



New York Cultural Center

Face to Face with...



JOEL MEYEROWITZ AND HIS PHOTOGRAPHY

A Dialogue with Joel Meyerowitz
and Giovanni Chiaramonte
Introduced by Francesco Zanot

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Jerome Green Hall, Room 103
Columbia University
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**transcript not reviewed by speakers*

Simmonds: Good evening. I would like to welcome all of you and especially our distinguished guests, Joel Meyerowitz, Giovanni Chiaramonte and Francesco Zanut. Special thanks to the Department of Italian at Columbia University for their help in organizing and promoting this event.

Before turning the podium over to Mr. Zanut, who will introduce our two distinguished photographers, we would like to say a word about Giovanni Chiaramonte, one of Italy's premier photographers. Giovanni's work is currently on view in the Venice Biennial where his photographs are also on view in a one-man show. Tonight's dialogue between Joel Meyerowitz and Giovanni Chiaramonte is the fruit of their ongoing esteem and professional collaboration, and we thank them for taking the time from their busy schedule to be here with us tonight.

On the part of Crossroads New York Cultural Center, we are pleased to host a discussion on photography, and not only because we are honored by having with us two world-class artists. If there is a theme that has inspired all of our cultural work, it has been that we want to learn again to "see." To us, the greatest weakness of contemporary culture is the tendency of human reason to impose itself as a "measure" on every aspect of reality. On the contrary, we maintain that originally reason is the capacity to look at the world, to be surprised by what one sees, to be challenged by the mysterious "beyond" that is evoked by every serious observation of reality. For us, this derives from the teaching of Msgr. Luigi Giussani, who regarded education precisely as "learning to see more" and insisted that the first step on any genuine religious journey has to be "more observation, less reasoning."

In this light you understand why we regard photography as one of the key forms of human exploration in our age. Because photography is always, to a large extent, the art of "looking." Great photography looks at real objects while striving to see "through" them, to grasp at larger and hidden subjects. Ultimately, great photography reveals reality for what it is: a sign. In doing this it has the power to break through the curtain of ideology and to awaken deeper questions. All of this is particularly true in the work of Joel Meyerowitz.

Let me now introduce Mr. Zanut. He is an acclaimed critic in Italy where he works with the most prominent Italian photographers and he often gives lectures in the leading Italian universities about the history and theory of photography. His most recent book "The Anticipated Moment", presents Joel Meyerowitz and Richard Misrach, revealing their vision of the beauty of the world and treating crucial points in the history of 20th century American photography. And now ...Francesco Zanut.

Zanut: Before beginning my brief speech I'd like to thank Crossroads New York Cultural Center for inviting me to take part in this conference, and the Department of Italian at Columbia University for giving us hospitality. Obviously I'd also like to thank all of you for being here tonight.

There are very numerous "strong thesis" that I've tried to discuss and demonstrate in my essay, *The Anticipated Moment*, with the classic instruments of historiographical

research: first of all the fact that a flat split exists between the history of photography which considers the events that took place on the East Coast of the United States, and another one which is possible to reconstruct on the Pacific Coast. On the one side, in the East obviously, main subjects have been men before, I mean their portraits, and the city with its crowded streets since the last two decades of 20th century; while on the other side, the West, nature has always remained in the center of the view-finder, uncontaminated at first (the wilderness), then touched by humankind, civilized, with all the usual accoutrements of millions of people.

Then I studied the issue of color in the history of American photography, coming to the conclusion that an external intervention was necessary to let color photography be totally accepted in the realm of Fine Arts. We can't forget that many methods of achieving the color photograph were still ready and available just a few years after the invention of photography itself. So I identified that intervention with Pop Art, which we all know since the early 60s allowed the products deriving from popular culture and mass communications – and color photography was considered to be both – to get into the world of art.

The works of Joel Meyerowitz and Richard Misrach, which permitted me to deepen the above-mentioned themes and many others, are all connected by a characteristic which goes far beyond any historiographical consideration: they're founded on the "Sense of Time."

We all know that Time is one of the basic elements of the vocabulary of photography together with the frame and the point of view. John Szarkowski taught us that in his renowned book *The Photographer's Eye*, published by the MoMA in 1966. But in this case Time is not only an element of photographic signification, but the main subject of each single image. This is perfectly demonstrated by a series of a few pictures that Meyerowitz included in the sequence of his celebrated *Cape Light*: in this series, called *Bay/Sky*, as in the impressionist paintings by Monet and Cézanne, framing remains essentially unaltered, while the moment when the scene is registered on the film always changes. This way focus moves from represented space, always the same, to the effects of the temporal variable on it. The camera becomes a sort of clock. It works like a clock. Its hands are light and, therefore, its colors continuously change as time passes by.

One of the most interesting aspects of Meyerowitz's biography is that he began photographing using color film. It's interesting because he did that in the very early 60s, when color, as just said, was still considered by most critics and photographers as a factor of the vulgarization of the medium. At that time he was practicing street-photography in the tradition of his great masters Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand. When he shifted from a small format to a big 8x10 inch view camera, which permitted him to reach a wider public (we must remember that *Cape Light* sold more than 100.000 copies, a true record for a book of photographs), he had to step back from his subjects, but he brought with him from the 35mm experience an instinctive attraction for the unexpected. What makes his work different from that one of many colleagues from all over the world, is the fact that he has continued to include in it the category of the Event. His photography

shrinks from objectivity. Even when for his last published work he puts down the tripod in front of the ruins of the World Trade Center, just after the biggest and most tragic contemporary event has concluded, in his pictures something always happens. It is often something unimportant, such as the sudden appearing of the extraordinary light of NY, pure, vigorous, dazzling, which makes every picture deeply but unexpectedly beautiful. It is not sacrilegious to find beauty in this landscape of devastation (“There’s beauty in ruins,” wrote Susan Sontag), but that’s the only thing that permits us to bear the pictures of Ground Zero.

