

## Affect, Performativity and Politics in the 9/11 Museum

Amy Sodaro

*The National September 11 Memorial Museum was created to be not only a space of memory and history but also moral transformation and the promotion of democracy and nonviolence. The museum is thus a performative space, in which exhibits are not only meant to tell the story of 9/11 but to spur action and transformation in visitors. One of the ways in which the 9/11 Museum attempts to do this is through the use of experiential, affective exhibitionary strategies intended to theatrically and affectively recreate the events of 9/11 for visitors to experience and witness. In this article, I analyze the 9/11 Museum as a 21<sup>st</sup> century memorial museum that engages new technologies and modes of remembrance that emphasize affect and emotion, reflecting today's "performative society" (Kershaw 2001). Through a close reading of the museum's historical exhibition, I demonstrate how the museum functions as a performance of the past that invites visitors to become part of the performance as witnesses to the attacks of 9/11, a role imbued with ethical meaning. However, the museum's narrow temporal focus on the minutes and hours of September 11, 2001, though meant to be apolitical, constructs a memory and historical narrative of 9/11 that is in fact deeply political and problematic.*

In May 2014, the National September 11 Memorial Museum opened to the public. On the site where the World Trade Center once stood, the museum joins the 9/11 Memorial, which opened in 2011, in remembering and honoring the victims of the "largest loss of life resulting from a foreign attack on American soil" (9/11 Memorial "About the Memorial"). The creation of the 9/11 Memorial Museum suggests that the memorial alone, two massive reflecting pools in the footprints of the twin towers, is insufficient for the difficult task of remembering this painful

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This article is adapted from "The National September 11 Memorial Museum: 'To Bear Solemn Witness'" in *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (Rutgers University Press, 2018) and is being used with permission from Rutgers University Press.

past. It is therefore the duty of the museum to be not only a place of memory and history but also empathy that will lead to moral transformation. Museum director Alice Greenwald believes that encountering the painful past of 9/11 in the museum has “the potential to inspire and change the way people see the world and the possibility of their own lives” and that the museum can be “an agent of resolve, demanding that each of us individually, nationally and globally, place a value on every human life” (2016: 12-13). In this way, the museum is a performative space, in which words, objects and exhibits are not only meant to tell the story of 9/11 but also to spur action and transformation in visitors so that they commit themselves to creating a more peaceful world. The museum, through its existence and the story it tells, seeks to “constitute a [more peaceful and democratic] social reality through its utterance” (Alexander et al 2016: 3).

The key way the 9/11 Museum attempts to inspire moral transformation and action is through the use of experiential, affective exhibitionary strategies intended to encourage empathy with the victims, survivors and families of 9/11. In this sense, in addition to being a performative space, the museum is also what Valerie Casey (2005) and Paul Williams (2007) have theorized as a “performing museum,” in which the past is theatrically, affectively reenacted for visitors to experience and witness. In this article, I analyze the 9/11 Museum as a 21<sup>st</sup> century memorial museum that engages new technologies and modes of remembrance that emphasize affect and emotion rather than cognition, thereby reflecting today’s “performative society” (Kershaw 2001). Through a close reading of the museum’s historical exhibition, I demonstrate how the museum functions as a performance of the past that invites visitors to become part of the performance as witnesses to the attacks of 9/11, a role imbued with ethical meaning. However, the museum’s narrow temporal focus on the minutes and hours of September 11, 2001, though meant to be apolitical, constructs a memory and historical narrative of 9/11 that is in fact deeply political and problematic.

### Remembering 9/11

September 11, 2001 is a day that changed the world. The clear September morning was shattered by a kind of terrorism that most Americans could hardly imagine. Many in the US and around the world spent the day and night glued to television sets watching the grim events unfold, and a search for meaning emerged as it became clear that this had been a spectacular terrorist attack. An estimated two billion people around the globe witnessed the event,<sup>1</sup> making it truly international.

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<sup>1</sup> By some estimates a third of the world’s population watched the events unfold live and another third knew about the events within 24 hours, making it truly a 21<sup>st</sup> century “media event” (Dayan and Katz 1994).

At the same time it was immediately framed as an attack on America and, in particular, New York City, though of course the Pentagon was also hit and another plane crashed in Pennsylvania. As the initial chaos, fear and confusion of the morning ebbed, the sickening realization of the scale of the loss and destruction began to sink in.

Discussions about commemoration began as Ground Zero smoldered and rescue workers searched for survivors, indicating just how firmly an imperative to commemorate has inserted itself into our contemporary world. The events of 9/11 had been captured in countless video recordings and photographs; the images seem seared into collective consciousness. As many tried to erase these images, talk turned to the creation of what French historian Pierre Nora refers to as *lieux de memoire*, or mediated, deliberate and constructed spaces intended to contain the collective memory of the past. It was not clear from the start just what shape this *lieu de memoire* would take, but it was evident that the significance of the event and of the site itself would necessitate a deeply reflective process.

In the weeks and months after the attacks, as New York City began to resume its daily routines and the rest of the country mourned and got back to work, earnest discussions began about what to do with the site; in the attempt to adhere to the democracy that had been attacked on 9/11, the discussions were intended to be public and inclusive. To guide the process, then-Governor George Pataki and Mayor Rudolph Guliani created the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) which, in 2003, selected a design for the site created by Studio Daniel Libeskind, who has by now become something of a memorial starchitect. Under his “grand design,” which over the years was wrested from his control, a high-profile design competition was called in 2003 for the memorial, with a jury composed of well-known artists and architects, important civic actors and activists and experts in the field of memorialization like scholar James E. Young and artist Maya Lin (Goldberger 2005).<sup>2</sup>

