cold War heated up. In 1953 the United States Information Agency (USIA) was created 'to tell America's story to the world', and cultural diplomacy took on a more overt propagandistic imperative. As Kevin Mulcahy notes, the USIA was 'operationally independent of the State Department' but was designed to be 'a public relations agency for the American government in foreign nations'.³ Following the Fulbright–Hays Act of 1961, the USIA worked in concert with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) in the Department of State to implement exchange and exhibition programmes overseas. This institutional arrangement, with some strategic amendments, remained in place until 1999, when the USIA merged with the Department of State. In the 1990s the USIA had found it nearly impossible to justify maintenance of Cold War funding levels, and its staff and budgets were severely cut in the course of the Clinton administration's 'reinventing government' initiative. This government downsizing was exacerbated by pressure from Senator Jesse Helms, chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, who sought an end to government funding of arts and cultural organizations.

Efforts to influence 'hearts and minds' through support of touring exhibitions were common in the earlier days of the Cold War. In 1946, the State Department organized an exhibition called *Advancing American Art*, which toured in Europe and effectively advertised an American challenge to French dominance of international art. Many such exhibits were supported throughout the 1950s, often under the auspices of the USIA.⁴ A famous example, to which I will return, is the photography exhibit *The Family of Man*, which travelled to 28 countries and was seen by over nine million people between 1955 and 1959. Then, in the mid-1960s, confronted by congressional criticism, the USIA began

² This promotion reflects a broader reinvigoration of public diplomacy in the wake of September 11. Christopher Ross, a special coordinator for public diplomacy and public affairs at the Department of State, has welcomed this: 'Since the September 11 attacks on the United States, the nature and role of public diplomacy have been debated more vigorously than at any time in recent memory. A foreign affairs speciality that was once the province of a relatively small number of professionals has suddenly—and quite properly—taken its place in the wide-ranging discussion of national security in which the US population is currently engaged ... Terrorism has changed the way people think about public diplomacy. Today, no serious observer can deny the link between perceptions of the United States and the country's national security.' Christopher Ross, 'Public diplomacy comes of age', *Washington Quarterly* 25: 2, 2002, pp. 75, 83.

³ Kevin Mulcahy, 'Cultural diplomacy and the exchange programs: 1938–1978', *Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society* 2: 1, Spring 1999, p. 26.

⁴ On the history and activities of the USIA, see: Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the curtain: propaganda, culture and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: Macmillan, 1997); Frank Ninkovich, *The diplomacy of ideas: US foreign policy and cultural relations, 1938–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Alvin A. Snyder, *Warriors of disinformation: American propaganda, Soviet lies, and the winning of the Cold War* (New York: Arcade, 1995); Nancy Snow, *Propaganda Inc: selling America's culture to the world* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998).

to withdraw sponsorship from international exhibitions. Though selective programming continued, most notably under the auspices of the Arts America Program created in the late 1970s, it was now greatly curtailed by financial and other criteria. By the late 1990s very little was on offer to diplomatic missions beyond a few established events such as the Jazz Ambassadors Program.

The bureaucratic death of the USIA pointed up longstanding uncertainties about the objectives and practices of cultural diplomacy. It also reflected major changes in the post-Cold War relations between national security imperatives and the United States' drive for dominance in the global economy. Under the Clinton administration, the USIA was increasingly linked to American business and economic development goals, most notably in support of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The close links to trade promotion indicated the growing importance of corporate-based diplomacy and laid foundations for new approaches to 'public diplomacy', particularly those which would reflect and exploit the impacts of media globalization and electronic technologies.⁵ In the wake of September 11 (and with many critics now lamenting the dismantling of USIA infrastructures) the Bush administration pressed forward with a number of these approaches, designed to promote US views to a world audience. A significant element of this rethinking about cultural diplomacy centred on the perceived need to take control of the 'PR war' being fought between the United States and media sources in the Middle East.

