

Ground Zero/Fresh Kills: Cataloguing Ruins, Garbage, and Memory

Cinzia Scarpino

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how the rise and fall of the Twin Towers can be read in relation to the rise and fall of the Staten Island Fresh Kills landfill, how their destinies were entwined from the start, and how the immediate cultural response to the collapse of the former and the closing of the latter recurred to the form of catalogues of objects, words, and images. From this angle it will be possible to posit the events within a larger, if somewhat unusual, cultural frame encompassing the history of two different yet complementary symbols of New York up to 2001 (the WTC and Fresh Kills). From Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) and *Falling Man* (2007) through Holman, Steve Zeitlin e Joe Dobkin's *Crisis* (2001-2002); from Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadows of No Tower* (2004) to *Artists Respond's 9-11* (2002); from the New York Times to *Bearing Witness to History*, the 2003-2006 retrospective of the Smithsonian Museum, relevant collective or individual responses to the 2001 attacks took the form of a catalogue, a list, a vertical or horizontal juxtaposition of data, objects, and memories, evoking a suggestive parallel to the organizing principle of past relics collected in museums and garbage stratified in sanitary landfills.

Parole chiave

Ground Zero, Fresh Kills, cataloghi

Full Text

PDF

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/1306>

NBN: <http://nbn.depositolegale.it/urn%3Anbn%3Ait%3Aunimi-5974>

Altre Modernità è indicizzato da: SCOPUS BASE DIALNET DOAJ PLEIADI ROAD ULRICH'S ZDB WORLDCAT ERIH PLUS MLA CIRC WEB OF SCIENCE, ESCI EMERGING SOURCES CITATION INDEX



Ground Zero/Fresh Kills: Cataloguing Ruins, Garbage, and Memory

di Cinzia Scarpino

That's great, it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes, an aeroplane
– Lenny Bruce is not afraid. Eye of a hurricane, listen to yourself
churn – world serves its own needs, don't misserve your own needs.
Feed it up a knock, speed, grunt no, strength no. Ladder structure
clatter with fear of height, down height. Wire in a fire, represent the
seven games in a government for hire and a combat site. Left her, wasn't
coming in a hurry with the furies breathing down your neck.
Team by team reporters baffled, trump, tethered crop. Look at that
low plane! Fine then. Uh oh, overflow, population, common group,
but it'll do. Save yourself, serve yourself. World serves it's own needs,
listen to your heart bleed. Tell me with the rapture and the reverent in
the right – right. You vitriolic, patriotic, slam, fight, bright light, feeling
pretty psyched.

R.E.M., "It's the End of the World As We Know It (and I Feel Fine)", *Document*
(1987)

Rumor has it that Michael Stipe wrote one of R.E.M.'s greatest hits as a (somewhat belated) comment to New Yorkers' reaction to Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* radio

* This article is a partial rewriting and expansion of a chapter of my *US Waste. Rifiuti e sprechi d'America. Una storia dal basso*, il Saggiatore, Milano 2011, pp. 154-161.



hoax (1938). If so, Stipe's vertiginous lyrics help confirm what media pundits have been telling us since 2001, that is, popular culture had predicted the occurrence of a catastrophic event upsetting the sleep of Manhattan well before 9/11 (Baudrillard 2002). Stipe's paratactic catalogue is made up of words which seem to collapse under the weight of its hectic pace: if one were to convey the feeling evoked by such high-voltage mantra, it would probably be that of a cathartic falling down.

It does not take the seismographic sensitivity of Don DeLillo – whose *Underworld* (1997) uncannily foreshadows the association between garbage and ruins on the one hand, and memory, on the other, which was to unravel in the aftermath of 9/11, and whose *Falling Man* (2007) revolves around the effects of the attacks on the life of an American family – to guess that the event “heard around the world” can be ultimately defined as a collapse.

If 9/11 is the story of things – and people – falling down, then its representation is largely based on their recovery, the picking up and stitching of the pieces and threads of interrupted lives onto narratives at the same time individual and collective. By pasting and juxtaposing words and images related to the victims of the attacks, or by stratifying them, artists and common people alike have been able to offer an image of the city as a united public place, even at its most fragmented and hit. To a certain extent, the same principle – if one fragment can bear witness to the memory of one missing person, thousands of fragments will bear witness to a whole city – underlies the organization of museums (where relics of past civilizations end up) and landfills (the true archaeological sites of late modernity):¹ as archaeologist William Rathje and his Garbage Project have shown (Rathje 2001), the collection of discarded objects, *objets enfuis*, and garbage is organized, not unlike its museological counterpart, around catalogues, inventories, tables, and cross sections.