The jury unanimously selected Michael Arad’s *Reflecting Absence* for the memorial component: two deep memorial pools inverting the towers with water cascading down their sides, which are lined with the names of those who died in a style highly reminiscent of the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial. The underground space of the memorial plaza had been reserved for some kind of museum, and in 2006 serious discussions began about what that museum would look like. At the helm was museum director Alice Greenwald, a former associate director at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, who was joined by a team of curatorial and other experts, as well as 9/11 family members and community leaders. Set on establishing a memorial museum, from the beginning the creators were

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<sup>2</sup> The full list of jurors is available here: <http://www.911memorial.org/design-competition> [Accessed 13 July 2016]. For an excellent discussion of the process, see James E. Young, *The Stages of Memory* (2016).

extremely self-aware of the challenges to the project that lay ahead. They well understood both the normative expectations surrounding the creation of a memorial museum, but also the particulars of a memorial museum created to remember and educate about such a high-profile and widely witnessed event. To attempt to navigate this difficult terrain, they began the project with a “Conversation Series” intended to bring together memorial, museum and trauma experts with key stakeholders, including family members, business and religious leaders, politicians and community members to discuss the potential and pitfalls of the project. Rooted in a set of core considerations about the nature and role of memorial museums in remembering and educating about painful pasts, writing history and inspiring civic renewal, the conversation series spanned seven years and formed the foundation of the development of the museum.

As the conversation series wrestled with the complexity of commemorating 9/11, the creation of the exhibits began under the joint leadership of Thinc Design’s Tom Hennes and Local Projects’ Jake Barton. As the team began to delve into the event and its meaning in the effort to determine how it should be represented, one striking fact about 9/11 kept recurring: how widely mediated, recorded and witnessed the attacks had been. With the understanding that over half of the world’s population likely remembers precisely where they were on September 11, a driving principle in the museum’s design began to emerge: that of letting individuals tell the story of 9/11. This idea of privileging individual memories and stories in the museum was not new for Jake Barton, whose firm had designed the extremely popular StoryCorps oral history project, which collects oral histories from individuals across the United States. In a TED Talk on the museum, he describes listening as a form of “love” and his desire to make “history” out of people’s memory. He notes the “symmetry” between the event and how people tell it and how they *need* to tell it, and from the very beginning this new mode of what we might think of as “crowdsourcing” history and memory became the key to the construction of narrative in the 9/11 museum (Barton 2013). Museum scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reflected this idea in her contribution to the 9/11 Museum’s “Conversation Series,” where she stressed the importance of making the museum a place where visitors can “find themselves” through the stories and testimonies of other individuals (quoted in Greenwald 2016: 14).

In their effort to be both houses of history and spaces of memory, memorial museums use individual testimony to augment the historical artifacts, documents and narratives displayed in their exhibits. Testimony is an integral part of what makes them “performing museums,” according to Paul Williams (2007: 97). In his discussion of memorial museums, he borrows this concept from Valerie Casey, who used it to describe the genealogy of museums from their “legislative” functions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when their role was to dictate taste and excellence, to their “interpreting” function in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when they acted as spaces of explanation and interpretation, to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when museums utilize theatrical

techniques to “perform” the past for their visitors (Casey 2005). Williams argues that memorial museums, as performing museums *par excellence*, use testimony, as well as architecture, sound, interactive exhibits and other “theatrical tropes” (Williams 2007: 97) to create an affective reenactment and experience of the past that mere history-telling cannot. It is this affective reenactment through individual storytelling that the 9/11 Museum strove for from the start: it was conceived to be a “performance space [where] visitors move through exhibitions, enacting the performance of memory and engagement” in a way that “encourages self-reflection, which in turn can lead to moral understanding” (Greenwald 2016: 14).

What is unique in the 9/11 Museum, however, is that rather than individual stories being used to complement the historical narrative, the historical narrative in the 9/11 Museum is meant to be constructed *out of* individual memories and testimonies. Part of this is a function of the new kinds of technology that not only allowed individuals around the world to witness the event, but also to record and share their memories and experiences of the event. But it also points to the way that the 9/11 Museum “performs” the past, recreating the experience of the day through the eyes of the victims, survivors and witnesses. This performance draws visitors into the experience and invites their participation as witnesses to 9/11 so that they too become part of constructing the historical narrative and collective memory of the attacks. However, as we shall see, while perhaps the intention was to create a fragmented, “collected” memory and history of 9/11 sourced from experiences all over the world (Young 1993: xi), the museum instead contributes to a hegemonic, monolithic and easily politicized memory and history of the event.

### **Memory, Authenticity, Scale and Emotion**

As the brief background on the museum’s creation demonstrates, the National September 11 Memorial Museum, commonly referred to as the 9/11 Museum, was created in a deliberate, careful process that drew upon the growing collective, international body of knowledge and expectations about how to remember a painful past through the construction of a memorial museum. The 9/11 Museum adheres to an internationally agreed upon set of memorial museum “best practices,” in terms of its presentation of historical narrative, museum storytelling, visitor learning, “the transformative power of immersive environments and experiential design, and the integration of memorial considerations” (Greenwald 2016: 26). Further, the process of its creation—inclusive and deliberative—seems to be a model of “memory work” (e.g. Young 2016). And just as 9/11 is often thought to have marked the geopolitical end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in many ways commemorating it marks the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century commemoration; the process outlined above has created a massive, highly sophisticated, state-of-the art 21<sup>st</sup> century memorial museum.

The finished museum boasts of 110,000 feet of exhibition space “in the archaeological heart of the World Trade Center site” (9/11 Memorial, “About the Museum”) and, whether intended to or not, the museum cannot help but shock and awe visitors—from the \$24 entrance fee, to the massive scale of the building and artifacts on display, to the breadth of the collection and minute by minute account of the morning of 9/11, to some of its overt omissions. Visitors enter the museum through the memorial plaza, where the pavilion is tucked into a corner of the site that is dominated by Arad’s pools. Enclosed in a skin of glass and designed by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta, the pavilion seems typical of the sleek, industrial concrete and steel architecture of memorial museums like the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). And like other memorial museums, the affective, bodily experience of the museum generally begins with a considerable wait in a long, snaking line outside, no matter the weather, followed by airport-style security. Once in the building, visitors must empty their pockets, remove their coats and submit to a full-body scan. While perhaps this mild violation is meant to make one feel secure, it rather reminds that this is a place that has the potential to be dangerous and visitors should remain alert and fearful.