In his forty-year career as a photographer, Giovanni Chiaramonte has always worked on the same fundamental issues: Time, Light, Event, Man. He went in search of his own roots in Sicily, finding them in the shapes of the Greek columns and theaters and in the infinity of the Mediterranean Sea. His research has been especially focused on the investigation of urban form. He did very important work on Milan, the city where he lives and that he has chosen to represent as bathed in a surreal golden light, Berlin, where he has been able to measure and to show the direction of history, and Venice, the last one to be published just a few weeks ago, which wavers tragically between life and death, between its own splendor and the danger of an imminent disappearance.

Chiaramonte has photographed almost every place in the Western world searching for his own cultural origin and trying to comprehend his destiny. The journey as an act for understanding and growing up has accompanied his career from the very beginning indeed. Obviously, along his endless path he passed through the United States also, where he made a long pilgrimage from East to West reporting the glory but also the miseries of American culture. Joel Meyerowitz wrote a brief foreword to this work that was published as *Westwards*, where he said: “Chiaramonte, in the tradition of the great Italian explorers, bold and curious as his predecessors, seems to be telling us: this strange and absorbing land excites my eye and mind, yet there is little there in the way of hope. He may be right and for this he makes me weep.” It came out in 1996. It’s surely even truer after the last tragic events.

Apart from being a photographer, Giovanni Chiaramonte is a publisher too. In over thirty years he has published more than 70 books with the most important international photographers: among them are Joel Meyerowitz, André Kertesz, Mario Giacomelli, Werner Bischof, Wim Wenders and the Russian movie-director Andrey Tarkovsky, who’s the author of a stunning but never-before-seen series of Polaroids. Recently Chiaramonte has also published my essay, so for this reason I’d like to thank him too for giving me the possibility of being here tonight, and I’m glad to give him leave to speak now.

Chiaramonte: [translated by Stella Maniscalco] I apologize for not speaking English, but I understand everything. [laughter] I believe to be here because maybe the Mystery of Light has called me here together with Joel. And also the experience of photography as a writing of life. So, when I was very young and I started to become interested in photography, it was 1972, I saw in Parma an exhibit of this new American photographer, and I was incredibly struck by some images of Joel Meyerowitz, and even more when he

published *Cape Light*. And through his images I really understood that his images were representing a great history, a story of a man who had made great not only a city, but I also believe the world, images that spoke about a very common story. And so I understood that a deep bond tied together all of American culture. So today I would like to ask a few questions to Joel because I want this story to be better understood and to be even a greater gift for the world.

So I want to start from the beginning. Tell us about your childhood and early youth in New York. What kind of human and cultural heritage do you feel you've received from your family and from your hometown?

Meyerowitz: Thank you, Giovanni. I was very comfortable in my anonymity before he came here. It's definitely uncomfortable after what was said. In fact, I come from very humble beginnings. I grew up in the Bronx. So I'm just a street kid from New York City. My parents were first generation American Jews from...escapees I guess their parents were from Hungary and Russia. I grew up in a working class neighborhood in the Bronx where the doors were always open so the milkman and the iceman could bring their stuff in. And street life was what we had for entertainment. It was before television. And my father, who was really a first-rate comic, he had been a stand in for Charlie Chaplin at the Gold Medal Studios in the Bronx and he had a Chaplin act in Vaudeville. Just like we have Elvis imitators today, he was a Chaplin imitator. He had a great reading of what was possible on the street. He would always say, "Watch that!" And no sooner would he say "Watch that!" then somebody would walk into the telephone pole, or someone would slip on a banana peel, or the horse with the hat, with the ears coming through the hat, the hat would fly off. He would always know, or it seemed to me as a kid that his instinct for pointing out things to observe, the comedy of the streets, was flawless. He always made me laugh, and so I think that my basic instinct for observing human nature, although at the time who could've imagined that photography would have been the way grasping a bit of that as it disappears in front of us. Nonetheless, I think that I got my "chops" from my father's nudging me to say, "Watch, watch what happens here!"

And I didn't in any way process that to become an artist. My childhood passions were playing baseball and building model airplanes that I flew. And maybe in some way the discipline that I think one needs to be an artist of any sort, particularly photography because it requires a kind of solitary building up of one's work, I think those afternoons I spent gluing those balsawood airplanes, and they were big, they were three or four feet wide and they flew....Of course, the big event of every day was racing home from school and opening up all the bottles of glue. Of course, at the time I didn't realize I was getting high every day. That stuff would just come into the air and the vapors would express themselves through the little bottles, and I would be in a dream for hours gluing. I couldn't wait!

Nonetheless, I think that that discipline of building something so that it was perfect and then taking it out and watching it crash, was a lesson in endurance and devotion and commitment, and connection—all the things that it takes later on when you decide to be

an artist or when art grabs you in some way that won't let you go. Maybe you can refer to that one source in your early beginnings, and that was certainly a source for me.

Chiaramonte: And in this great youth, when and how did you discover your vocation for photography? And I think talking about you, the word “vocation” is really appropriate.

