THE HERE IS NEW YORK EXHIBITION: PHOTOGRAPHY AS COLLECTIVE WITNESSING

Abstract
This essay examines the Here is New York project, a photographic exhibition that opened in late September 2001, just two weeks after the Twin Towers collapsed (hence, it was the first public event to provide documentary evidence of the 9/11 disaster in New York City). In particular, the essay spotlights two main aspects of the exhibition. On one hand, it explains why, during setting-up, the curators decided not to distinguish between professional pictures and those taken by amateurs (all the photographers present that day thus became eyewitnesses with cameras.) On the other, it underlines the significant discontinuity proposed by Here is New York, which adopts a very different visual rhetoric compared to the representation of 9/11 in the mainstream media coverage, especially by US television and major newspapers.

Keywords
9/11 imagery; photographic exhibit; media witnessing; amateur pictures; visual archive.

1. A DEMOCRACY OF PHOTOGRAPHS

The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible.
A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions.

The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition
(E.B. White, Here is New York)¹

In 1949 the American essayist Roger Angell commissioned to E.B. White (a contributor to The New Yorker magazine, co-author of the English language guide The Elements of Style, and also Angell’s stepfather) a piece about New York for the travel magazine Holiday. White wrote an article that captures his love for the city and for its citizens, although he pointed out all New York’s contradictions and he lamented all the changes occurred in the Big Apple in a few short years. Furthermore, the piece ends with a disturbing conclusion (which I partially quote in esergo): White, as a victim of the widespread postwar nuclear fear, finished his essay with a threat of destruction which takes the form of a “single flight of planes” that can “quickly burn the towers”; a threat

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that, more than sixty years later, seems ominously prescient, taking new resonance in the 

wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks that crushed the World Trade Center. 

At the end of September 2001, just two weeks after the collapse of the Twin Towers, a photographic exhibition named *Here Is New York: A Democracy of Photographs* opens only fifteen blocks north from Ground Zero, located on the ground floor of a small building at 116 Prince Town in SoHo (which had been, for the previous twenty years, a women’s clothing shop): it is the first public event that bears testimony of the disaster foreseen by White’s words. The promoters of *Here Is New York* exhibition are four and they ask for cooperation to anyone who owns pictures of the attacks, especially concerning their effects and victims, with the aim to place them side by side in a set-up without hierarchies or awards. No selections, no titles, no authors: just pictures (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 - *The Here Is New York: A Democracy of Photographs exhibition at Prince street, New York City, 2001*

The initiative achieves resounding success, also thanks to the crucial participation of many dedicated volunteers. The project is launched on September 25th: initially it is meant to last until October 15th, but it continues up to Christmas, then up to summer, whereas twelve months later, on the first anniversary of the attacks, the exhibition is still open and it is expanded adding a floor of the facing building (up to this time, $500.000 are raised from the sale of thousands of digital prints). Meanwhile, the *Here Is New York* website is online, its catalogue is published and alternate sets of photographs from the collection are exhibited all over the world.

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2 Alice Rose George, a curator and photography editor; Gilles Peress, a documentary photographer; Michael Shulan, a writer, who edits the catalogue texts; Charles Traub, chair of the MFA Photography program at the School of Visual Arts.

3 The earnings from the sale are donated to the Children’s Aid Society (a charitable organization that provides help to the 9/11 ‘victims’ children) and other worthy charities.

4 The link is http://www.hereisnewyork.org/, but the website is no longer updated and some parts are currently unavailable.

Hence, we may consider the organization of a photographic exhibition as the direct reaction to the attacks, but it also represents the creation of an initial collective archive, to the point that Here is New York has organized one of the largest photographic archives in recent history devoted to a single event. This is the reason why Here Is New York, which is not intended to be an art exhibition in the conventional sense, soon becomes an important meeting point for the neighbourhood and for the citizenry in general: thousands of photographers donated their pictures and people viewed and bought them (while millions have looked at them on the website). In other words, it is something that is more than a simple exhibit, and that actually represents a community response, in which photography plays the role of a tool that promotes an intense and shared documentary activity, with the aim to increase “the democratisation of the medium’s witnessing function”\(^6\).