Inside the pavilion one can go upstairs to an auditorium and café or descend down into the museum proper, which is located at bedrock, seven stories below the ground and designed by New York firm Davis Brody Bond (DBB) to incorporate and display, wherever possible, the archaeological remains of the buildings. Whichever way the visitor goes, she is met in the pavilion by skeletal remains of the WTC buildings, two “tridents” that are staggering in scale. In creating the museum, DBB set four principles to which they would adhere: memory, authenticity, scale and emotion (Sturken 2015: 478). We shall soon see how memory, authenticity and emotion play out, but scale is the first thing that strikes a visitor—first the scale of the memorial and then the scale of the museum represented initially in those tridents, which give a taste of what is to come. As a driving principle of its design and a key aspect of the experience of the museum, the sheer scale of it all is deeply important to the story and memory the museum creates about 9/11. As cultural historian Marita Sturken argues, the scale of the site, the memorial and the museum “all converge to convey the sense of 9/11 as an event of massive importance” (Sturken 2015: 478).

Acutely aware of the heavy significance of the event one is about to witness, the visitor begins the long descent to the museum. On the first lower level, the daylight that streamed in through the glass of the pavilion is gone and muted lighting and somber dark wood shifts the visitor into a quiet, serious museum mode. Past the information booth, the exhibit begins with a huge photograph of the twin towers on the morning of September 11, the sun streaming behind them, a spot where many visitors pause for photographs, inserting themselves into the exhibition which they will be invited to do throughout. Breaking the levity of group

photographs in front of a skyline forever gone, a massive map on the wall shows the trajectory of the planes that morning as they set off on course and then gruesomely changed direction. Here the first bottleneck of visitors occurs as this story we feel we know so well begins to be explicated and performed. Viewing the photo and map, one becomes aware of a cacophony of voices and as the overview of the events begins to sink in, visitors can begin to make out what the voices are saying. The voices overlap—men and women, many with accents from across the globe. It is individuals, 417 of them to be precise, recounting their memories of 9/11, some of whom were nearby and others thousands of miles away.

As the words of the voices begin to come into focus so too does a series of columns that draw the visitor forward and onto which are projected words that together create the shapes of continents. If one stands at the right angle, the columns converge to create a map of the globe. This at once reminds the visitor that 9/11 was an event witnessed and felt around the world, and serves as the first invitation to the visitor to become a witness to the event as well. As one listens, the visitor realizes that like the map, the voices also converge. The individuals—from France, England, Morocco, California, New York—finish each other’s sentences.<sup>3</sup> What at first seems to depict the multiplicity and fragmentation of individual memories of the day begins to literally form into one coherent narrative: collected memory becoming collective.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the voices, the visitor descends the ramp, intended to evoke the ramps used to remove debris from the site but also to “encourage an attitude of reverence” in visitors (Weisser 2016: 58). The bodily experience of the museum becomes more intense as the visitor descends and becomes smaller vis-à-vis the museum’s scale, which is highlighted by a stunning viewing platform overlooking the immense slurry wall, which was constructed to hold back the waters of the New York Harbor from the World Trade Center buildings. Surrounding it in the cavernous Foundation Hall are scattered massive artifacts. If one does not quite feel the “reverence” she should, she merely has to look around at the reaction of others performing such reverence: gaping at the scale, furtively snapping photographs and speaking in hushed murmurs about the immensity of the buildings, the museum and the event. As the depth of the museum sinks in, the visitor must descend yet again to the exhibitions. At the bottom of the ramp is yet another viewing platform, this one overlooking the stunning and immense memorial artwork by Spencer Finch, entitled *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on that September Morning* (2014). The almost 3000 tiles—one for each victim—in almost 3000 different shades of blue evoke both the multitude of victims and the beautiful day

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<sup>3</sup> This exhibit, called *We Remember*, is composed of recordings from the museum’s oral history archive, by people from 43 countries, recorded in 28 different languages.

<sup>4</sup> This is a distinction made by Jeffrey Olick (1999) between collected memory—the collected memories of individuals (a concept also developed by James E. Young (1993)), and collective memory that occurs *sui generis* within a group.

that changed the world. Set into the blue collage is a quote from Virgil's *Aeneid*: "no day shall erase you from the memory of time," an unofficial, though controversial (e.g. Dunlap 2014), motto of the museum, adorning various tchotchkes in the gift shop.

Descending one last set of stairs alongside the remnant of the "Vesey staircase," which many people used to escape the burning buildings, the visitor begins her own reenactment, fleetingly feeling what it might have been like to escape the towers, and is at last in the soaring Foundation Hall. Weaving through the gigantic artifacts—a mangled firetruck, a piece of the antenna from the north tower, a motor from a World Trade Center elevator that could shuttle people 1600 feet in one minute, the towering "Last Column" —the visitor acutely feels the scale of the buildings but also begins to absorb the scale of human loss; each artifact is accompanied by the story of an individual, most of whom did not make it out. It is these individual stories that form the backbone of the rest of the museum. Straight ahead is a cube wrapped in aluminum—the base of one of the memorial reflecting pools, which contains the memorial—and around the corner the other building footprint, which contains the heart of the museum experience, the historical exhibition called simply September 11, 2001.



Fig. 1: Entrance to the museum exhibits with columns leading visitors down the ramp. Photograph by Amy Sodaro.