Meyerowitz: Well, I didn't discover photography until I was 24 years old. I was working as an art director for a small advertising agency. I had graduated university with a degree in painting and art history. I was doing graduate work at Hunter College in art history and painting at night, and working in the advertising industry in the day time, and my boss one afternoon said, “Listen, you have to go downtown and watch this photographer shoot a job for us. His name is Robert Frank. Go to Stuyvesant Town and watch what he does and make sure he covers all the territory.” I didn't know who Robert Frank was, and for those of you who don't... Who doesn't know who Robert Frank is here? That's a lot of people! Robert Frank is a turning point for contemporary photography. He's a Swiss photographer who came to America in the 40s and he did a body of work in the 50s called *The Americans* on the Guggenheim fellowship, and it's published as a book, and that book single-handedly turned photography around and gave it a bittersweet, dark poetry that swept across the American landscape, the emotional and spiritual landscape of America. And it seems to me that most contemporary photographers have gone through the little door that Robert opened into a kind of recognition, consciousness about America being a place to photograph in. So, as luck would have it, this guy was taking pictures of two pre-pubescent girls doing their after school nonsense—you know, milk and cookies, playing with dolls, painting their toenails—and I was looking over his shoulder while he was taking these pictures. He had to make a living too like all of us. And when I watched him move and take pictures at the same time, I had one of those epiphanies where I thought—I didn't know you could do that, you could move and take a picture. I thought it was, stop, hold that pose, lift your chin, turn, hold this. He was effortlessly, balletically moving in this small space and whispering to these girls, and every time I heard that tiny little click, I would see over his shoulder life have a seizure. For a moment it kind of froze in a gasp-like quality. I was so astonished by that that when I left there two hours later and went out on the street to go back to my office, everything I saw on the street I intercepted with a little click in my mind, as if to freeze it as it was disappearing in front of me. And by the time I got back to 53rd Street and Fifth Avenue where my office was and got upstairs to the art department, I realized, that was it---photography. And I walked in the door and I quit my job then and there, and the art director gave me his camera to use. I went out, I loaded some colored film into it, and I started taking pictures because I thought, the world was in color so what other choice is there? Plus I didn't know any better about dark rooms or anything else, and so blundered along trying to catch the ephemeral moment as it was disappearing. And along the way I made the acquaintance of first Tony Ray-Jones, a great English photographer, now dead, and Gary Winogrand, Dione Arbus and Lee Friedlander and John Charkovsky at the Museum of Modern Art, and I fell into what was then the budding culture of photography.

Pardon me while I go on a moment. In the 60s photography wasn't the photography of today where there's every gallery of New York showing, and you can sell a picture for

\$100,000.00. Photography was the bastard child of serious art. Nobody gave a damn about it. Few museums collected or showed it. It wasn't taught in most schools. And I remember in 1964 I saw a show of Ansel Adams at the only gallery there was in New York, the Underground Gallery, and old Chinese laundry on East 10th Street. And those pictures of Ansel's were \$25 a piece and nobody was buying them. So that's where photography was. One didn't do it for the money or the fame or ambition. One made those pictures because it was part of the visible world effacing itself at any given moment and perhaps one could find some connection to this that was poetic or meaningful. So that's what drew me in to making pictures.

Chiaramonte: You spoke about Arbus, Friedlander and Winogrand. What brought you together at that time, and what set you apart later? To me your images manifest a joy and a hope that I don't see in your companions. Do you agree with that?

Meyerowitz: Well, I don't agree entirely. The differences are human differences and the emphasis on who we are, what we make of the world, but I think in all of their work, whatever the dark and mysterious nature of their works, there is both beauty and poetry and hope, even in the darkest pictures of Dione Arbus and Lee Friedlander. Last year the Dione Arbus exhibition was in the Metropolitan Museum and I hadn't seen her work publicly for many years. And going through the exhibition many times I was so encouraged to see how great Dione Arbus was and how much pleasure she took in the magnitude of every human being she photographed, even if they were crazy or impoverished or hopeless in some way, she saw their deep humanity everywhere. And from that sprang for me a sense of hope that even though she killed herself because of her own desperation, and believe me, it was painful to all of us who knew her, not only to lose someone like Dione Arbus, but at that time, 1971, when she killed herself, photography was still not a big ambition place—we thought, if the work (which is all we had to sustain us) didn't sustain her, then what was in it for us? She was at a point when she was making her best work and then she killed herself, so it didn't leave that much hope.

But, for myself, there are a few black and white photos here that were probably in the show that you saw which was a traveling show that the Museum of Modern Art put out—Contemporary American Photography—and Gary and Lee and Dione and myself were in this show which traveled around the world. And I was an innocent kid. I was in my twenties and trying to see the world and what it looked like and what ephemeral moments might actually contain something of interest, and I remember in this picture [shows slide] I was in a café. I spent a year abroad in Europe in 1966, and I remember going to get a coffee and hearing some music. And I turned around and realized there was a blind man sitting there listening to his little radio, and it was his world. And outside of that window was this crazy, chaotic world of gypsies and dancing goats and traffic and everything else, and in that moment I just saw the poignancy and the challenge of people's lives.

I was just in Paris last week and I went to see if that stature is still there [shows slide] and it wasn't there! Nor is this. [shows next slide]

One of the joys of photography for me is that things do disappear, and the only thing that is capable of an intervention at one-thousandth of a second is the camera, making a still photograph. I love film. I made a film. I see movies all the time, but you can't hold a frame in a movie still very often and study it, blow it up so you can look at it and watch the way it teaches you about stillness and recovering all of the information.

[next slide] See, it pays to carry a camera, even if you're going to go swimming. You carry it with you to the edge of the water because you never know what you're going to see.

[next slide] This is during the Vietnam protest era. I always feel that if you carry a camera, you have a license to see. Anything that comes your way is fair game. You learn to anticipate, to be ready—very boy-scoutish, the whole thing.

So these, Giovanni, were some of the photographs that you in your innocence there saw.

Chiaramonte: I really loved your photograph of Cape Light and in particular what strikes me is that you seem to love the limit, the border, for instance the beach between land and sea, the twilight between night and day, and the representations of subjects by circling around them, always more and more at a distance. Why?