In this context some powerful voices have emerged, advancing arguments for the diplomatic role of culture in the war on terrorism. Key advocates in this argument include President Bush's signal appointees to high-level State Department posts in early October 2001, with Charlotte Beers sworn in as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, and Patricia Harrison as Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs. Both came to their posts with backgrounds in advertising and public relations work, and both have championed the need to counter what Beers terms 'the myths, the biases, the outright lies' being presented about the United States throughout 'the Muslim world'.⁶ Beers and Harrison were quickly confirmed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which speeded up its hearings for nominees to State Department posts following the attacks of September 11. Beers told the Committee she would seek to communicate 'not only the facts but also emotions and feelings':

We promote US interests not only through our policies but also in our beliefs and values. Never have these intangibles been more important than right now ... When we show on our web sites the face of tragedy, not just the buildings, depict the moving vigils from other countries, profile a superbly brave fireman, we are communicating the essence of the American people.⁷

⁵ For an astute critical account of this trend, see Snow, *Propaganda, Inc.*

⁶ 'Under Secretary of State Beers salutes visitors council', 14 March 2002, US Department of State: International Information Programs, <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/volunteer/so41502.htm>.

⁷ Chris Reidy, 'Hearts and minds: Madison Avenue guru aims to discredit Bin Laden', *Boston Globe*, 8 Nov. 2001, p. C1.

In speeches and other communications Beers has reiterated this approach, arguing that public diplomacy must present a 'total communication effort' by 'putting the US in whole context', by which she means 'communication that includes rational and logical discourse but also evokes our deepest emotions'.⁸ What Beers terms 'the emotional and rational dimensions' of cultural diplomacy recalls the 'hearts and minds' rhetoric of Cold War cultural politics, but with an added public relations spin.

Many initiatives have been drafted and launched to advertise the 'context' to which Beers refers. The *After September 11* exhibition is one of these. When Beers and Harrison learned that the photographer Joel Meyerowitz, under the auspices of the Museum of the City of New York, was creating an archive of rescue and recovery work at Ground Zero, they saw an ideal vehicle for their ideas of 'effective communication'. Beers provides some direct commentary on the genesis of the exhibition and her aims for it. Noting that 'illustration is ... one of our communication standards', she explains:

As time has passed since last September, we found that we needed to give people a visceral reminder of the devastation and death in New York. We needed to depict—not in words, but in pictures—the loss, the pain, but also the strength and resolve of New York, of Americans, of the world community to recover and rebuild on the site of the World Trade Center ... A message that—without words—documents that the World Trade Center was not a collection of buildings or a set of businesses—but a community, a way of life, a symbol, a place of the living and, now also, the dead. How do you do that? How do you tell such a sad, grim, shocking, and ultimately uplifting story? You do that in pictures.⁹

The exhibition is intended to do more than illustrate rational political rhetorics; it is intended as an emotional supplement that adds a 'visceral' dimension to representations and memories of the events of September 11. It is also intended to take viewers beyond the visual horrors of that day into the aftermath. In Harrison's view, it was necessary to 'convey to foreign audiences the physical and human dimensions of the recovery effort, images that are less well known overseas than those of the destruction of September 11'.¹⁰

With arguments such as these, Beers and Harrison convinced initially sceptical State Department chiefs that sending the exhibition on an international tour could be an effective diplomatic weapon in countering 'misinformation' about the United States. Having secured support, Harrison took control of the planning. In the best traditions of Cold War cultural diplomacy, American diplomatic missions across the world have been used to support the touring exhibition, building a 'friendly' environment for its launching, reception and interpretation. Before examining the implementation of the exhibition more closely, I want to

⁸ 'Under Secretary of State Beers salutes visitors council'.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 'Travelling September 11 photo exhibition unveiled in Washington', 27 Feb. 2002, US Department of State: International Information Programs, <http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/02022802.htm>.

turn now to its content—the photographs of Joel Meyerowitz—to consider if they are commensurate with the aims of the State Department sponsors.