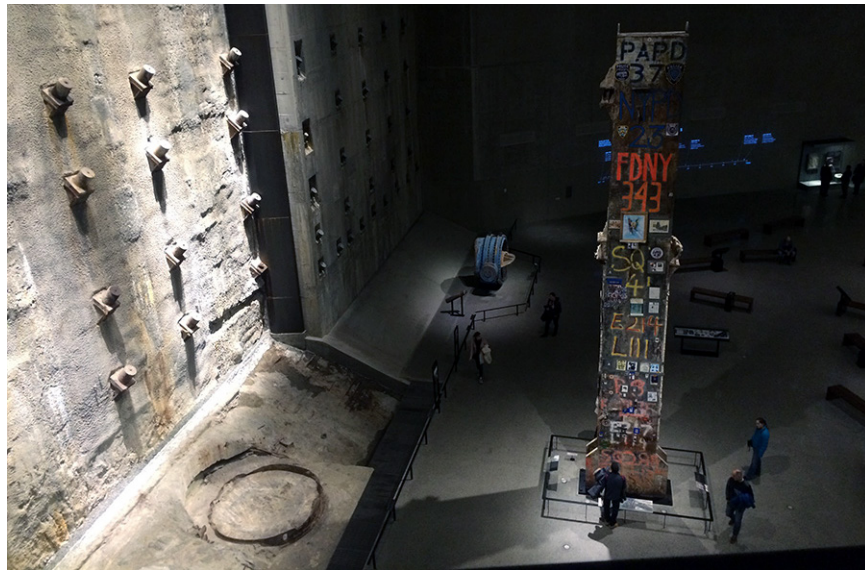


Fig. 2: Foundation Hall seen from viewing platform, with slurry wall (left) and Last Column (right). Photograph by Amy Sodaro.

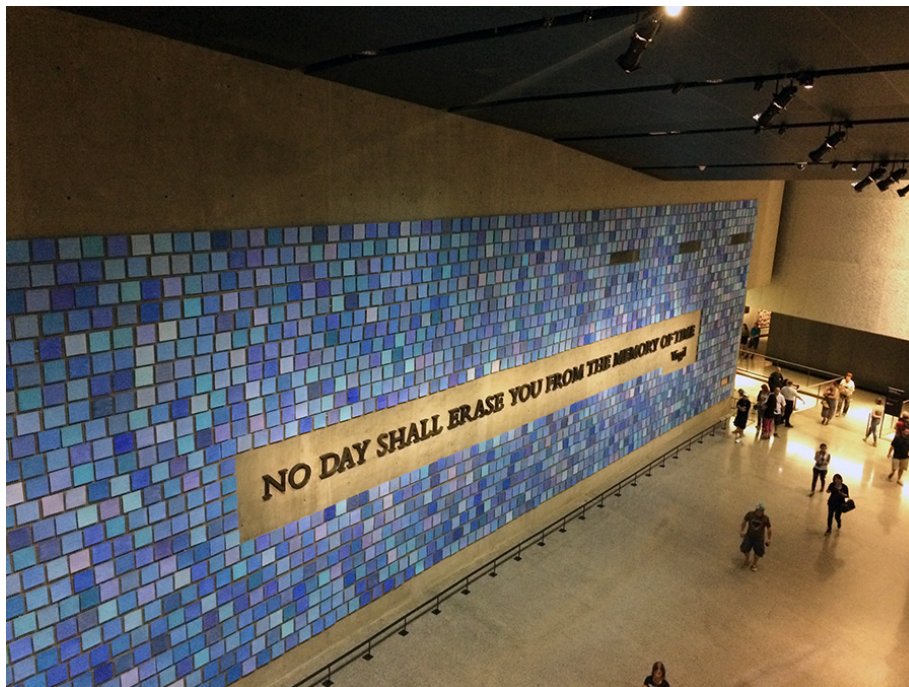


Fig. 3: Memorial artwork. Photograph by Amy Sodaro.



Fig. 4: Destroyed fire truck from Ladder 3 in Foundation Hall. Photograph by Amy Sodaro.

### The 9/11 Experience

Entering the historical exhibit, the museum experience dramatically changes. Photography is allowed in Foundation Hall, where selfie-sticks, iPads held high and people posing in front of the wreckage feel almost an expected performance of visiting. But, as the crush of visitors squeeze their way through a revolving door, they are reminded that no photography is allowed inside the historical exhibit. Instead, apparently, all senses are to be focused on re-experiencing—or, for those who were not there or too young, experiencing—9/11. And while the pavilion and Foundation Hall are all characterized by their sweeping scale, suddenly the museum is cramped, claustrophobic, chaotic and uncomfortable. Thus begins the 9/11 experience.

Once inside the historical exhibit one is thrust, in multimedia, into the events of the day. Through images, documents, videos, artifacts and a constant din of overlapping audio background, the museum endeavors to show the visitor how the bright September morning was shattered. The exhibit is anchored by a timeline documenting the 102 minutes of September 11, 2001, from the time the first plane hit the north tower at 8:46am until the north tower collapsed at 10:28am.

The timeline snakes along the walls with details about what was happening in the sky and on the ground, ticking off the minutes, taking us from Lower Manhattan, to the Pentagon, to Shanksville, PA and back to Lower Manhattan. Surrounding the timeline, the senses are assaulted by images of destruction—the airplane slamming again and again into the south tower, flames leaping from the gaping holes in the buildings, people screaming and running for their lives, the north tower collapsing over and over again. More huge artifacts, like twisted ambulances and windows from airplanes, once again impart the scale of destruction, while small personal belongings like wallets, eyeglasses, shoes and backpacks, remind of the human scale. The devastation of the day is evoked everywhere one looks, and simply by moving through the space and viewing at the artifacts, images and videos, the visitor becomes part of the reenactment of September 11.