The instinctive gesture of giving voice to words, images, and objects related to the human loss caused by the attacks was most visible in the grassroots spontaneous memorials and shrines which sprung up on every surface of New York City – “sidewalks, lampposts, fences, telephone booths, barricades, garbage dumpsters, and walls” and firehouses and police stations (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2003: 11) – staging flowers, flags, candles, ribbons, scraps of paper, chalk paints, and teddy bears. Punctuating the West Village (and soon the rest of Manhattan and of the other boroughs), this *pastiche* of portraits, posters, drawings, messages, and objects followed no organizing pattern but that of unmediated mourning. Although it was a mostly ubiquitous phenomenon, with improvised memorials sprouting overnight throughout the city, Union Square became the heart and the symbol of the amazing

¹ Remy Saisselin and Jani Scandura have already analysed the semantic similarities shared by museums, department stores, and dump sites (Saisselin 1985; Scandura 2008). See also Gianni Celati, 1988, “Il bazar archeologico”, in Georges Teyssot, ed., *Oltre la città, la metropoli. Esposizione Internazionale della XVII Triennale*, Electa, Milano.



ability of New Yorkers to gather in public places to express their sense of loss. In Marshall Berman's words,

[Then] abruptly it was flooded with candles, flowers, missing person signs, poems and drawings. Some Art students unrolled a scroll paper three feet wide and several hundred feet long. A great assembly of people gathered round the scroll and wrote radically contradictory images and meditations. Overnight, Union Square became the city's most exciting public space: a small-town Fourth of July party combined with a 1970s be-in (Berman 2002: 11)

According to Berman the touching quality of the "signs on the street", that bazaar of missing person signs, poems, drawings, and candles was the result of the dramatization of "one of the central themes of modern democratic culture: life stories" (*Ibid.*: 7). In the same essay, "When Bad Buildings Happen to Good People", the critic goes on to argue that in the U.S. this line of tradition has seen its heyday during the Great Depression, with the photo-essay books, documentary films and murals sponsored by New Deal agencies such as the WPA and the FSA. It may be worth noticing here that catalogues were at the basis of the narrative structure of *Land of the Free* (1938), by Archibald MacLeish, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), by James Agee and Walker Evans, and Pare Lorentz's scripts of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938), all works financed by the FSA.² In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the details and samples of the sharecroppers' lives are rendered with scrupulous attention by Agee.³

If modernist techniques showed how extraordinary the ordinary existence of unheroic characters could be, with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) bestowing literary fascination on what Windham Lewis contemptuously labelled as "plainmanism", Berman associates "the street signs" enlivening Manhattan within days of 9/11 with the same narrative strategy,

The signs we saw downtown – with names like Ciccone, Lim, Murphy, Rasweiler, Singh, Morgan, Barbosa, Sofi, Vasquez, Pascual, Gambale, Draginsky, Bennett,

² See William Stott, 1973, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, Oxford University Press, New York; Paola Rabinowitz, 1994, *They Must Be Represented. The Politics of Documentary*, Verso, London-New York.

³ "Upon this towel rest these objects: An old black comb, smelling of fungus and dead rubber, nearly all the teeth gone. A white clamshell with brown dust in the bottom and a small white button on it. A small pincushion made of pink imitation silk with the bodiced torso of a henna-wigged china doll sprouting from it, her face and one hand broke off". James Agee and Walker Evans, 2006, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Penguin Books, London-New York, p. 132.



Gjonbalaj, Vale, Alger, Holmes, and so many more – were triumphs of plainmanism (Berman 2002: 7).

The remains of the victims to whom missing person's signs were dedicated ended up at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, where debris hauled from Ground Zero was sorted. The rests of their anonymous corpses were received by the place that had contained the city's waste since 1948 and had closed a few months before. Ironically, as we will see, New York could not find a better site to accommodate its dead: ashes to ashes, in an ultimate rite of "plainmanism".