The forbidden city

On the State Department website that advertises the *After September 11* exhibition, Joel Meyerowitz relates how he came to photograph Ground Zero:

Standing in the crowds at the perimeter five blocks north of the zone, I raised my camera simply to see what could be seen and was reminded by a police officer that I was standing in a crime scene and no photographs were allowed, so I left. Yet, within a few blocks the echo of that reminder turned into consciousness and I saw what I had to do. To me, no photographs meant no history. I decided at that moment that I would find my way in and make an archive for the City of New York.¹¹

Meyerowitz approached Robert Macdonald, the director of the Museum of the City of New York, who agreed to sponsor the archive and help lever permission from the city authorities for access to Ground Zero. Gaining clearance for full access took time and effort; but from 13 September onwards Meyerowitz had greater access to the site than any other photographer and began a regular routine of photographing it. In return for access, Meyerowitz is building an archive that will eventually number about ten thousand images and form a ‘permanent historical record’ by ‘systematically documenting the painful work of rescue, recovery, demolition and excavation’. Reflecting on the project, Macdonald remarks: ‘I sensed a great opportunity when Joel called. We’ll have no trouble getting documentary photographs; everybody is already collecting those. What Joel’s doing will have a different sort of legs, though. It will be a nuanced portrait made over time.’¹² This statement speaks to the distinctive nature not only of this form of archival photography but also of Meyerowitz’s style. Skilled in the aesthetics of both street and landscape photography, Meyerowitz conjoins these to produce some striking illustrations of life and work at Ground Zero.

A native New Yorker, he grew up in a Jewish neighbourhood of Brooklyn in the 1940s and made his name as a street photographer in New York in the 1960s, working in the traditions of Cartier Bresson and Robert Frank. In the 1970s, in a deliberate effort to break free of the conventions of such photography, he became a very successful proponent of the ‘new color photography’ in the United States and concentrated upon natural as well as urban landscapes. Using a 1944 8 × 10 wooden box view camera, he works not to capture the ‘decisive moment’ (associated with street photography aesthetics) but to render a scene in atmospheric detail, using light and colour as ‘an intricate part of the content’.¹³

¹¹ ‘After September 11: images from Ground Zero’, 6 March 2002, <http://www.911exhibit.state.gov/index.cfm>.

¹² Joseph Kahn, ‘Afterimages: Joel Meyerowitz’s photos find beauty beneath the horror of September 11’, *Boston Globe*, 24 Oct. 2001, p. C1.

¹³ Joel Meyerowitz and Colin Westerbeck, *Joel Meyerowitz* (London: Phaidon, 2001), p. 96.

The result, as in his famous studies of Cape Cod and of St Louis, is to lend an expressive luminosity to vernacular reality; seemingly uncontrived, the imagery is emotionally charged, characterized by a romantic realism that is influenced by American traditions of landscape painting and photography. What he visually describes are extended moments rather than decisive moments; his camerawork produces imagery that invites empathetic contemplation. What Meyerowitz photographs at Ground Zero is not an event but its aftermath, the scene of trauma, and the gravitas imputed by the style makes it peculiarly suited to the project.

Meyerowitz's work stands in contradistinction to the modes of documentary (and snapshot) photography that are much more commonplace in representing the attacks on the World Trade Center. It eschews a photojournalistic approach and the concomitant, more politicized framing and styling of media reportage. This is likely to have formed part of the appeal of his work to the State Department sponsors of the touring exhibition; certainly, Meyerowitz was a canny choice to convey what Harrison terms 'the physical and human' dimensions of Ground Zero. His camerawork lends an epic quality and scale to these dimensions in its depictions of recovery work and the environs of Ground Zero. This is clear in the photographs selected for the touring exhibition. In many of these we see workers—firefighters, police officers, welders and others—depicted as heroic figures, set against a shattered urban landscape of melted metal and cascades of rubble. One welder—'wounded by exploded bullets', the caption reads—is shot in close-up, which accentuates the grime on his clothing and the look of grim resolve on his face. Indeed, resolution is the predominant structure of feeling in these photographs; there are few images of grief or pain. In many ways the photographs reflect components of the 'sad, grim, shocking and ultimately uplifting story' Beers wants the exhibition to transmit, a story of recovery and resolution. At their most maudlin—such as the image of tattered flags waving across shattered buildings, or that of a bugler playing taps—Meyerowitz's images crudely animate Beers's message as one of heroic redemption.