Meyerowitz: [shows slide] We all grow, hopefully, or evolve in some way. Francesco was talking about the street people. When I was working in the street, as in some of the pictures you saw, the temporal moment, the disappearing moment, is certainly a great interest to me. But in every developing life, one hits a wall. You ask questions of the medium. How can I extend it in some way? How can I get it to yield more of something? And this something I wanted more of was description. John Charkovski, who was head of the Museum of Modern Art's photography department for nearly thirty years, spoke often and wrote often about description being all that photography is about. What is the photograph doing? What is the camera doing? Describe something. Press a button, it describes what is in front of you. It doesn't necessarily do anything else but describe. If you make it describe something well enough, personally enough, you will get perhaps a reflection of your concerns and your values and your take on your time or your culture or whoever you are. And frankly, I wasn't getting the fullest description out of black and white photography. I felt that if photography is about description, then color photography described more things because it described as forms in color and if there was more content in these photographs then there would be more description. So it was a circular reasoning on my part, and since I was shooting in color, 35mm color, I felt that I wanted to make big prints and see the world more completely, and it pushed me; the medium did it to me. It wasn't my fault. The medium pushed back and somehow I fell under its spell and I picked up a large format view camera, similar to this smaller one sitting on the side here—I've been out working all day today and I came directly here from a project I'm working on—and I bought myself an 8 x 10 inch camera and I started to make photographs in color. Of course it was a different vocabulary; it wasn't the speed and movement of the street. It was a much more meditative and studied kind of picture, but nonetheless I tried to bring in what I thought were the streets' temperaments, the speed of

things happening, the recognition of things. And with that came a space that ran from track, these cameras could actually track a great deal of specs, and since I wanted description, I kept on thinking about deeper and deeper specs. And so I started to make exposures that were longer. And then I realized, look at this hour, this hour that the French call “*entrée chien et loup*,”- *between the dog and the wolf*...What do the Italians call that hour? *Crepuscolo*. It’s not as animated as “the dog and the wolf,” which is a description that means what? Between the known and the unknown. Between the tame and the savage, something like that. So I took that hour to mean I could look into the cunning darkness with this camera that used time to drink in the light. As the light was fading, it could also be amplified. And so I was running on the edge both of broad daylight, because I love hard sunlight, but I also was interested in that narrowing time frame between day and night. And as I made some of these pictures, pools by the sea became for me....and it came from this picture [shows slide] It wasn’t that I suddenly made pools by the sea, but I made this picture, and I thought, ah, that is the dog and the wolf. That pool is the dog lying there passive at our feet, and out there beyond it is the sea, is the wolf, unknown and untamed. And so I began to make numerous pictures along the edge of the sea, and pools and sea and the sky, and bit by bit things....photography has this wonderful gift of catching you. You take pictures of disappearing things, but these things catch you and capture your mind and maybe ask you or suggest to you, and you could pursue them in different ways. So there’s a kind of open-ended but logical method in photography. You follow your instinct and your instinct will nourish and suggest things to you and perhaps, over time, you will develop different bodies of work. Certainly as Giovanni has suggested, that hour between day and night, pushing that particular boundary and looking into the darkness was an interesting example of light and time and space—all of these mysteries.

And then the question arose, if one has a camera that can describe everything, as a view camera can—with a great definition, depth of field, all of that—then can you make pictures that are almost about nothing? [shows slide] And so I found myself making pictures about big space, almost the line between the sea and the sky, where there would be tiny figures in this big space...as empty as I could make it. There are other pictures that I don’t have here which are emptier even than that because I wanted to sort of test the limits of description and see where it took me.

If you have a question, don’t hesitate to ask it as we go.

Chiaramonte: Another question. Today I saw again your places in Hopper’s paintings and I was again really struck by the connection between your color and Hopper’s color.

Meyerowitz: Whose color?

Chiaramonte: Hopper’s

Meyerowitz: Oh! Hopper’s color! I heard Oprah’s and I didn’t want to go there.

Chiaramonte: What relationship do you see between the color and the reality of the world?

Meyerowitz: I'm a realist. Basically I'm an urban photographer and a realist. I look at the way things look and I don't wish to colorize them or make them pumped up in any way. Things as they are really please me. And I can get into that kind of drifting reverie in front of something that speaks to me, and I never know what that's going to be. And we're all the same. All of you, waiting for a bus, walking to a class, going to work, see things every day that make you say, "Ah!" And as soon as you say, "Ah!" that little gasp reflex of yours is your connection, is your inspiration actually in the most basic sense. Something in the world has pinched you, grabbed you, touched you, awakened you, something has happened to you in that split second, and you've understood without long contemplation, you've understood in just that briefest of seconds, a lot about where you were, what you saw. You took it in. You didn't stop to take a picture perhaps. Maybe that's the difference between everybody and photographers is that the photographer stops when he or she's awakened by something visible in the visible world. And so it could be just like here, [shows slide] a street corner in a town in the Midwest on a sunny day, coming out of the shadows and feeling what sunlight feels like skittering across the streets, and off of the buildings and one realizes there's no one out there. Where are they all? And you're alone in this environment, and suddenly the scale of the buildings, the march of the streets, the materiality of the reality, all of this stuff becomes solid, presence. It opens up a possibility. And if one can stop at that moment and just take it in both emotionally and centrally, as well as photographically, you may earn the title of photographer. Just feel where you are and respond. And sometimes it could be as fake as this. [shows slide] That's not grass; that's just turf, and that artificial turf against that beautiful blue sky and those pink seats and that white drawn line all around the infield and the foul lines—all of that stuff spoke to me. I particularly like the way the line along the third baseline zips through that umpire's legs there as it whisks its way to the bleachers. Something about taking it all in and looking at reality is the life that we lead as observers and that continues to constantly lead everyday reality.

Chiaramonte: Your great book on Ground Zero has just come out. What do you think is your role, the role of an artist today, in a world at war and full of evil?