Bearing in mind Berman's "life stories", this paper will examine how the rise and fall of the Twin Towers can be read in relation to the opening and closure of Fresh Kills, how their destinies were entwined from the start, and how the immediate cultural response to their explosive and environmental collapse took the form of catalogues of objects, words, and images. Looking at the events from this perspective will help consider a larger, if unusual, frame encompassing the history of two different, yet complementary symbols of New York.

CATALOGUES AND RELIGION

From Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) to Bob Holman, Steve Zeitlin and Joe Dobkin's *Crisis* (2001-2002); from Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadows of No Tower* (2004) to Artists Respond's *9-11* (2002) and 2002 film *11'09'01 September 11*;⁴ from *New York Times* articles to Smithsonian Museum exhibition *Bearing Witness to History*, remarkable responses to the 2001 attacks took the form of lists of data, objects, and memories.

The analysis of lists, catalogues, or inventories is the subject of Umberto Eco's *The Infinity of Lists* (2009), and Robert Belknap's *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing* (2004). Eco's work surveys the history of lists throughout the centuries from ancient (Homer's famous catalogue of ships) to modern literature (from Whitman to Joyce and Perec, to mention a few), also relying on vast iconographic sections (as anticipated by the subtitle, *An Illustrated Essay*); whereas Belknap's otherwise exhaustive overview focuses on the fecund recurrence of lists in American literature (particularly in the works of Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Thoreau).⁵ What are the

4 Unfortunately, for the complexity of the topic and the limited space of this article, it is not possible to analyze the three films on 9/11 – *9/11* (2002) by Naudet; *11'09'01 September 11* (2002); and *Fahrenheit 9/11* by Michael Moore (2004). See Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, Karen Randell, 2010, *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture, and the War of Terror*, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., New York.

5 A groundbreaking work on catalogues in literature and the biblical derivation and "pagan" interpretation of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is Leo Spitzer's "La Enumeración caótica en la poesía moderna", *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, 1945.



differences between practical and poetic lists? For Eco, a possible answer to this question is to be found in taxonomy. Practical lists (shopping lists, library catalogues, restaurant menus, etc.) are finite, purely referential, and therefore unalterable; poetic lists, on the contrary, are non-referential and infinite, writes the Italian semiologist (Eco 2009: 113), thus invalidating Belknap's argument (Belknap 2004: 31). Even more relevant to our discourse is what Eco writes about Homer's lists, which he sees as gradually drifting from the original referential function into a poetic one: enumerating the names of Greek heroes, Eco's argument goes, Homer is lured into the sphere of sounds and signifiers. If the same composing principle governs the Genealogy of Jesus by Matthew and the litanies of the saints (*Ibid.*), the illustrations chosen by Eco as a pendant of biblical and homiletic catalogues are eloquent: Sala dos Milagres (Salvador de Bahia) ex-votos placed in the Church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim; and ex-votos to Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo. The proliferation of reliquaries, rosaries, candles, and icons can be interpreted as the aesthetic translation of liturgical mantras.

An analogous referential-to-poetic shift occurred with 9/11 spontaneous memorial, poems, and exhibitions: meant, at first, to display the signified (missing persons' names and photos, for example) they soon lost their referential function to poetry and art. As folklorist Steve Zeitlin writes in his essay "'Oh did you see the ashes come thickly falling down?' Poems posted in the wake of September 11th", the words written and gathered everywhere in the city in the aftermath of the attacks became the ideal vehicles for the creation of "sacred places", where the living and dead could communicate. Quoting Mircea Eliade's and his concept of *axis mundi*⁶ – the center of the sacred space serving as "a passage between different levels of reality" –, Zeitlin argues that "the improvised shrines became places where the living and dead are conjoined" (Zeitlin 2011: 4).

Despite their being rooted in the material realm of the city, these lists of words and objects meant to commemorate a collapse, its ruins, its corpses verge on its sacred space, which, as such, is doubly entailed in the sphere of abjection,

Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse (Kristeva 1982: 17)

Waste (dirt and filth) – what we expel from our bodies, our homes, our cities – partakes of the sphere of abjection and of purifying religious rites. If Nick Shay – the protagonist of *Underworld* – states that waste is "a religious thing" (DeLillo 1997: 88), and that "it is necessary to respect what we discard", then a common thread links the Fresh Kills landfill and Ground Zero, the very same *fil rouge* which did not fail to surface after the attacks.