This intimation of redemption is supported by the photographer's comments, recorded in interview, on the 'spirituality' of Ground Zero, the act of 'salvation' being carried out by the workers there, and his sense of it as a 'forbidden city', a space of primal sensations and sights. In Meyerowitz's words, 'I've seen things down there that you can only see if you keep going.'¹⁴ In part, of course, such statements serve to underline the photographer's privileged perspective in relation to the horror only he can truly see (a trope of much war photography) and struggle to represent in the visual despatches he sends back. The 'forbidden' element of the site refers not only to restrictions on those who visit there, but to the visual censorship and the promise of breaking this that is inherent in Meyerowitz's imagery. The photographer is not unaware of this, for he uses scale, colour and frame to manipulate our viewing: our eyes move across the images, searching—for what, we may not be sure, but mimicking the search

¹⁴ Vince Aletti, 'Site specific: with Joel Meyerowitz in the forbidden city', *Village Voice*, 2 Nov. 2001, p. 13.

going on in the photographs by the firefighters, police officers and others at the scene. As every spot of colour emanating from the masses of twisted steel and debris catches our eye, we sense the moral ambiguity of looking.

This camerawork takes some risks, acknowledging beauty in the scenes, and flirting with the elegiac elements inherent in photography. In doing so, it brings to the fore some of the dilemmas surrounding aesthetic and ethical dimensions of 'photographic seeing', especially as this applies to scenes of horror and trauma. Meyerowitz occasionally refers to this in interviews but his thoughts reflect rather than resolve these dilemmas. He asserts:

I don't like making aesthetic response to other people's tragedies. I see a lot of my contemporaries do that and it always offends me ... They start to make nice frames of people who are in trouble or people who have been blown to bits. They're making art, and I always thought there must be a form that's as raw as the actual event ... I'm trying to make photographs that are in some ways highly descriptive images of what I see, rather than make tricky interesting art, photographic solutions to visual problems, trying to stay raw and give you the scene and disappear from the making.¹⁵

This descriptive realism is well suited to the archival project on which Meyerowitz is embarked; but his comments are ingenious in suggesting he is not making an 'aesthetic response' to his subject matter. In another interview he muses: 'It's not perverse, I think, to focus not on the horror but to marvel at what's here. Look at how that building stood up! Is this not astonishingly beautiful? ... You make judgements that are, dare I say, aesthetic ones. I'm walking a fine line between art and documentary.'¹⁶ Indeed he is, and his work is at its most startling and engrossing when the viewer becomes conscious of this line. The raw description that Meyerowitz's photography idealizes is, as he well knows, the result of using light and colour as 'an intricate part of the content'.

It is not surprising that Meyerowitz should want to rein in questions about beauty in his representations of Ground Zero, yet his belief that this site 're-defines conventional notions of beauty' also reflects a limited understanding of the limits of representation.¹⁷ Photography has been representing the unrepresentable for a long time and there are established debates on the testimonial functions of photography, with intense questioning of its documentary mandate to 'bear witness'.¹⁸ Meyerowitz is uncomfortable with such questioning, and his awkward promotion of his transparent camerawork suggests a desire to shore up the meanings of his images as an archival record. As he describes his sense of mission, 'To me, no photographs meant no history.' If he refers to photographic

¹⁵ Hamilton Kahn, 'Archival instinct draws Meyerowitz to "Ground Zero"', *Provincetown Banner*, 4 Oct. 2001, p. 5.