Maybe now it becomes more explicit the meaning of the exhibit’s tagline, A Democracy of Photographs: a formula that refers to the choice of granting visibility not just to a single point of view focused on 9/11, but to a variety of perspectives, preserving in this way the complexity of the event, its plurality of gazes and the diversity of its representations, in order to convert the space of the gallery in a place of collective memory. Indeed, the genesis and the set-up of the exhibition provide us food for thought encouraging several considerations; so, in the following parts, we will delve into some among others, choosing them for their capability to convey Here Is New York as the outcome of a choral gesture, performed by a large number of witnesses in the horizon of post-9/11 photographic heat.

\section{2. Operators of visibility: bystanders as witnesses}

Looking at the pictures available online and in the catalogue, we first notice the arrangement of the materials, which is quite evocative of Here Is New York’s overall sense: all the pictures are anonymous, without any caption, disposed along the walls or dangling from the ceiling; they are also offered for sale in a unique form, an A3 (which is approximately 16.5 by 11.7 inches) inkjet print on white paper, identical in size and price ($25). Because of this unusual set-up, those who visit the exhibition and decide to buy one or more photos can recognize the pictures’ authorship only after the possible purchase. Indeed, the strategy chosen by the promoters makes no difference between pictures shot by professional operators or enthusiastic ones.

After all, nowadays the idea to imagine professional and amateur photography as diametrically opposed operative dimensions proves to be an exaggerated strict approach, which reveals its weakness if more deeply tested, and its inadequacy if compared to the reality of social media practices. As a consequence, a project as Here is New York suggests that the comparison between professional and enthusiastic photographers needs to be thought in a soft way and that it has to be probably intended more as a continuum rather than a distinction\(^7\), because the relationship that exists between the two is not an-

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\item \(^7\) The concept of continuum is discussed in S. Allan, “Amateur Photography in Wartime: Early Histories”, in Amateur Images and Global News, edited by K. Andén-Papadopoulou, M. Pantti, Bristol-Chicago: Intellect, 2011, 41-60. More information about the relationship between amateur and professional photography in a war context can be found in war photography histories such as P. Hodgson, Early War Photographs, London: Book Club Associated, 1974; J. Lewinski, The Camera at War. A History of War Photography from
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tithetical at all and it could be preferably described not as an unquestionable boundary line, but as a movable frontier. Indeed, as the catalogue states,

in those turbulent days it seemed as if everyone in NYC had a camera and they [the promoters] decided that the exhibition should be as broad and inclusive as possible, open to ‘anybody and everybody’, not just photojournalists and other professional photographers, but amateur of every stripe

This does not represent an absolute innovation in itself: already in the past there were occasions in which a war context has been documented by professional photographers as much as amateurs; nevertheless, the contemporary media scenario has considerably changed the coordinates with which this co-presence can be interpreted. First of all, during the ‘War on Terror’ declared after the 9/11 attacks, pictures of conflict are taken with a broad range of video and photographic cameras developed by the latest technological advancements: in this way, contemporary theatres of war turn into a visual context exposed to a myriad of crossing gazes coinciding with many points of view, often integrated in devices of daily usage (for example, in Here is New York exhibition photographs are “captured with every conceivable kind of apparatus, from Leicas and digital Nikons to homemade pinhole cameras and little plastic gizmos that schoolchildren wear on their wrists”). In this way, anyone who is involved in the reality of war and is able to shoot photographs of it can gain the role of an ‘operator of visibility’ (aside from his professional status or skills). Therefore, we can say that, during the crash of the Twin Towers, the bystanders who take pictures of the event do not perform just as photographers (professional or not), but primarily as eyewitnesses, because they use their snapshots to bear testimony, converting an experience into visual contents that act like proofs of their presence, or – according to John Durham Peters – of their being there.

But that is not all, because due to the global importance acquired by digital literacy and social networks, also the instant sharing of pictures and videos becomes a meaningful activity in the shaping of the war imagery. Indeed, 9/11 showed us a plurality of individuals, engaged in providing a visual representation of a traumatic event, acting as eyewitnesses pictures producers: a formula that describes how, in the age of digital transformation, eyewitnesses become also media producers, because they “no longer just settle for making appearances in the media as sources of information and experience; they are themselves capable of creating and distributing media contents”.