Meyerowitz: Well, all of us here, whether we were in New York on that day or not, experienced Ground Zero and the attack of the Towers on television or in the reality of the city, probably all of us, in one way or another, wanted to be of help. I know I did. As a native New Yorker I wanted to help. And there was little that I could do. First of all, I wasn't even in New York City when it happened. I was on Cape Cod. But a few days later I came back and I couldn't do anything short of writing a check. There was no blood to be given. One couldn't go inside to move steel, so I felt helpless, and I know that there were many other people who also felt helpless. And somehow I got down to Ground Zero and I stood outside the perimeter on Chambers and Greenwich Street, and it was all gated off with cyclone fencing and tarp. All you could see was a little smoke rising in the distance. I took my Leica off my shoulder and raised it to my eye to try to take a look. There was actually nothing to see, but I wanted to sort of frame it and get a sense, and no

sooner did I do that then I was struck on my shoulder from behind by a female police officer who poked me and said, “No photographs. This is a crime scene.” What was quite shocking to me was the crime scene was in there and we were standing on a public street, and I told her so, which she didn’t like very much, and we had a good argument over that. I figure it’s on my birth certificate. It says, “New Yorker...If you don’t agree with something a cop says, you have a right to say what’s on your mind.” Anyway, when I asked her if the press corps was going in, and she pointed them out to me showing me that they were all tied up, and I said, “So, they must be going in. It’s the free press.” And she said, “No. No photography allowed. They’re never going in.” When I heard that, I got the sense that that’s what I could do to help—that I could figure out a way to get in there and take photographs and make an archive that I could give to the City of New York as a gift. And I did. I managed to go into Ground Zero on September 23rd and stay for eight and a half months, and I made 8,000 plus pictures which now stands as the archive. And I have to tell you though, I didn’t want to do this alone. I actually wrote a letter to Mayor Giuliani asking if I could form a team of six other photographers, one of whom is in the room tonight, Tom Roma, who teaches here at Columbia as many of you probably know, and I wanted six photographers and myself and a cinematographer and a historian to all go in and do this work for whatever length of time it took, and the mayor never responded and so that group never came together. I managed to sneak in and stay for that time by myself. And now, five years later, to see a book come out feels like it was a worthy effort. I learned a lot. It changed me personally, and my work.

I know Giovanni probably wants to ask me another question, but they tie together, the question probably you’re going to ask me ties together with this, so I’ll wait for them to ask this question, and then I’ll continue. Is that okay, Giovanni?

Chiaramonte: The task of an artist is to change himself, as it is for every man, and so I ask you, how did this change of reality also come into play in Tuscany?

Meyerowitz: Actually, in September of 2001, I had airplane tickets to go to Tuscany to begin work on a book that I had been commissioned to do by a publisher, and I took that advance and I spent it inside Ground Zero because the book about Ground Zero wasn’t funded by anybody. And some months later the publisher said, “How’s our book going in Tuscany?” I said, “I haven’t gone there yet. I’m inside Ground Zero on a daily basis.” He said, “We’ve got a publishing date. You better get over there.” So in January I went to Tuscany. It was an interesting balance, equilibrium in a sense, to go from Ground Zero to standing in Tuscany on the ground and to consider that the upheaval we had in New York City changed life that we all experienced since that day and, in fact, the rest of the world has experienced. To be in Tuscany, was to have a sense of old rituals and order and gentleness and the seasons and a sense of goodness, whereas to be inside Ground Zero, just compare [shows slide] a sense of order with this. So I was living in this every day and swallowing it, dust and all, and becoming part of the larger force of workers down there. Even though I went in to be an observer, I suddenly found myself as part of the team, which was an interesting change to go from the solitary artist who was staying by himself, to being part of a larger group of people and recognizing that this was part of the uplift of the place because as tragic as it was as an event, that’s how uplifting it was to be

in there and to watch the way human beings handled the elements of this disaster, the great care with which they treated it. So I found myself shuttling back and forth between one space and the other and having to find a sense of meaning from it, and the goodness and the solidities of the ability that I saw in Tuscany really forced my sense of what was going on in Ground Zero, and how necessary it was to have a perspective. To walk on the steel of Ground Zero, [shows slide] this picture here is such a dumb picture. It's just turned-over land, basic muck, earth out of which is going to become...polenta. [laughter] Here the polenta grows. But only after standing in Ground Zero on all that steel and looking down at it smoking and stinking and feeling the heat of it, to stand on the humble earth was an incredibly moving experience. It made me connect with it and actually allowed me to risk taking a picture as dumb as that because I was in places like this [shows another slide of Ground Zero]. Here's 50 firemen who I ran after as they ran over the rubble down into a valley inside the south tower. You see those beams on top? Those are the central core beams that held up the elevators of the south tower, and down in the center where there's a light, a man came out and announced that he had found five bodies of firemen in a stairwell, and that the stairwell was from the north tower. It was thrown a couple of hundred yards and had crashed into the south tower and was buried until they excavated it here. Then I found myself literally standing with these men [shows slide of Tuscany] on that sturdy earth. And look at the way that they stand. You think of them as planted. They are men of the earth. They stand on the ground. There's a way their posture sets that they belong to. It was nourishing to be reminded that these men exist after having been with the firemen whose frantic energy, search for their comrades was part of the overall experience of Ground Zero.

This may not look like much of a picture [shows slide], a stick and a tree, but someone has lovingly tied that tree to that stick so that that tree will grow straight and bear fruit at some future time. And it's the loving gesture, and the knowing in the loving gesture—just making sure that something is going to be strong, that is so moving to me...an invisible hand that tied it.

And no different from those workers, in fact, were these men and women who were raking, just like we read in the papers in the last few days that they found some more human remains in a manhole, that manhole is not far from this place [shows slide]. And what these people were doing was just raking up the last bits of rubble, turning it over, square foot by square foot, looking for a bone, a tooth, some little piece of human being that they could analyze through the DNA and give some family member a sense of solace. And I know that speaking to one of these guys and saying, "You know, the act that we do here, this raking gesture, is so ancient. It's been done for thousands of years." He looked at me and said, "That's us; we're gardeners in the garden of the dead."

This is Beppo. [shows slide] He was gardening too. He was gleaning the last fallen ears of corn after the harvest. Nothing is to be wasted. And he reminded me of those guys in Ground Zero. Nothing was to be wasted.

I could go on all night. Giovanni, ask me a question.

Chiaramonte: At this moment in history where art seems to be abandoning reality, and in the era of digital image and of the extravagant fiction of Hollywood's movies, what motivates you to keep taking pictures of daily reality on the streets of the world?