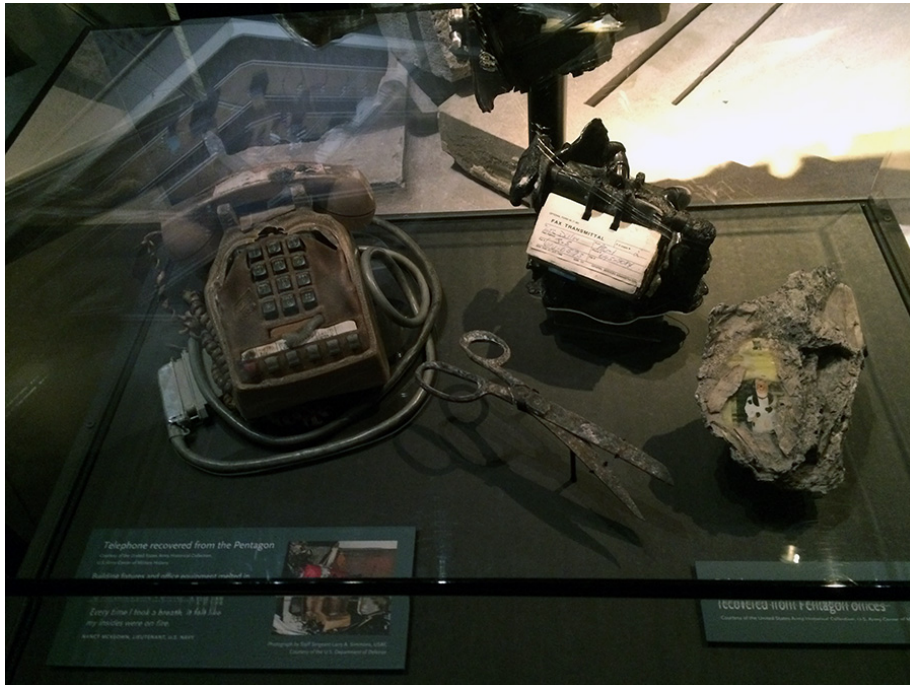


Fig. 5: Artifacts from historical exhibition. Photograph by Amy Sodaro.

Yet while the images, videos and objects work together to perform the terror and chaos of the day in a deeply affective and highly experiential way, most powerful is the audio. The soundtrack to the exhibit is a clamor of voices of victims, family members, survivors, talking heads, and witnesses to the event. There are screams and shouts of disbelief, sirens wailing, incredulous newscasters trying to make sense of what was happening even while trying to explain it to their viewers, and

the voices of the victims themselves in the voicemail messages they left for their loved ones. As noted, testimony is an intrinsic and essential part of “performing” memorial museums, but most others cannot offer the voices of the victims who no longer have a voice and the impact is deeply affective. To hear the museum is to be taken to Lower Manhattan on that terrifying morning to experience the confusion, fear and chaos for oneself. As Annike Smelik argues in her discussion of 9/11 films: “the effect of the soundtrack is particularly powerful in a culture that privileges images over sound. Sound still has a more direct and affective power...” (2011: 315). Like the power of Oskar’s father’s voicemail message in Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) — his last words before dying in the 9/11 attacks — the potency of sound and *voice* is acutely felt in the museum.

If one wants to delve emotionally even deeper, there are other recordings and testimonies in the alcoves set off from the main exhibit, with signs warning of the “disturbing material” inside and podiums holding tissues discretely tucked into corners. One of the lead designers, Tom Hennes of Thinc Design, described their efforts to make the space what they referred to as “safe enough — providing enough safety to allow the experience to enter us in the museum, but not so safe that we don’t stretch our own horizons and come to new insights about ourselves and others” (2014). Visitors who wish to “stretch their horizons” can enter these alcoves and there, in the dark, listen to stories of those who escaped the buildings. Visitors can hear the recordings from the hijacked flights’ black boxes and the calls made by the flight crews and passengers to their loved ones and to air traffic controllers. One can follow Flight 93 to its heroic end in a Pennsylvania field. Visitors can witness the people who were forced to jump to their deaths in an almost beautiful still photograph of people falling through the sky and in the heart-wrenching quotes on the wall from those who witnessed it. One in particular stands out:

She had a business suit on, her hair was all askew...This woman stood there for what seemed like minutes, then she held down her skirt and then stepped off of the ledge...I thought, how human, how modest, to hold down her skirt before she jumped... I couldn’t look any more.

Together with this witness, the visitor is also witness to the impossible choices that people were forced to make that horrific morning. And the “performance environment” opened up by the experience of witnessing makes demands on the visitor. Vivian Patraka describes a similar exhibit at the USHMM where visitors crowd around screens to view atrocious medical experiments: “Our curiosity, even our curiosity *to see* itself, is thrown back at us. We are challenged... to create a more self-conscious relationship to viewing materials about atrocity and take more responsibility for what we’ve seen” (2001: 156). This is not meant to be a typical museum experience of learning something from the display of objects and

information; the 9/11 Museum recreates 9/11 in a way that attempts to make visitors take responsibility for the past and, with it, the present and future. It is thus not just telling the story of the past, but demanding action through its telling in the present.

The intensity of the “day” begins to ebb after the buildings fall. The chaotic audio collage of sirens and screams gives way to a mournful, monotonous beeping of the Personal Alert Safety System (PASS) device that firefighters wear to notify others if they are in distress. Time slows as the visitor walks in disbelief—like those who were there that day—through the wreckage. Twisted metal evokes the destruction and the images are so large and powerful that one almost feels herself coated in the white dust that settled over the city. And with the settling dust, a deep sadness overtakes the fear of the preceding rooms. As one moves through the immediate aftermath of search, rescue and recovery, which has a dual emphasis on the destruction of the attacks and the courage of the first responders, the magnitude of the task of recovery becomes almost overwhelming, reinforcing the triumph of the very existence of the museum.