6 M. Eliade, 1961, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959), trans. William R. Trask, Harper & Row, New York.



'VERY TERRIBLE THING BUT YOU HAVE TO LOOK AT IT, I THINK'

Jani Scadura's reading of the singular relationship between Fresh Kills and the WTC sheds light on the "double-edged role" they played as allegories of modernity (Scandura 2008: 3). One of the common semantic ground on which they both rested was that of landfilling and garbage. "The Twin Towers were built, remember, on landfill", she writes (*ibid.*), and real estate's "land grabbing" has always loomed on Lower Manhattan (Lopate 2004: 13), starting with the use, in late 18th and early 19th centuries, of wooden cribbing "to extend the shoreline of Manhattan Island ever farther into the Hudson River" (Dunlap 2010). The story of the construction, destruction, and reconstruction of the Twin Towers is, to many respects, a constellation of technological wonders. And yet, their being founded on landfill suggests "both the spectacular heights to which garbage may be raised and the less popular vision of Capital built upon the foundations of its own refuse" (Scandura 2008:3). Let's see why.

The basic facts regarding the construction of the Twin Towers are by now very well known: they were designed by architect Minoru Yamasaki as the landmark features of the World Trade Center complex, built in seven years (groundbreaking work started in 1966 – but only after two years of demolition and excavation the construction of the North Tower began – and the ribbon cutting ceremony was in 1973), and with their 110 stories (and 1,350 feet) they became the city's tallest buildings (Glanz and Lipton 2003). The foundation stones dug-out during excavation were then hauled to Battery Park and reused as landfilling for Battery Park City, thus continuing a tradition of urban design embraced and exalted by Robert Moses in the 1930s (Lopate 2004: 42).⁷ Reception of the minimalist aesthetic of the Twin Towers was mixed: compared to the Empire, Woolworth and Chrysler Building, Yamasaki's skyscrapers looked diminished, and Lewis Mumford criticized their "purposeless gigantism and technological exhibitionism" (Mumford 1970: 344). Yet they soon became symbols of paramount importance across the New York skyline.

Many are the definitions and epithets which have tried to capture Twin Towers' identity since the 1970s. They have been called "The Everest of our urban Himalayas" (Sorkin and Zukin 2002: iv), and, as such, they inspired different perilous enterprises (in 1972 a skydiver landed on the South Tower, in 1977 George Willig scaled the South Tower with climbing equipment, and in 1974 high-wire French artist Philippe Petit walked back and forth the two towers on a cable) (Gard 2003: 5); "matching cigarette cases" (Lopate 2004: 40), "reflecting glass and anodized aluminium" (DeLillo 1997: 386), conveying both the modernist elegance of the 1960s from which they stemmed

⁷ See Hilary Ballon, Kenneth Jackson T., eds, 2007, *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, Norton and Company, New York-London.



(making the most of Le Corbusier's lesson and the minimalistic aesthetic of Donald Judd) and their role as a hub of the global business network; "a model of behemoth mass production" (DeLillo 1997: 377) constructed out of the destruction and removal of a little residential and small retailer community and made possible by property speculation (Darton 1999); and, above anything else, New Yorkers' "Stonehenge" and "aluminium altars" (Lopate 2004: 40), made of two mighty slabs, possessing a mysterious opacity that could be only seen at a distance, seemingly impregnable, strangely abstract (as if they were not inhabited by humans, Darton 1999: 198-199), and twice violated and profaned, in 1993 and 2001.

When, on 11th September 2001, the Twin Towers were hit by two hijacked jetliners, they accommodated business offices, a world restaurant on the 107th floor, and a shopping mall in the concourse area of the WTC, and the LMDC (Lower Manhattan Development Corporation) owned by Port Authority had just leased the whole complex to the developer Larry Silverstein for the following 99 years. According to the latest estimates (Ember 2011), nearly 3,000 souls died when the Towers and the surrounding buildings collapsed: by 2003, only about 700 bodies had been recovered (Gard 2003: 5).

Ground Zero (or "the Pile") was the name given to the pit where the Towers fell down, a huge crater filled with the rubble of the external walls: the 16-story high pile of debris consisted mainly of the pulverized materials of the collapsed buildings, among which cancerous asbestos. Rubble was then hauled to the nearby piers, loaded onto barges and shipped to the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island (Melosi 2008: 244). There it was examined and sifted through by engineers, police officers and FBI agents searching for human remains and remnants. Ashes and dust met waste.

