

ICMEMO WEBINAR

15 May 2010

Gained Solidarity or Loss of Liberties:

How our Museums Might Address Changes Wrought by the Virus

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

QUESTION REPORT

1. Dear Barbara. I was just wondering, can you put some words into the "being there themselves" at memorial museums, as compared to other museums? And perhaps, the challenge for memorial museums to not be able to be physically "close" to its visitors? Something we touched upon in the previous webinar.

BKG: What makes "being there" so important is the power of site-specific memorials and museums to harness the emotional power of the place – whether on a commemorative occasion or as part of a personal journey, tourist itinerary, or pilgrimage. At the same time, many events are memorialized far from the places where they took place, but close to those who care about those events. Such sites provide a place to gather. "Being there" is about being together, as well as alone.

The challenge today and one the ICMEMO is especially well positioned to address is how the coronavirus pandemic will be remembered and commemorated as a worldwide collective tragedy. People are dying alone, their relatives in anguish at a distance. In many cases, bodies cannot be prepared for burial according to religious requirements. Funeral homes and crematoria are overwhelmed. A proper funeral may not be possible. There are already improvised and vernacular efforts to put faces on the growing numbers.

Newspapers are calling on readers to submit tributes – "Faces of the dead. This is how they

lived — and what was lost when they died.”¹ Individuals are being remembered on radio and television, and above all on social media. These efforts personalize the mounting numbers and offer a measure of consolation to the living. Mourners find alternatives to face-to-face gatherings. There are now even protocols for Zoom shivas, the seven-day mourning period in Jewish tradition.²

There are spontaneous memorializations, whether ephemeral flowers, candles, and posters in public spaces, crowdsourcing postcards from public school students honoring those who died,³ or collective projects inspired by the Aids quilt and 9/11 memorial projects. Artists are creating memorials in the midst of the crisis, to mention only the projection of photographs and stories of the deceased on buildings in Washington, D.C.⁴ The conversation about a national memorial has begun: “What will the COVID-19 memorial look like? It’s not too early to begin remembering.”⁵

While plague columns are common throughout Europe, they are largely a relic of the 17th and 18th centuries.⁶ The Black Death, which killed a third of Europe’s population in 1347, and the epidemics that followed clearly made an indelible impression, but the 1918 Spanish influenza, which took 50 million lives, apparently did not. The near total lack of memorials for the Spanish influenza – there were also no major commemorations of its centenary in 2018 – is an indication of its “near total disappearance from our collective memory.”⁷ Why? Is it because the devastation of World War I overshadowed this catastrophe, which took more lives than the war? Or because, as some have suggested, pandemics do not lend themselves to narratives of heroism, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, patriotism, and manliness associated with war – or because the heroes were women?⁸ Moreover, unlike wars, pandemics are not battles between good and evil; viruses are

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/04/24/coronavirus-dead-victims-stories/?arc404=true>

² <https://www.shiva.com/learning-center/death-and-mourning/virtual-shiva-how-to-attend/>

³ <https://www.kaaltv.com/coronavirus/rochester-public-schools-using-art-from-the-community-to-memorialize-COVID-19/5716409/>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonian.com/2020/04/17/this-dc-artists-projections-are-a-huge-poignant-memorial-to-the-citys-COVID-19-victims/>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/28/what-will-COVID-19-memorial-look-like/>

⁶ <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-05-05/coronavirus-plague-columns-memorials-trump-tower>.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/business/1918-flu-memorials.html>. There is also a striking lack of artistic responses to 1918 Spanish influenza, whether literature, painting, theatre, and cinema.

⁸ <https://slate.com/technology/2019/02/spanish-flu-women-nurses-heroism.html>

independent of ethics. Or, is it because of “the impossibility of imagining deaths on such a scale? In his novel *The Plague*, Albert Camus describes the many millions of bodies from the past as no more than an intangible mist drifting through the mind.”⁹

Or, perhaps the reason is that to remember this pandemic is to recall the colossal failure to deal with the outbreak responsibly. Governments refused to communicate its seriousness to the public immediately, a scenario that has repeated itself in our day. That said, the centenary has given rise to histories of the 1918 Spanish influenza in publications and exhibitions, among them an exhibition at the Florence Nightingale Museum about the sacrifices of wartime health practitioners, largely women, who cared for the infected, and exhibitions at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia, National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., Ingenium in Ottawa, and museums elsewhere. Developed and in many cases opened before the pandemic, these exhibitions were quickly adapted to reflect the current situation and what could be learned from pandemics past.¹⁰ As is the case with other global events, whether the two world wars or the Holocaust, exhibitions about the 1918 pandemic become a national or local story.