¹⁶ J. Kahn, 'Afterimages', p. C1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Not surprisingly, much of this questioning has emerged from studies of Holocaust photography. See e.g. Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through shadows: memory, photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to forget: Holocaust memory through the camera's eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

influences it is to cite the activity of historical documentation: 'I will be the Matthew Brady', he observes in one interview; in another, he compares his exhaustive attention to detail with the organizational procedures of Roy Stryker, who meticulously planned Farm Security Association photography projects.¹⁹ Such references are apt, but elide important reference points in visual histories that shadow Meyerowitz's work. Brady's images of the ruins of Charleston after the Civil War do link to the representation of the ruins of Ground Zero in suggestive ways, referring us to a national trauma. However, the overall scale of Meyerowitz's scenes, in which human figures are dwarfed by mountains of rubble, might prompt some to think of Piranesi's images of the ruins of Rome, referring us to a loss of empire.

Meyerowitz's descriptive ideal cannot contain the meanings of his imagery. The instability and seepage of meaning is, of course, a feature of the medium itself; but, rather than simply observe that all documentary photography distorts, we need to examine what 'frame' is being used to present it as the real. In the case of *After September 11* the key frame is propagandistic, the political mandate of American cultural diplomacy to 'tell America's story to the world'. In other words, we need to distinguish the exhibition from the archive in terms of this framing, and to examine the contexts of its production and reception on tour.

Memories of urban destruction

The propaganda impetus behind *After September 11* is clear in much of the planning. The cities chosen for the exhibition have not been picked at random. While a number of European and South American capitals are included, the majority are cities in the Middle East and North Africa. This reflects the targeting by Beers and others of territories where 'misinformation' about the United States most needs to be combated. (It is also likely that the merits of a touring exhibit were strengthened by the very low percentage of internet usage in many of the targeted countries.) Diplomatic missions are crucial to the implementation of the 'message' the State Department seeks to transmit through the tour. They draw on local connections to give the exhibition particular regional resonance and lend it civic and educational connotations, through sitings in museums or city halls, and scheduled talks on September 11. In this fashion it is set apart from conventional photographic exhibitions, the better to partake in the building of public memory of September 11 and its aftermath.

As already noted, US-sponsored touring exhibitions have many precedents within the Cold War framework of cultural diplomacy. A particularly suggestive one is *The Family of Man* exhibition of photography that travelled across Europe in the late 1950s. This exhibition contained 503 images by 273 photographers from 68 nations. Organized by Edward Steichen, Director of Photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art, it posited humanity as a universal ideal

¹⁹ H. Kahn, 'Archival instinct', p. 5; Aletti, 'Site specific', p. 13.

and human empathy as a compensatory response to the threat of nuclear annihilation.²⁰ Though not conceived as a programme of propaganda, the exhibition nonetheless functioned as an advertisement for American values and freedoms as it moved across Europe, supported on its journey by the recently established United States Information Agency, until it took up symbolic residence in Moscow as a backdrop to the 'Kitchen Debate' between Nixon and Khrushchev. By this point on its journey the message of the exhibition was surrounded by Cold War rhetorics that blurred the boundaries between art, information and propaganda.

The boundaries have been blurred again with *After September 11*. To be sure, this later exhibit has been more overtly designed as propaganda, yet it also carries the cachet of 'culture' (most obviously, via the signature of a renowned photographer) and is intended to transmit a universal message that transcends the politics of difference. This appeal to the universal is valued by the propagandists. As Wendy Kozal notes, 'USIA officials praised [*The Family of Man*] exhibition for promoting not American culture, but the culture of humanity, of which the US then became its best representation.'²¹ *After September 11* promotes human resolve as the obvious corollary of the exhibition's visual narrative, the 'ultimately uplifting story' (Beers) of recovery and renewal. Like Steichen, Meyerowitz assumes (and his photography projects) an ideal of empathic humanism as the natural responsive condition for his imagery. The ideological value of his work to the State Department lies in large part in its strenuous stance beyond ideology.