'SCIENCE FICTION AND PREHISTORY'

The Fresh Kills landfill, "the King Kong of American garbage mounds" (DeLillo 1997: 163), opened in 1948 on a marshland area Robert Moses planned to fill up with garbage, and to develop as a residential site by "building houses, attracting light industry, and setting aside open space for recreational use" (Rathje 2001: 4).

"The Hill", as it was called by New Yorkers, was indeed to become one of the greatest dumping grounds in human history,

[It] spread over more than 2,100 acres, with four mounds ranging in height from 90 to 500 feet. [...] Before it closed, barges from nine marine transfer stations operated around the clock, six days a week, to deliver approximately 11,000 tons of refuse daily, or approximately 2.7 million tons of solid waste and incinerator residue annually [...] despite its size, it did not even accommodate half of the city's daily solid waste production (Melosi 2008: 244).



Fresh Kills, an environmental devastating burden for Staten Island (because of the chemicals released into the air and into the water, through leaching, in the process of waste disposal), was closed on 22nd March 2001 – though the city plan had been approved in 1996 – by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, after decades of environmentalists protests and concerns supported by the EPA (Toy 1997). It was New York last active landfill; after 2001 the city's garbage would be shipped to other states (New Jersey, Virginia, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Ohio). When it closed, Fresh Kills had become a sort of huge archive of New York City late-20th century history, containing fragments of urban past.

Along with the World Trade Center, Fresh Kills rises high atop of the 1974-1990s New York skyline in *Underworld*, portrayed as a citadel made of pyramids of waste and as an uncomfortable counterpart of Lower Manhattan canyons, in particular the Twin Towers. When Brian Glassic, Nick Shay's colleague at a waste management company, looks at Fresh Kills in 1992, what he sees is an overwhelming spectacle of science fiction and prehistory,

Three thousand acres of mountained garbage, contoured and road-graded [...] Barges unloading, sweeper boats poking through the kills to pick up stray waste. [...] It was science fiction and prehistory, garbage arriving twenty-four hours a day, hundreds of workers [...] He imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza – only this was twenty-five times bigger [...] All this ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort to fit maximum waste into diminishing space [...] And the thing was organic, ever growing and shifting, its shape computer-plotted by the day and the hour. In a few years this would be the highest mountain on the Atlantic Coast between Boston and Miami (DeLillo 1997: 184)

Much of the data used by DeLillo can be checked in *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, by William Rathje and Murphy Cullen. This 1992 book recorded the Garbage Project's experiment in "measuring" American garbage between 1977 and 1986, a ten-year span in which William Rathje and other archaeologists worked in three different national landfills (San Francisco, Chicago, Tucson) to catalogue waste. It is mainly thanks to Rathje that the analysis of garbage in American landfills has reached the status of archaeology of late modernity,

Garbage is among humanity's most prodigious physical legacies to those who have yet to be born; if we can come to understand our discards, Garbage Project archaeologists argue, then we will better understand the world which we live in (Rathje 2001: 4).

A Weltanschauung shared by Brian Glassic,



He dealt in human behavior, people's habitus and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences but their kindness too, their generosity, and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us (DeLillo 1997: 184)

In *Underworld*, as we said, the vision of Fresh Kills incorporates its double: the WTC towering at the prow of Manhattan. DeLillo's epic novel represents Fresh Kills and the Twin Towers as symbols of the nexus between American abundance, waste, and democracy (extolled by John A. Kouwenhoven in his 1959 Harper's article "Waste Not, Have Not: A Clue to American Prosperity").⁸ In the author's reconstruction of the history of New York, the "rooftop summer" of 1974 sees the newborn Twin Towers crowning the cityscape, whereas in the summer of 1975 Manhattan is infested with garbage because of a strike of sanitation workers (Lankevich 1998: 217). In *Down in the Dumps*, Jani Scandura further investigates the strange balance between Fresh Kills and the Twin Towers,

If the Twin Towers had been built as monuments to the grandeur and self-righteousness of progressive modernity [...], Fresh Kills seemed an allegory for modernity's less spectacular depressive twin, a modernity that moves neither forward nor backwards, but idles, trembling, face-to-face out with the fallout of progress (Scandura 2008: 3).