Meyerowitz: Well, reality is never-ending. A movie is over in two hours and you forget about it as soon as you leave. Yet reality just keeps on spinning its repetitions and its newness again and again. Every day is new. There's always something to discover. It's part of the innocent joy of photography, being able to go in the world armed with a tool that might actually hold your thoughts for even a few minutes. And just to walk through the world and see what happens next, see the story being retold for the millionth time and see if it's still fresh to you. And it's particularly a challenge as one gets older because I'm not the 24-year-old boy that went out on the street panting to be in the mix of it all. I spent 45 years prancing about on the streets fairly regularly. And I've seen a lot. And it's not so much that I'm jaded by what I've seen, but I've seen a lot. So what surprised me about the world, what pleased me and astonished me and nourished me are now more known quantities. So the question I ask now as someone who goes out into the world to still find what I can find is--What interests me now? What does it mean to me now, 45 years later? What is the world saying in this incarnation of itself to me that is worth looking at? Drawing some observations or maybe some conclusions from it. So it's an interesting problem for an artist, for a street artist, a photography artist.

A person who stays in the studio...When I think about getting older, I think about Pablo Picasso in his late years, in his 80s, doing an entire body of work called *The Artist in the Studio*, mostly engravings, etchings. He must have filled the studio with young men and women who he told to take their clothes off, and he pranced around loving them, eating and dancing and lounging, and in the midst of them is an old bull stamping and huffing and snorting and watching. An old bull is in there watching youth at play, and he made this incredibly rich series of maybe one hundred drawings. And I thought, well, he saw youth as something that he lived once and now he had it no longer so he was looking at it, really looking at the dance of life and seeing it from his perspective. He could do that from the studio. I have to go back out on the street and the same buses are running. Taxis just got more expensive and, you know, more cops on the street, and I have to deal with all that stuff and it's interesting to see what is it that speaks to me now. But at the very least I can say, to answer your question, life itself is still...sweet.

[applause]

Question & Answer Session

Question: You talk about your father and his influence on you, and you were a painter. And I can see from your photographs your great sense of composition. I want to know what painters influenced you before you had that ah-ha moment at the Robert Frank studio.

Meyerowitz: The gentleman asked what painters influenced me before I was captivated by photography. Well, a lot of painters. It was in the 50s, so I was in school and although

contemporary painting was very provocative, and I was painting that way, I was actually deeply influenced by Rubens whose kinetics and physicality and sumptuousness was just delicious. And by Bosch because of the kind of crazy world that he envisioned. And Tiepolo because I love the way he drew because he drew with dark spots and left white spaces and just drew the shadows and let the highlights take shape around them. But Franz Kline and Pollack and De Kooning and Hopper, absolutely Hopper. Hopper might say no.

Before I was a photographer, I used to go from my office, which was across the street from the Museum of Modern Art, and you could go into the museum in those days and it was quite empty most of the time. And there was a back door by the cafeteria which led into the Whitney. For those of you who don't know, the Whitney used to be behind MoMA on 54th Street, and it was actually just a mansion, and in it were all the Edward Hopper's and their Cornell boxes. And you could walk in there for free and go up the spiral staircase and walk through. The Edward Hopper's were just hanging there by the dozens, and feast on those incredible paintings.

Question: When you were showing the difference between Ground Zero and Italy, I could not help but be struck by the difference between the dog and the wolf. And not only in the literal sense, but perhaps also, in a sense, deep in your soul.

Meyerowitz: That's a very generous connection and an interesting one. Yea, I never thought of it that way, but, in fact, I was in the savage. I was in the results of the savage. And I went to this place which, certainly you couldn't call Italy 'tame,' but the land has been tamed for two thousand years. It's been cared and loved into being. It is a form of perfection that's tendered and tended and tenderly every which way. And I took my recovery there. My eyes softened and my heart opened, and it was important to me to lie down with that dog in all its innocence.

Question: Could you also talk about the anonymity of the figures in your World Trade Center photographs...you talked a lot about the firemen and their role...rather than having that experience of engagement with them...compared to the engagement you have with the people in the Italian photographs.

Meyerowitz: You all heard the question? It's a good question and a good observation, but it's unfair. The reading one would get with the few pictures I've shown isn't a fair enough reading, but you were right to see because there was an inherent problem for me. When I went into Ground Zero, it was tumultuous and chaotic, and a spectacle beyond our imagining. There were literally billions of bits and pieces strewn about. Not millions, billions of bits and pieces. It was something the eye, my eye, had never seen before. And the men and women, mostly men, but men and women who were working there were like ants on the pile, and generally, certainly I stood next to people, but for the most part they were there working, and nobody was really that interested in stopping to have their picture taken and it seemed wrong to do that.

Now this book has come out, and it has four hundred pictures in it, and I struggled with the problem of the book. Every book has an arc to the book, and hopefully every book gets more interesting as the book goes along, so by the time you get to the end, you have a full and complete book. You know how bad you feel when the book sort of empties out and you realize you've wasted your time; it started off good and it ended badly. And Ground Zero started off incredibly full, but within five months it was an empty hole in the ground, and it got less and less interesting. And the way I solved that problem in terms of the book, but also in terms of the arc of the whole work, was that as the work diminished, the workers came forward and I made hundreds and hundreds of portraits, informal and formal portraits, and the book, if you look at it, moves from the general to the personal. The people come forward. And it helps, I think, to give the book a conclusion that has some optimism and uplift and spirituality to it. The people did it. They cleaned up. They were on their hands and knees and raking away for eight and a half months, and finally we get back to a kind of clean place to begin again. In fact, the book ends with a few blades of grass growing under a railroad tie at the bottom of Ground Zero. In the bedrock of Ground Zero some grass has sprouted from seeds that were probably dropped there accidentally thirty-five years before, and they were sitting in the dark for thirty-five years and then a little bit of sunlight and some summer weather, and the seeds sprout, and it seemed to me to be a perfect way of saying, we've come full cycle.