Another notable echo of *The Family of Man* exhibition is that *After September 11* is primed to connect the images displayed to local contexts and occasions. As *The Family of Man* moved across Europe, exhibitors would emphasize links to the locale—people or places that appeared in selected images, for example. Though lacking the range of imagery displayed in the earlier exhibition, *After September 11* works in a similar way. The Museum of London ran an exhibit on the Blitz in a room adjacent to that displaying the Ground Zero images. In Nairobi, an exhibit on the bombing of the US embassy in that city is displayed alongside the Meyerowitz photographs. In several cities, relatives of local people who died in the attacks on the World Trade Center are being invited to exhibition openings. Such programming refers us again to the blurring of information and propaganda, and underlines the mnemonic functions of the exhibition as asserted by Colin Powell. It is also a mechanism explicitly supported by Charlotte Beers, who cites it as a valuable way to 'magnify' the meaning of the exhibition as it travels.²² More overt examples of magnification are also supported by the State Department, such as New York fire officers being flown in for press interviews to support exhibition openings.

²⁰ For a detailed critical history of the exhibition's origins, production and reception, see Eric Sandeen, *Picturing an exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

²¹ Wendy Kozal, 'Visions of the world', *American Quarterly* 50: 3, Sept. 1998, p. 667.

²² 'Under Secretary of State Beers salutes visitors council'.

The programming of the Museum of London exhibit provides an example of this magnification and of the visual politics mobilized around *After September 11*. As with so many of the exhibition sites, the Museum of London exhibition works from established American connections to reinforce support for the United States. With the London exhibit there is a very deliberate effort to link national empathies through the scheduling of a supplementary exhibition *The London Blitz*, hastily assembled from the Museum's holdings. This exhibit is made up of 30 photographs taken by London police officers Arthur Cross and Fred Tibbs, who recorded the destruction caused by Nazi bombing of central London in late 1940 and throughout 1941. There seems an obvious logic to the co-exhibit structure, underlined in the Museum's website, which notes that 'the extent of the destruction and loss of life invites a comparison between New York, September 2001 and London, September 1940' and that Meyerowitz's photographs 'promise to hold a powerful resonance for the inhabitants of a city that itself witnessed large-scale air attacks during the Second World War'.²³

It is just such a resonance that the State Department sponsors want to activate with this exhibition, tying the imagery of Ground Zero to collective memories of urban destruction and human solidarity in the face of such horror. With the London exhibition, this resonance was transformed into an overt political message by Lynne Cheney (wife of US Vice-President Dick Cheney) during a visit to the Museum:

These photos are a stunning reminder of the tragedy of [September 11]. Three thousand people were murdered. Except for Americans, more people who were British were killed than people of any other nationality ... So this is a horror that we stood together and suffered ... My husband met today with Prime Minister Blair and came away from that meeting talking about the special relationship that the United Kingdom and the people of America share. We have shared difficulties before, and I can't tell you how grateful the people of the United States are for the fact that you are sharing with us in the defense of the common values, the freedoms that were attacked on September 11 ... And the pictures of the Blitz remind us, too, that, at the end of it, the side of good will win. We will defend our [democratic] values, our common values.²⁴

What remains implicit in much of Meyerowitz's imagery is made crudely explicit by Cheney, who invokes President Bush's symbolic reterritorialization of good and evil in the aftermath of September 11. In this authoritative reading, supported by the framework of cultural diplomacy, the photographs function as a transparent calculus of human suffering.

Elsewhere, though, the exhibition imagery seems less legible, despite the efforts of diplomatic missions to frame its meanings. At the National Museum in Nairobi, *After September 11* was placed beside a visual record of the aftermath of

²³ 'Museum of London: capital concerns', 6 March 2002, <http://www.Museum-london.org.uk/MOLsite/exhibits/sept11/>.