When Fresh Kills reopened to receive the remains of the WTC, becoming "the other graveyard" (*Ibid.*), after laying a stratum of asphalt and polyurethane over the refuse of the landfill, the debris was investigated through a meticulous process of classification. In the 1.62 million tons of rubble brought to Staten Island, there were,

4,100 body parts, 1,350 crushed vehicles, clumps of human hair, the engine from one of the hijacked planes, dozens of Gap bags and Fossil wristwatches [...] Blue Cross/Blue Shield insurance cards [...] diamond engagement rings [...] sets of keys [...] baseball memorabilia [...] (*Ibid.*: 2).

William Langewiesche offers an impressively exhaustive description of the operations at Fresh Kills,

[...] bargeloads of rubble consisting of broken and crushed concrete, asbestos, asphalt millings, rebar and other forms of light steel – all stirred through with a homogenized mixture of details from 50,000 working lives, nearly 3,000 of which

⁸ See Susan Strasser, 1999, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, Henry Holt and Company, New York.



had just ended violently. Fresh Kills' job was to separate the human mixture from the rest, and to de-homogenize it.

The hilltop was a wild-looking place, with American flags whipping in cold winds, like the outpost of a government expedition to a toxic planet. [...] It was roamed by hundred workers (typically police officers or FBI agents) who were garbed in white protective suits, respirators, gloves [...]

For visitors first arriving from the Trade Center site, where people worked largely unprotected, the clothing seemed odd, as if something must have happened to the debris to make it more dangerous (Langewiesche 2002).

It is not without bitter irony that on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 we must go back to the last part of the quote. An increasing number of those rescuers and recovery workers (some of them volunteers, many of them hired by private companies) who excavated through the debris at Ground Zero wearing no masks and no safety equipment, have suffered from serious illnesses ever since. The death toll of 9/11 is now extended to include the lives of construction workers, firefighters, police officers, paramedics, and medics (estimated between 40,000 and 90,000) who responded to the emergency without using the necessary prophylactic precautions and thus being exposed to contaminants. Asthma, respiratory diseases are the most common pathologies, yet the worse case scenario is that of throat and lung cancer – which are not considered in the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act (January 2, 2011). A recent statement of federal officials who were asked to investigate the link between cancer and the smoke cloud produced by the collapse of the WTC dismissed the case as lacking enough evidence (Navarro 2010; Foderaro 2010; Hortocollis 2011).

NEW YORK RESPONDS

William Rathje was one of the archaeologists who participated to the sorting operations at Fresh Kills. In 2004 he wrote an article in which he proposed to build a memorial honouring the victims of the attack over that mound of garbage and ruins: the bulk of the rubble, he wrote, would be enough to build a pyramid twice as tall as the Temple of the Sun; and a historical precedent was to be found going back to 490 B.C., when the Athenians built a huge mound of stones, weapons, armours, and bodies of the soldiers who had died in the Battle of Marathon (Rathje 2004). While Rathje's proposal has been (almost) completely neglected, the reconstruction of the WTC and the conversion of Fresh Kills have been thorny issues.

As for Fresh Kills, a 30-year project which seem to return full circle to Robert Moses's original plans will transform the 2,220-acres site in a park twice as big as Central Park, with bike trails, canoe watercourses, green fields etc. Fresh Kills Park may also contain two 9/11 commemorative areas right on the mounds where the debris



from Ground Zero were separated and sifted, but this part of the project is struggling to take shape because of the hostility of the victims' families (DePalma 2004).

The building of a new WTC has been far more controversial. The Freedom Tower designed by Daniel Libeskind – the architect who won the competition for the reconstruction of Ground Zero, but whose original project had to go through many changes because of Silverstein's misgivings – has been the object of a heated debate. The new project of 1 WTC – the Port Authority changed its name – is now in the hands of David M. Childs. Amidst the many compromises and the not so transparent dealings of property speculation involved in this very profitable enterprise (Dunlap 2011; Rayman 2011), by late August 2011, 1 WTC has reached its 80th floor, and is just one of the landmarks of the new WTC.