Question: It's hard to ask this question. I'm going to do my best. I really liked that picture of the tree and the pole by the tree. But I liked it more when you explained why you took that picture. I'm really impressed with your way of seeing things. It's rare. I find it's very rare; even among artists I think it's rare, and I think that Giovanni was kind of touching on that in what he said. He wanted to kind of expose you more. This greatness that you have, this gift that you've been given. And my question is, how did this develop in you? You explained your history, but was there something else that happened that you didn't tell us? Because I find it rare. I don't know many people that would take a picture of a tree with a pole next to it that would have that kind of depth and to make it so beautiful! How could a tree and a pole be as beautiful as you've made it? I just want to know more where that comes from.

Meyerowitz: That's a very kind observation and statements that you've made about the work. I'm surely not alone in this. I see it in photographers and artists a lot. I think it's the work of artists to connect to the ephemeral and nearly invisible. Photographers in particular deal with that. Artists use, graphic artists who paint or make things other than photographs have other ways of connecting, but photography is precise because it comes from the ordinary, everyday reality. One tries to draw life from that thing you see in through you. You're the medium. And then get out of the way so that it goes on to the film in some telling way.

Everybody has their own method for this. I think that how susceptible each individual is to the stray meetings emanating from the world, how we vibrate to that core, to that harmony that we sustain between ourselves and the thing. We have to find a harmony. If you don't find it, it's not there or you are empty at that moment. Not every moment is

full. But I could see in my own way of being that I am vulnerable to hearing inanimate things or transitory moments saying something to me. Just to me. And I try, if I'm on good behavior in connection to things, to get it right somehow through me. And it's not about composition. It's about catching the thing before it dies. Getting it while it's just a fragrance.

I'll make an analogy to you how slender and fragile this moment is. You're walking along the street. You're in Paris. You pass a bakery and out of the open door you smell sugar and butter and yeast. It's like [whiffs] wow! You take two steps and it's gone. You go back and it's there. You take two steps the other way and it's gone. It exists only in that doorway where it's coming out into the world, and as you pass through, you're aware. You all know what I'm talking about, right? It is a fragrance that enlivens your mind. In that split second you say, "Croissant."

Photography is like that too. You pass through these zones of opportunity where things happen in an instantaneous split-second and you're alive to it. It's so fugitive and fragmentary and ephemeral and it's barely there, but you, like a good athlete or a good musician, you've tuned your instrument, and you're ready to have the bow strike the string and make a perfect sound, not a scrawky, scratchy, off-tune thing. You just learn to get the pitch right. It doesn't happen every time but when it happens, and it happens regularly enough over time, you can build these things and link them together, and teach yourself how to be nourished yet again.

And attached to that, and this is often an issue of contemporary art, attached to that is the notion of beauty. I think that beauty is a big problem for a lot of artists today. "Ah, it's beautiful!" It seems cheapened in some ways. People who feel it cheapened are actually thinking 'pretty'. Pretty and beautiful are two different states. Beauty is really important to us. We live, we urban beings live in a place that is rugged every day. Life is hard. The speed with which we have to move from place to place, the things we see, the encounters—life is rugged. And we need a glimpse of beauty now and then to help give us some equilibrium. So I think we're pre-disposed to feeling beauty, or the sense of it, even if it's only the fragrance. And certainly while I was inside of Ground Zero with all of that stuff, and you have to understand, it wasn't tragic. Tragedy happened on 9/11 when those buildings were attacked and they fell and thousands of people died. That was tragic. Everything after that was clean-up. And the place itself was filled with real life—humor, profanity, wisdom, art, wit—it had everything. It was just life. But it was hard on the eyes. It was all sharp and stinking, dangerous, and I think, for me there was a search for the sense of beauty. Not that I tried to make things beautiful. They were in and of themselves beautiful, but I felt the hunger for it more than I ever had before because I was in a place of such a desecration in a way.

So all I'm saying in answer to your question, in a roundabout way, is that I think...and you can see in every artist's work what their predilection is. If you look hard enough you can tell what the artist is thinking about, what they're doing, what they're driven towards. It should be embedded in the work. And for me, a lot of it has to do with the ephemeral nature of beauty.

Question: I had a question on what you just said. You have been talking about catching something ephemeral, something that is. I'm not an artist at all; I'm a scientist. But I was struck by the way you talk about reality. You want to catch something in reality and you want to catch something that will be there. You want to know reality. But for me, to know reality is like writing a formula and it will be true now and will be true forever. From the first picture you were catching the movements and then it slows down in the history you showed us. Is it your experience or is something real something that is real now and then goes away....because you are trying to make something permanent of that instant. Is it clear? Is it confusing?

Meyerowitz: No. It's perfectly clear, like a formula. [laughter] It's a provocative question you're asking.

One of the concerns of photography is time. The present is always being replaced by the next present moment. Time is what? Is melting away? Is it being divided into all these subdivisions? There's a formula for that. But one of the things about photography is that when you stop a piece of time, and you make a photograph, and you print the photograph, and you look at the photograph, that photograph is always of the past but in the present. This is a kind of dislocation and an irony and an ambiguity that is viewed. For example, I can hold a picture of Egypt and the pyramids, 1860. I pick it up today and I look at it and I go into the plane of the photograph—it only exists in two dimensions, it's not a three-dimensional thing; it's the illusion of three dimensions—but as you're looking at it in 21st Century America, and you're actually reading the information, the description of 1860 Egypt, something is happening between the transport of the of the presence to the past and to the present. And that back and forth is alive and it's in those atoms of 1860 which are jiggling around in the space of 2006, and something about the impermeability of time, of the space between past and present, is inactive, and there's a beauty to that. And so I participate in that in some heady, personal way. I only look like I'm stopping time in the 21st Century, but I'm trying to make a description of this moment in time because maybe it will be useful later on.

I don't know if that answers you question but it's in my mind, on my mind.

Do we have a time? Do we just talk all night? Is dinner being brought in for all of us?