After the solemnity of rescue and recovery, the chronology that so rigidly guided the events of 9/11 suddenly ruptures as the historical exhibit turns to a set of disjointed rooms focused on before and after. An almost kitschy room filled with popular cultural references to the twin towers, like movie posters and magazine covers featuring the towers and a large scale model of the complex, leads to a few small rooms devoted to “before 9/11”. A room focused on the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center reminds the visitor that the iconic towers had been targeted by terror before. The following room describing the rise of Al Qaeda in a not even 7 minute video and a handful of information panels builds on this narrative. While it does provide some valuable historical background, this historical contextualization is strikingly minimal and inadequate in a museum that boasts of over 100,000 square feet of exhibition space and—following the emotional journey one has just been on—many visitors seem too exhausted to spend much time or energy in this room. Another two small rooms focus on the hijackers—how they planned and carried out the attacks. Also interesting, these exhibits lack the depth that would be necessary to give the attacks context; while the words of the victims, witnesses and survivors are everywhere present in the museum, the perpetrators remain silent—e.g., a reproduction of a letter in Arabic dated September 10, 2001 entitled “Last Night” is displayed with just one sentence of translation—which reinforces the notion that it was a violent, radical *other* who carried out the attacks.

The context of “after 9/11” is even more minimal. Much is present about recovery at ground zero, but the only mention of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is in the context of the “Global War on Terror” as a justified response to the attacks and with a focus on celebrating the heroism of American troops. The museum’s discussion of the US’s use of torture is limited to the inclusion of “enhanced

interrogation” in a list of words related to big questions accompanying 9/11 and, similarly, the PATRIOT Act is briefly described in neutral terms. In the context of what one has just witnessed in the museum, it seems that any and all tactics for protecting Americans can and should be on the proverbial table. The story that the museum performs is one of such acute trauma that any critical thinking or questioning is foreclosed; rather, the focus on the horror of the day serves to justify subsequent American policies and actions.

### Performing Witness in the Museum

Visiting the museum is a moving, powerful and sometimes overwhelming experience. And for visitors to Holocaust and other memorial museums it is also, in many ways, a familiar experience. There are exhibitionary tropes common to memorial or “performing” museums, like the narrative structure, emphasis on victims, audio and video testimony, multimedia and interactive displays; even the architecture is similar, though on a very large scale. However, there are also some ways in which the museum is dramatically different than other memorial museums, suggesting a new 21<sup>st</sup> century iteration of the form that politicizes the past in new—and troubling—ways.

Memorial museums have as a key function the documentation of past violence so that it cannot be denied or forgotten and their artifacts, testimony, and other forms of documentation serve as evidence of the violence that occurred; the museums are intended to literally bear witness to past violence. From the moment one enters the 9/11 museum it is clear that this is a different kind of event being remembered—one that was witnessed globally. Further, the narrative in and by the museum is constructed out of the memories of individual witnesses; thus, the 9/11 museum is not so much museum as witness, but a museum *about* witnessing, turning visitors into witnesses. The museum employs a crowdsourcing of memory of 9/11 to create and perform a history of that day that every single visitor witnesses anew.

If we think of the 9/11 Museum as a museum about witnessing in a very 21<sup>st</sup> century fashion, perhaps the most noteworthy part of the exhibition is its use of audio recording—from recordings of the hijacked airplanes’ cockpits, to voicemail messages from family members who never made it home, to news reports and individual remembrances, the experience of the museum is predominantly audio. Lead designer Jake Barton described the museum as a “listening experience” and indeed this is central to not only the experience of the historical exhibit but the larger goals of the museum’s creators. The hope was to avoid a single story line and instead allow visitors to reconstruct or create narratives on their own, using the information, artifacts and memories on display. According to director Alice Greenwald, “Witnesses are the way into the museum” (Kuang 2014).

Scholars have argued that museums are inherently performative spaces in that they demand interaction with visitors in their movement through the space and their consumption of the information displayed (Patraka 2001; Costello 2013). And others have argued that memory is itself a performance in that it is always a reenactment of the past (Bal 2001; Winter 2012). In the 9/11 Museum both the performativity of the museum experience and of the memory of 9/11 are especially apparent through the multimodal levels of witnessing that exist in the museum. On the one hand, the stories of witnesses are what move the narrative of the museum along; they recreate, reconstruct and perform the trauma of the day. But the museum goes further, inviting—or perhaps forcing—the visitor to perform the role of witness, both to the witnesses of 9/11 but also to the event itself as it unfolds in the museum. In its recreation of the morning of September 11, the museum draws visitors into their very own 9/11 experience, reinforcing and reconstituting memories of the event: “The performative act rehearses and recharges the emotion which gave the initial memory or story imbedded in it its sticking power, its resistance to erasure or oblivion” (Winter 2010: 12). In recreating the 102 minutes of the 9/11 attacks on perpetual loop for millions of visitors to witness, the museum is constructing a collective memory of 9/11 out of the memories of those who witnessed the initial event *and* those who witness its recreation in the museum.

Further, the act of witnessing is conceived by the designers as an ethical act. Exhibit designer Tom Hennes writes (2014), about witnessing:

By maintaining the first-person voice throughout, and by continuously re-grounding the exhibits in lived experience, we have sought to create conditions where people feel comfortable moving out of their own experience to witness the events and others’ myriad responses to them with greater empathy and an increased sense of how they themselves relate to 9/11. By witnessing others, and being witnessed by others in the museum, we are all brought into closer contact with our own humanity.