The project is particularly complex, considering that the 16-acres site is also a transportation hub and that, as Graham Roberts comments, "so much of the redevelopment is taking place below ground". Under the new WTC stands an incredible maze of subway (number 1 line) and PATH tracks whose street level entrance will be an arch structure designed by Calatrava and ready in 2014. As for the 9/11 memorial, which will be finished by 2012,

[It] includes a museum with exhibition space, 70 feet below ground, where the Twin Towers foundations met bedrock. Where the Towers stood, water will cascade down large square fountains, their structure will be visible from the exhibition space below, the glass and steel Pavilion will service the entrance to the museum. At street level, the memorial area will be covered by a stone plaza planted with 400 trees. The tallest building at the site, 1 World Trade Center will have a parapet of 1,368 feet to roof, height of the original North Tower and reach 1,776 feet to antenna spire. Tower 4 will reach 977 feet, and depending on economic conditions, Tower 3 and 2 will be finished later. By 2020 perhaps the site will be complete (Roberts and Fountain 2011).

The memorial museum will open on 11th September 2011 with a ceremony for the families of the victims: it lists 2,983 names inscribed in bronze on the walls of the square pools (Ember 2011).

Yet, more than any institutional plans for memorials, it was the immediate cultural response to the attacks which seemed to fill the hole at Ground Zero. Besides the gatherings in various squares of the city (Washington Sq., Union Sq., Time Sq.), this response took many forms: from the *New York Times* series of articles meant to "report on workday objects that resonate in unusual ways in the aftermath of September 11" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2003: 15); to the photographic show "Here is New York, Images from the Frontline of History: A Democracy of Photographers" opened in downtown Manhattan and flooded by visitors who were invited to bring their own pictures of 9/11 (*Ibid.*: 20). City Lore, a Lower East Side based non-profit cultural organization



founded in 1986 by folklorists, historians, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists, was a privileged repository of 9/11 pictures, drawings, stories, and poems. In “How my Life Has Changed”, Hilary North mourns the victims of the attacks through a poignant catalogue,

I can no longer flirt with Lou.
I can no longer dance with Mayra.
I can no longer eat brownies with Suzanne Y.
I can no longer meet the deadline with Mark.
I can no longer talk to George about his daughter.
I can no longer drink coffee with Rich.
I can no longer make a good impression on Chris.
I can no longer smile at Paul.
I can no longer hold the door open for Tony.
I can no longer confide in Lisa.
I can no longer complain about Gary.
I can no longer work on a project with Donna R.
I can no longer get to know Yolanda.
I can no longer call the client with Nick.
I can no longer contribute to the book drive organized by Karen.
I can no longer hang out with Millie.
I can no longer give career advice to Suzanne P.
I can no longer laugh with Donna G.
I can no longer watch Mary Ellen cut through the bull shit.
I can no longer drink beer with Paul.
I can no longer have a meeting with Dave W.
I can no longer leave a message with Andrea.
I can no longer gossip with Anna.
I can no longer run into Dave P. at the vending machine.
I can no longer call Steve about my computer.
I can no longer compliment Lorenzo.
I can no longer hear Herman’s voice.
I can no longer trade voice mails with Norman.
I can no longer ride the elevator with Barbara.
I can no longer be happy about Jennifer’s pregnancy.
I can no longer walk with Adam.
I can no longer say hello to Steven every morning.
I can no longer see the incredible view from the 103rd Floor of the South Tower.
I can no longer take my life for granted.
(in Zeitlin 2001: 17)

Comics, poems, documentaries, exhibitions: in spite of their multifarious genres, the innumerable intellectual and artistic works inspired by the events shared a



common formal trait, in that all were “life inventories” trying to make sense of what had been.

In 2002, the Smithsonian National Museum organized the exhibition *Bearing Witness to History*, which collected objects, documents, and photographs linked to 9/11 and continued its tour through 2004. The exhibit – which was the material outcome of a meeting of representatives of 33 museums who had discussed how to document the event and how to tell what was to be preserved in the future – displayed “artifacts and associated stories from the events”,

a battered wallet, a melted computer screen from the Pentagon, torn clothing, a structural joint from the World Trade Center, a window washer’s squeegee handle, a stairwell sign, as well as artifacts associated with the aftermath (commemorative coins, artwork, patriotic ribbons, rescue equipment) (Shanks, Platt, Rathje 2004: 61).