²⁴ Jim Fisher-Thompson, 'Vice-President's wife visits September 11 photo exhibit in London', 3 March 2002, <http://www.usembassy.org.uk/terror>.

the bombing of the US embassy and surrounding buildings in that city in 1998. One commentator who viewed the exhibition was struck by the incongruity of the two exhibits: 'Taking up half the upper floor of the national Museum, [Meyerowitz's photographs] dwarfed the photographs by local photographers which recorded the heroic attempts of Kenyan citizens to recover the dead and rescue the injured of the Nairobi attack, often scrabbling through the rubble with bare hands.'²⁵ In this instance, at least for this viewer, the spectacle of heroic recovery work at Ground Zero is disconnected from the local occasion (and representation) of suffering. In Bangladesh, incongruity gave way to protest when demonstrators gathered outside the exhibition opening at the Drik gallery in Dhaka. To be sure, the exhibition provided a focus for a range of discontents, including anger with the Bangladeshi government's pledging of support to the US-led 'coalition against terrorism'; but it also included pointed criticism of the exhibition as propaganda. In the view of one demonstrator, 'What is outrageous is how the US government is capitalising on the tragedy [of September 11] ... when the Israeli government is carrying out genocidal programs against the Palestinians. This Meyerowitz exhibition is obviously a ploy to elicit sympathy and as such is calculated.'

After September 11 is a richly encoded exhibit, the meanings of which cannot be securely tethered to either the mnemonic functions or the ideological connotations asserted by Colin Powell and Lynne Cheney. The photographic image is a highly unstable medium to entrust with such a mission—it does not function, simply, as a mirror of the real or a repository of memory, but shifts meaning in different contexts and in relation to different image banks of association. As I write, the exhibition is only nine months into its three-year touring programme, but there are already signs that its diplomatic managers will have some difficulty in controlling its reception in geopolitical environments in which horrors compete for media coverage, and in which an act of memory for one community is deemed an act of forgetting by another. They may yet learn that the incongruities of the imagery in certain contexts can be exacerbated rather than concealed by the appeals to shared suffering and common human values.

There is a retrograde quality to the implementation of *After September 11*, both in its atavistic relationship to Cold War forms of propagandizing and in its responsiveness to the crumbling authority of photography's evidentiary forms. The exhibit is packaged and presented by the State Department as a mobile 'site of memory' that feeds off and reinforces the liberal ideology of photography as a universal language.²⁶ Photography is never innocent, however, and the historical tensions between exceptionalism and universalism that have shadowed American

²⁵ Patricia Holland, 'Blow-up in Kenya', *New Statesman*, 13 May 2002, p. 37.

²⁶ Allan Sekula, in a forceful critique of this ideology, has argued that it combines romantic and technological imperatives in an imperialist project: 'The worldliness of photography is the outcome, not of any immanent universality of meaning, but of a project of global domination. The language of the imperial centers is imposed, both forcefully and seductively, upon the peripheries.' Allan Sekula, 'The traffic in photographs', in *Photography against the grain: essays and photo works 1973–1983* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia College Press, 1984), p. 96.

diplomacy (reflecting the contradictions of the founding myths of American nationhood) are reanimated in *After September 11* through its visual assumption that the United States is the epicentre of the culture of humanity. This assumption may be challenged in certain contexts but is clearly an ideological component of the State Department's broader efforts to remobilize the 'soft power' of cultural propaganda in the service of national security.²⁷ It lends ideological support to 'us against them' politics and policies, and is likely to remain a core motif of American cultural diplomacy as it works 'to tell America's story to the world' in the wake of September 11.²⁸

²⁷ See Ross, 'Public diplomacy comes of age', p. 81.

²⁸ Lamis Andoni, a Middle East analyst, argues that in 'the era of us against them' there is diminished '[r]ecognition of the equality of human suffering'. Lamis Andoni, 'Deeds speak louder than words', *Washington Quarterly* 25: 2, 2002, pp. 85–6.