Moreover, the idea of pondering on the profile of those who during 9/11 took pho-
tographs without basing our opinion on a binary pattern leads us to convert the opposition between professional and amateur practice into a sort of accord. Indeed, despite the prohibition on taking photographs in the initial aftermath of the attacks – a ban imposed by a public request of the Mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, who cited both national security issues and the need to respect the victims – the impulse to document the disaster was too tenacious to be restrained, to the point that, as a consequence, the fact of facing the crash of the Twin Towers gave rise to an imagery nourished by a variety of different perspectives of that state of emergency. In this way, what Here Is New York’s promoters called a *democracy of photographs* reveals itself not just as an opportunity for anyone who owned a picture of his encounter with the event to show it, taking part in a collective testimony, but also an instrument to elaborate the trauma by a particular visual rhetoric, different from the one prepared by mainstream media.

3. AGAINST *DIPLOPIA* AND *DÉJÀ-VU*: AN ALTERNATIVE VISUAL RHETORIC

Indeed, it is now important to pay specific attention to this factor, because Here is New York offers also a significant discontinuity compared to the visual rhetoric typical of the representation of 9/11 given by the covering of mainstream media, emancipating itself from the politics of representation enacted by US television and major newspapers the days after the attacks. These politics were characterized, on the one hand, by a curious syndrome called *diplopia*, that is a disturb similar to a ‘double vision’, whereby the same photographs seemed to recur exactly alike in different newspapers’ front pages; on the other, by an analogous *déjà-vu* effect trackable in TV live transmission of the attacks – actually, it is in the first place inherent to the fact that the Towers were Twin, therefore two – and highlighted by a continuous loop that, constantly repeating the same images of the collapse, did not allow us to properly understand the event, freezing it in an everlasting present, depriving our gaze of any comparisons or montage with other images.

Instead the exhibition offers an alternative visual project that claims back the spectacular images published or broadcast by official media to hybridize and redistribute them with a precise aim, that is to organize a participatory strategy guaranteed by digital photography, as it is clear in this statement:

> photography was the perfect medium to express what happened on 9/11, since it is democratic by its very nature and infinitely reproducible. The tragedy at Ground Zero struck all

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New Yorkers equally, leaving none of us immune to shock of grief. Although the disaster was the lead story in every newspaper in the world, and searing footage of the planes destroying the towers was running on television twenty-four hours a day, to New Yorkers this wasn’t a news story: it was an unabsorbable nightmare. In order to come to grips with all of the imagery that was haunting us, it was essential, we thought, to reclaim it from the media and share at it without flinching.\(^{(17)}\)

Moreover, speaking about what pictures represent, we can undoubtedly say that they show astounding explosions, clouds of thick black smoke raised to the sky, Manhattan’s street corners entirely ash-covered, ruins that let half-seen shreds of flags and bodies. It means images resonating with the unforgettable imagery of total destruction from Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings\(^{(18)}\) (when the military slang term Ground Zero first achieved popular usage); images that, thanks to their striking impact, can truly be considered as ‘icons’: but promoters did nothing to specifically attribute that sense to them. On the contrary, every photography is combined with others with the aim to create a promiscuous mixture in which images of different nature coexist, as shocking pictures and intimate snapshots (such as close-ups or details of survivors’ eyes and gestures): a choice that seems to lead the perception of spectators to an empathy focused on individual tragedies and not just on material damages, exceedingly emphasized by the media rhetoric because of their clamorous resonance. Hence, it is a form of representation that works as a visual ‘antidote’, influenced by a logic for which to the urban devastation is juxtaposed the human affliction, because, as Susie Linfield claims,

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\text{documenting 9/11 meant, also, documenting the look of the city itself: not just as an agglomeration of buildings, bridges, sidewalks, and street signs but as a living, breathing, achingly vulnerable actor in this drama. It meant portraying the city’s residents: stunned and hurting, yet unified in ways we lifelong New Yorkers had never experienced.}\(^{(19)}\)
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In conclusion, we can summarize insisting again on both the social and visual importance of Here is New York project: more than a standard exhibition, it has represented for a whole community an attempt to bear a collective testimony to the attacks and, at the same time, a photographic “act of resistance” – as writes Clement Chéroux, quoting Gilles Deleuze’s Abécédaire – capable of taking position against an uncritical development of the public opinion, avoiding the rallying cries of the official infotainment.\(^{(20)}\)

\(^{(17)}\) Rose George, Shulan, Traub, Peress, eds., Here Is New York, 8-9.