The act of witnessing has long been considered to carry an ethical duty, in the courtroom, of course, but also and especially in literature on the Holocaust. For example, Shoshana Felman describes bearing witness as “not merely to narrate, but to commit oneself and... the narrative to others: to take responsibility for history or for the truth of the occurrence... [bearing witness is] an appeal to community” (Felman 1992: 204). To witness is to take responsibility for what one sees and hears and with responsibility should come action. Through her performance of the role of witness to September 11, the visitor to the 9/11 Museum is, in Mieke Bal’s words, “given—and saddled with—agency” (Bal 2001: 207) and expected to channel that responsibility into actions and behavior that contribute to the creation of a more peaceful and democratic world.

But, of course, the irony is that this kind of massively witnessed, recorded and remembered event was exactly what the terrorists desired. The museum represents and performs — on endless loop — the images of destruction that give such force to terrorism as a political, public act, reinforcing the fear the attacks stoked as visitors become witness over and over again to the attacks. Thus, while witnessing in the museum is meant to be an ethical duty in the promotion of democracy and peace, it is channeled through the fear that an act of terrorism is intended to produce. In this way the museum amplifies the violent voices of the terrorists, granting them, day in and day out, the infamy and immortality that they sought. Thus, while the museum's creators intended to "democratize" memory in the hope of avoiding the creation of a single, hegemonic narrative and history of 9/11 and to disperse that memory and its concomitant responsibility, they have actually done quite the opposite. Just as in the opening corridor the overlapping memories of over 400 people who witnesses the event from near or far are stitched together into "one memory" of the day, throughout the historical exhibit, the individual testimonies and memories all reinforce the same traumatic, terrifying story of 9/11. The "collected memory" of many individuals is aggregated into one shared and cohesive collective memory of the day (Young 1993; Olick 1999). While individuals were in different places with different vantage points, together their memories form a shared narrative and history of the events of the day.

### **Temporality, Pain and Politics**

This coherence of the memories of diverse and disparate individuals about such a complicated event is possible because of the limited temporal context of the museum. As the 9/11 Museum was being created, a pressing question that the designers had to engage was that of when 9/11 began and ended. The simplest answer — which was ultimately decided upon — is that 9/11 began at 8:46am on Tuesday, September 11, 2001 and, though the museum suggests that its impact is still not over, in the museum's telling 9/11 essentially ended when Ground Zero was cleared. This narrow temporal focus accomplishes several things at once. First of all, it allows for a narrative that is relatively simple to tell in a museum: a compelling and theatrical plotline that follows a clear chronology and is moved along by innocent victims, brave heroes and evil perpetrators. In fact, this adherence to the chronology of the day through the timeline is one of the most striking things about the historical exhibit. Literary scholar Justin Neuman has coined the term "chronomania" to describe this "obsession with time and temporal disruption that characterizes representations of 9/11," which he argues obscures meaning (2011). While his focus is on the 9/11 Commission Report and various key political speeches after 9/11, his concept works well to describe the obsession with time in the museum. The timeline is nothing if not chronomaniacal, suggesting to visitors that the important question in understanding 9/11 is not why, but *when*. Just as



the museum's emphasis on witnessing collects the memories of individuals into one shared memory/history of the day, its emphasis on time "by refashioning disaster as chronology...aims to replace victims with knowers – first by establishing an authorial subject in command of its perceptual, technological and temporal fields, and second, by attempting to shape personal and collective understandings of 9/11 by securing events unfolding in multiple locations and witnessed in myriad ways on a single, immanent timeline" (Neuman 2011). The timeline becomes all important – the anchor to an understanding of the day that obscures deeper meanings.

This chronomania of the timeline leads us to the second way in which the narrow contextual focus of the museum works: to depict 9/11 as a rupture that occurred "out of the blue," the blue in this idiom of course being the sky. This notion of 9/11 as an event that occurred out of the blue is quite literally suggested in the frequent representational focus on the beautiful September day that was ruptured when planes fell out of the perfect blue sky. Spencer Finch's massive wall of sky blues underlines this imaginary of that gorgeous blue from which 9/11 dramatically came out, and this is indeed a tempting way to think of that day. It is also a way of remembering 9/11 that is encouraged in representations of the day in large part because it allows us to forget about the causes of the event. The framing of 9/11 as a rupture has become very important politically. As Neuman writes, "the disappearance of history at the heart of chronomania denies the narratives that would consider the role played by American policies in creating the material conditions out of which 9/11 arose and substitutes for them dystopian imaginings of greater violence yet to come" (2011).

And this brings us to the third key function of the narrow focus of the museum on the events of the day: this allows the museum – and as Neuman's work shows, other representations of 9/11 – to avoid confrontation with the politics behind the cause and consequences of 9/11. This is deeply problematic in a memorial museum, especially the 9/11 Museum, because the consequences of 9/11 – war and conflict, xenophobia and scapegoating, the spread of extremist ideologies across the globe – continue unabated. Nevertheless – and despite the museum's mission to explore the consequences of 9/11 – of the vast exhibition space, very little is devoted to context. The small rooms on the origins of the 9/11 attacks can hardly address the complexity of the motivations behind the attacks and extremist terrorism more generally, and the lack of any meaningful discussion of the two wars, which continue to embroil American resources and military personnel while costing tens of thousands of civilians lives, or the accelerated rise of extremist ideologies belies any claim the museum can make to contextualizing the events within contemporary American and global society.

Rather, the museum's performance of the pain of the attacks – at the expense of historical contextualization – constructs an experience of 9/11 that is deeply

affective and emotional. In its minute detail of the destruction and traumatic rendering of the 102 minutes, the museum's historical exhibition gives visitors such a forceful emotional experience of 9/11 that they cannot help but come away from the historical exhibition deeply horrified and angry. They have, after all, just played the role of witness to this terribly painful past; they have walked among the ruins of the buildings, have heard the voices of those who were killed and have seen for themselves the violent destruction. This kind of affective museum experience, however, replaces cognitive understanding and critical analysis with fear and empathy in a way that can be dangerous, especially for a museum that is meant to promote democracy and nonviolence. Diana Taylor writes, about the images immediately produced and disseminated after 9/11, "the intensely mediated seeing [becomes] a form of social blinding; percepticide, a form of killing or numbing through the senses" (2003: 244); in the museum, this "percepticide" is a numbing of cognition and questioning as the visitor is overwhelmed by the emotions of the "experience" of the day.