While today’s health care workers are surely heroes, risking and losing their lives caring for the pandemic afflicted, those dying of the virus are seen differently from those who fell on the battlefield.¹¹ It has been argued that mass amnesia of the 1918 Spanish influenza might “help explain the lack of preparation for the COVID-19 crisis.”¹² A notable exception is New Zealand, which finally unveiled a national memorial in 2019 to victims of the Spanish influenza, with the following inscription: “This disaster shaped modern approaches to managing infectious diseases, helping to protect future generations.” And, in New Zealand, it does. This country had a plan in hand for managing epidemics before this one and has led the world in containing the COVID-19 pandemic within its islands.

How to think about memorializing our 21st-century pandemic, a pervasive and collective tragedy that knows no boundaries, neither geographical, political, religious, racial, nor class, although populations are differentially affected depending on their vulnerabilities,

⁹ <https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/W7TfGRAAAP5F0eKS>.

¹⁰ <https://www.florence-nightingale.co.uk/spanish-flu-nursing-during-historys-deadliest-pandemic/>

¹¹ Catharine Arnold, *Pandemic 1918: Eyewitness Accounts from the Greatest Medical Holocaust in Modern History* (2018).

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/business/1918-flu-memorials.html>

access to health care, and public health policies. How to “locate” an event that took place everywhere? What does “site specific” mean in such a case? What does “being there” mean when “there” is everywhere? Rather than thinking of “there” as specific to a site, we might rethink “location” relationally: how we locate ourselves in relation to this event and to others affected by it, how we create places to grieve, alone and together. The power lies in the memory that we bring to such places, wherever they might be.

2. Could Barbara give us an example of a „highly civilized debate“ that was enforced by a museum during the Corona crisis? However, in this the centenary year of the pandemic that may be changing.

BKG: I referred to “informed civil debate” or “Informed civil discourse,” by which I mean discussing and debating difficult issues in an informed way. Museums have the advantage of being trusted institutions, at least in societies where they defend democratic values.¹³ The museum’s role as a forum for informed civil discourse becomes even more important in an era of science skepticism, conspiracy theories, rising xenophobia, “fake news,” and social media. Information and misinformation are spreading everywhere and with unprecedented speed. Museums remain a “slow” medium – they not only collect and preserve, but also they deliberate, and slow deliberation is the starting point for informed civil discourse. It is the opposite of the thoughtless comments, clicks, and trolling that plague the online communication. Moreover, museums have the power to convene and to do so in a trusted space, where they can model informed civil discourse. The New Museum of Contemporary Art in Manhattan has been doing just that.¹⁴ And, the International Coalition of Sites of

¹³ See the 2017 survey in the USA, which showed that people trusted museums more than newspapers: <https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/04/26/people-trust-museums-more-than-newspapers-here-is-why-that-matters-right-now-data/>. See also the World Economic Forum’s 2018 assessment, “How do we restore trust in our democracies? Museums can be a starting point,” <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/03/how-do-we-restore-trust-in-our-democracies-museums-can-be-a-starting-point/>.