Question: I'm struck that the photos you taken of the shore, that the buildings that are present are obviously not works forever, and often architectural photography is of that sort of beauty pageant kind of quality. But I'm struck that in your photography there's not that sort of ironic, "Oh, isn't this ugly, and isn't the background beautiful?" So I'm curious if you wanted to talk about that.

Meyerowitz: Did you hear the question? The question is that he's struck by the fact that in my pictures they're lacking the irony of here's something beautiful seen against something ugly, and where's my irony?

I certainly have been known to be ironic in some photographs, but I don't think we need to rub the beauty with the ugly to make irony. I mean, who determines what's beautiful as a building and what's ugly as a place anyway? That street I showed you in St. Louis, there is nothing actually beautiful on the street. They were all ordinary structures. But the place became beautiful; it transcended itself. So for me, the nature of transcendence...probably we could all write a paper on what is art. It's a good, hard question. It's a three-word question: What is art? And probably every one of us would come up with a different answer. So for me, art is transformation. The world sits there all by itself, just lying around being itself, and some person with a camera walks along onto the stage of the world and says, "Oooh." And takes a picture on Theresa Street in St. Louis and it looks beautiful to me. So the act of transforming that from ordinary reality into a brief moment of connectivity, if it works, then that transformation takes it a step closer to being art. And it doesn't need the lever of irony to make it more art or better art. It just is.

Another artist sitting here, Giovanni, could tell you a whole different thing. And Francesco could probably also take it from a different point of view, and any other artist who is sitting in my place could only celebrate irony perhaps. So I don't know, but for me, how can I take the most mundane things and find some communication with them and uplift, and find language for it too.

I used to when I was teaching say to some of my students, "If you can say it, you can see it." And I like to talk as you probably can see, or hear. And I think part of this rounding out the world is seeing all the parts so that they all make sense when I try to put them in a frame.

I could talk to you a week, or at you all night, but there is a time limit.

Question: I was first introduced to your work in August of 2002 at the Meeting in Rimini where there was an exhibit from your Ground Zero work, and it became an occasion for me to talk about the experience of that with Italian friends, and I think tour after tour people, but it became a way for me to share with them my experience through your work.

You mentioned tonight that Tuscany in part represented an opportunity for you to heal, and one of the things I was most struck by with your work was the humanity that was in every picture of dramatic, heart-wrenching subject matter, but the humanity was evident in each and every piece. Can you say something about what the experience in being at Ground Zero in all of your months work there did to you as a human being, and what was it that Tuscany did—the restorative aspect of that? What were the elements, or how did you come back to yourself in a more complete way, if that's an accurate way of describing it? But the healing process, whatever it was that was ruptured that then became whole again in Tuscany. Can you talk about your personal experience?

Meyerowitz: I think by going into Ground Zero and wanting to help, I think right there was restorative. I felt helpless and powerless and I wanted to be useful. And by going in and making this body of work, I felt the utility. I felt that I was making something that

would be beneficial. First of all, I was angry. How dare they say, “No photographs allowed.” This is the 21st Century. We need an historical record. How dare they act in this way and turn something that we all needed to grieve for into a blank space. So I was incensed first and angry, and that drove me to doing this work and finally feeling useful. And when I was in there, as I mentioned before, I moved away from being a solitary loner of an artist to being part of a larger system. And it felt great to be part of a team, to not just be by myself. Though I was sort of on my own making these pictures, I was around a thousand people every day who I began to recognize and who recognized me and who welcomed me all the time. So that was important—to be taken in.

What changed for me in terms of my work is that I now feel that I need to be more useful more often, that art for me is no longer just the singular thing of making work for myself, kind of self-indulgent in that regard. I want to make things that are useful. And art isn’t always so useful. The Russians tried it. The Chinese tried it with all kinds of propagandistic art. Clint Eastwood’s new movie is about that in a sense. All those guys selling war bonds with that photograph—the icon of it. Well, that was useful. That picture was useful. So that’s what I’m doing now. I’m trying to be more useful. And I also saw that there was a way to be more self-effacing in the making of a picture. It didn’t have to be as muscular, as personal. It could be more about making the thing just come to the camera in a more light-handed way. Getting out of the way of the picture became part of it for me.

So, those feelings of usefulness and being part of a team and then going to Tuscany and being part of an environment where the individual is still incredibly valued and the land is a part of everybody’s life. They’re connected to it. All you have to do is spend time in Tuscany, in Italy and you recognize this quality of life. And time itself in Italy is special. They have more tenses than any other language it seems to be. They stretch time out into all kinds of ways. But people take time. So I was nourished by the sense of time and the quality of the land, the sense of the seasons. I witness a year in Tuscany when I did this book *Tuscany Inside the Light*, and I witnessed basically a year in Ground Zero. So I was balancing these things and I guess I shouldn’t take it apart anymore. It all fit into the spaces I had that were vulnerable, and part of that softened me and changed me over a year. And I knew what it was like to be alive.

Thank you all very much.

Simmonds: I want to thank Mr. Meyerowitz, Mr. Chiaramonte, and Mr. Zanot for this fascinating dialogue, and also all of you for joining us this evening.

As to our next events, Crossroads is a proud co-sponsor of “Absent Canons,” a two-day Comparative Conference on Contemporary Italian Poetry organized by the Italian Academy at Columbia University. The Conference will take place in the “Teatro” at the Italian Academy on October 27 and 28, 2006. Material is available at the information desk at the exit.

Crossroads is also honored to promote *Miguel Manara* a play by Oscar Milosz, never before performed in the United States, about the historical Don Juan. The play is produced by the Blackfriars Repertory Theatre and will be performed on various dates in November at Saint Vincent Ferrer Church on Lexington Avenue at 66th street. We especially invite you to the performance on November 18th at 8:00pm which will be followed by a discussion with the cast.

Information about *Miguel Manara* and Crossroads are available at the information desk at the exit, where you can register to be informed about Crossroads' activities. Thank you and have a good evening.