The idea of an inventory of recovered objects and “voices” is also at the heart of the collective poem *Crisis*, started and edited by Bob Holman, Steve Zeitlin and Joe Dobkin. Consisting of a catalogue of 110 lines (as many as the towers’ floors) and signed by 110 poets, *Crisis* was conceived as an effort to rebuild “towers of words” and replace the collapsed ones (Daniele 2003: 158),

gone gone away down in the downward up. ward rush of howling graveyard lava air
Earthquake/shatter, volcano/ash, tidal wave/fear, fire/purify, wind/words disappear
Amazed I wake /committed crimes/vanishing eyes/it’s different now/vanishing
I expected a second moon or sun to appear
And radiance, the gleam of it at the edges of clouds, the gilt of clouds in the blue
sky, the blue sky, the blue sky.

[...]

eye travel underground over rails of thigh bones, surrounded by my caboose of
poetic lines

of love,

eye surface above ground at the speed of light, on time, inside time, singing the
blues, riffin’

licks of jazz & rock n roll, survey the empty space of once uponatimesleekhighsteel &
glass twinedificesofhubriticglory, see them smoldering there now in a heap of
smoking memory,

after castration by two swift blows of “blowback”

Holman 2011b: vv. 5-9; 108).

Not unlike *Bearing Witness to History*, the poem became an itinerant poetry installation in 2002.



Another collective experiment related to 9/11 is *11 Artists Respond*, a comic book published in two volumes and containing almost 400 different strip contributions (2002).

Talking about graphic artists, Art Spiegelman made his personal contribution to the topic with *In the Shadow of No Tower* (2004). The vertical unravelling of events – based on the autobiographical memory of the New-York based artist – is introduced by a preface (“The Sky is Falling”) and ends with “The comic supplement”, a sort of second preface to old newspaper comics plates recovered by Spiegelman,

The blast that disintegrated those Lower Manhattan towers also disinterred the ghosts of some Sunday supplement stars born on nearby Park Row. They came back to haunt one denizen of the neighbourhood, addled by all that’s happened since. [...] Right after 9/11/01, while waiting for some other terrorist shoe to drop, many found comfort in poetry. Other searched for solace in old newspaper comics (Spiegelman 2004: 11).

Spiegelman’s poetics seems to be guided by two vectors (downward and upward): the former tells the story of the sky falling down on the burning towers; the latter that of the unexpected unveiling of old comics. In both cases, focusing on a small part of Manhattan, Spiegelman offers a palimpsest of the city by disinterring its past and excavating its present.

LATE MODERN *UBI SUNT*

Ground Zero and Fresh Kills can be seen as memory vessels of the city’s life stories, two unique palimpsests of New York history in the second half of the 20th century whose latest painful layer was inscribed ten years ago. If the ruins of 9/11 have been sung and remembered by plenty of New Yorkers, Fresh Kills’ garbage has not. A less popular vision of the workings of capitalist economy, the closure of Fresh Kills was met with tepid satisfactions by New Yorkers. On 24th March 2001, a *New York Times* Op-Art dedicated to the event a long report featuring a giant picture of that wasteland, with hills of garbage and seagulls hovering over them, as the background of a long, nostalgic list of once shining objects lying buried there,

Where is my toothbrush? All my toothbrushes? My slacks, all that junk mail, my Farrah Fawcett poster? Where are my Coney Island flip-flops, my 30th birthday cards, my report cards? That fresh pastrami sandwich (still in its Tupperware), my pet rock and those New Year’s resolutions? My training wheels, my junk bonds, my five-and-dime store? My high-school project, my Nerf ball, my size 6 bikini, my heated water bed [...] (Mc Wilton and Nadel 2001).



An end-of-the-millennium *ubi sunt* which suggests a final thought. Marshall Berman said that the ruins of Ground Zero were somewhat “greater than their source” (Berman 2002: 10) and it was therefore necessary to preserve them. Garbage stratified at Fresh Kills followed an opposite logic, being, so to say, less than its source, a heavy burden the city has struggled to remove since the end of the 19th century (Melosi 2008; Miller 2000). If the spontaneous memorials – and the institutional ones, like the list of 2,983 names inscribed at the Memorial Museum – bore the names of victims, saving them from the anonymity of casualty numbers, Fresh Kills was a great container and disposer of thrown-away garbage and used commodities once belonging to otherwise anonymous New Yorkers.

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