But while the story the museum tells is one of a wounded America, all visitors, because of the ethical implications of their role as witness to 9/11, are invited to identify with the individuals and values that were attacked. And the museum goes further than simply promoting American values and ideals such as democracy and freedom. It presents a simple, Manichean image of the world, in which the good "us" (Americans, and by extension, Western, liberal visitors to the museum) was attacked by the evil "them." The museum takes pains to ensure that the perpetrators of this violence are depicted as "outsiders"—literal in that they were not US citizens and had spent at most only a couple of years in the United States and metaphorical, in that they espoused an ideology that is radically foreign to most visitors of the museum. Though the perpetrators appear in the museum's exhibit—their small photographs hang at knee level, suggesting "some primitive image superstition" (Gopnik 2014), and security footage of them readying to board the planes plays on foreboding loop—but the only discernable motivation offered in the exhibit is the by-now-standard response "they hate us for our freedom"—a simplistic (and tenacious) reaction that perpetuates the myth of American innocence. The context given to their ideological position is superficial and sheds little light on the deeper causes of the rise of global terrorism. The museum creates an evil other against which the glorious US triumphs and will continue to triumph. It is ultimately a highly nationalistic museum that, through performance of this painful past, serves to "galvanize the ties that bind groups together" (Winter 2010: 11). Its purpose, rather than inspiring ethical transformation in visitors, seems to be more to bolster American national identity and use the pain of 9/11 to draw all those who visit into its Manichean universe of "us against them."

## Conclusions

The 9/11 Museum, because of the global impact of the event, the highly public process of redeveloping the site and its location in the heart of New York City, is especially shaped and challenged by its role as a destination for the millions of tourists from across the globe who visit New York each year. In many senses, its role as a premier tourist destination has, more than anything else, shaped the institution and how it, in turn, shapes an understanding of and narrative about the past. Not only did the creators have to negotiate the divergent responses and desires of a range of deeply involved stakeholders, but also many other people around the world with some kind of perceived connection to the site. The solution to this vexing problem was in part to limit the context of the museum's narrative to the events of that September morning at the expense of any deeper historical contextualization or reckoning.

On the one hand, this allows for people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences to have a meaningful encounter with the events of the day. Those who were there are taken back to that morning; those who watched the events on television are able to get a bit closer via the authenticity of the site; and those who did not witness it firsthand have the opportunity to "see what it was really like."<sup>5</sup> But what is troubling is the way that this narrow focus on the events of the morning allows the museum to avoid confrontation with the important questions that 9/11 continues to raise, and instead foment the kind of fear that the hijackers intended with their attacks. The performance of the pain of 9/11 in the museum together with its role as a tourist site simplify the complexity of 9/11 in a way that reproduces a dangerous narrative of good and evil in the world today. Marita Sturken describes this problematic in terms of American tourists: "The mode of the tourist, with its innocent pose and distant position, evokes the American citizen who participates uncritically in a culture in which notions of good and evil are used to define complex conflicts and tensions" (Sturken 2007: 10). Tourism is an innocent endeavor; it is a fleeting encounter with the past by someone who is free from its weight and burden. The very nature of tourism demands simplification in the effort to make the past something that can be easily consumed and digested. And in the 9/11 Museum the visitors are indeed placed in the innocent, distant position of tourist who is offered up a simplistic version of the past for consumption. After "consuming" 9/11 in a way that the museum implies elicits thorough understanding, the tourist leaves the museum with a limited understanding of the causes and consequences of terrorism, but an acute impression of the fear, trauma and terror the attacks created.

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<sup>5</sup> I visited the museum with a group of students who were very young when 9/11 occurred and this was an anecdotal response of a student when asked what she thought about the museum.

Because the cultural forms we use shape how events enter into our collective memory (e.g. Sodaro 2018), we have good reason to be wary of what collective memory is being performed and crystallized by the National September 11 Memorial Museum. The museum has exceeded eight million visitors since its opening and so promises to impart a particular memory of 9/11 to many millions of visitors in coming years. But the danger is that this memory will strengthen the kind of outsider/insider division and triumph of the glorious nation that has the potential to contribute to new forms of 21<sup>st</sup> century violence. Fifteen years after 9/11, the US and Europe have seen a wave of hateful, divisive and intolerant ideology sweeping political and social life, evident in the US with the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016. Ironically, this rise of rightwing populism is, at least in part, driven by the global rise of terror attacks, which is in turn largely driven by the US and its allies' responses to the attacks of 9/11, producing a violent and seemingly intractable cycle. Caught up in this cycle, the values that the museum is meant to promote, such as democracy, freedom and tolerance, appear to be under very real threat today. In particular, the Trump administration's focus on the threat of terrorism in the effort to sow fear and bolster support for exclusionary and xenophobic policies like his immigration (Muslim) ban, demonstrate just how ripe memory of 9/11 continues to be for manipulation and mobilization. It cannot help to have the 9/11 Museum constructing a national narrative of 9/11 that echoes the divisive and exclusionary political rhetoric from the right. While we can hope that the museum will find a way to stand up for the values it is meant to promote, the traumatic and divisive ahistorical narrative created in and by the museum can potentially help fuel the dangerous ideology and rhetoric that threatens the core values of the museum, like peace, democracy, inclusion and the value of human life. Rather than channeling the painful past of 9/11 into constructive dialogue and understanding, the museum performs an endless repetition of that pain for its millions of visitors, drawing them into the chaos and fear of that day and sharing it so that it becomes part of their 9/11 experience.

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