¹⁴ https://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/1657/deep-future-building-lateral-institutions?utm_source=New+Museum&utm_campaign=bf31352904-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_05_21_HomeDelivery&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6c3938a7e5-bf31352904-409528521&mc_cid=bf31352904&mc_eid=04d0c343be

Conscience has created a guide for orchestrating dialogue during the pandemic, consistent with their mission: “From past to present, memory to action.”¹⁵

For discourse to be civil, being informed is necessary but not sufficient. The role of museums to inform – through their exhibitions, educational and public programs, publications, and projects – is also necessary, but not sufficient. Museums have a critical role to play in developing 21st-century competences: critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and media literacy, among the other skills necessary for evaluating truth claims and engaging in productive debate.¹⁶ In post-communist Europe, especially in authoritarian regimes with a state-mandated historical policy and a traditional approach to pedagogy, museums as spaces of informal learning have the potential to do what schools will not or cannot do. This is especially the case in private museums like the new MO Museum of Modern Art in Vilnius and those established as public-private partnerships like POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

Museums are engaging the public in thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic even as it is raging and in anticipation of new reality in its wake. There is no way back, the world will not return to the old normal, but there is a way forward, and that way will be defined by our understanding of how the pandemic has been instrumentalized, by anticipating a transformed world, and by imagining possible futures, even as we hope for the best and prepare for the worst. Facing History and Ourselves, which has been working with museums for many years, is addressing COVID-19 as a teaching moment. Their program, COVID-19: How Can We Make Choices that Promote the Common Good?, is suitable not only for schools but also for museums.¹⁷ FASPE (Fellowships at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics), which runs its program at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, has been organizing online webinars addressing ethics in the time of COVID-19.¹⁸

Planned long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Rijksmuseum Boerhaave’s newest temporary exhibition, *Besmit! Infected!*, was scheduled to open 16 April 2020. Paradoxically, the very circumstances that have made this exhibition so topical also forced the museum to

¹⁵ <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Coronavirus-FPD-051420.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.aeseducation.com/blog/what-are-21st-century-skills>

¹⁷ <https://www.facinghistory.org/educator-resources/current-events/COVID-19-how-can-we-make-choices-promote-common-good>

¹⁸ <https://www.faspe-ethics.org/webinars/>

delay its opening until June. The coronavirus pandemic has been incorporated into the exhibition, which together with accompanying educational and public programs, will engage the public in debates regarding the pressing topic of vaccination, among others. The museum's goal is to "allow the widest possible audience to discover the importance of science for our lives today" and strike a "balance between health and real risk and between social exclusion and empathy."¹⁹ As the world races to develop a vaccine and anti-vaccination activism intensifies, modelling informed civil discourse is of existential importance. Museums have an important role to play in supporting a scientific approach to the crisis, a moral response to rising xenophobia, and resistance to exploitation of the pandemic for political gain. These are ways that museums can strengthen the resilience of civil society, which is our best hope for a better future.

3. Which was the museum who planned an exhibit on fear?

BKG: Ethnographic Museum of Istria. The temporary exhibition "What are you afraid of?" opened in December 2019. It proved timelier than could have been anticipated. As a result of the pandemic, the museum closed on March 11 and was to reopen on April 28.

https://cegasebojis.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwAR1OAS_pgCyk24ZqT5XDKTPZgGMvZftMnPXxdDzliWSeNdXK_FrVVtozZlo

The website includes a multilingual publication that can be downloaded as a PDF.

https://cegasebojis.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/cega_se_bojis_e-pub-1.pdf

4. Hello, it is possible to get the names of the Museums that were mentioned in the examples of "collecting the present"?

Many museums are engaged in "rapid response collecting," "contemporary collecting," or "collecting the present," in anticipation of a future when the present will be past.²⁰ Marjorie Schwarzer has suggested that "Reviewing how museums responded to three major 20th-century epidemics—tuberculosis, the Spanish flu, and AIDS—and what we learned

¹⁹ <https://ncoh.nl/events/exhibition-in-rijksmuseum-boerhaave-about-infectious-diseases-leiden/>

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/arts/design/museums-covid-19-collecting.html>

in the process can help our field chart its way through the coronavirus crisis.”²¹ In considering what to collect now, museums are guided by what they collected in the past, whether related specifically to epidemics or to such catastrophes as 9/11, and by how they could imagine exhibiting the COVID-19 epidemic in the future. For example, the V&A’s Pandemic Objects initiative:

an editorial project that compiles and reflects on objects that have taken on new meaning and purpose during the coronavirus outbreak. During times of pandemic a host of everyday often-overlooked ‘objects’ (in the widest possible sense of the term) are suddenly charged with new urgency. Toilet paper becomes a symbol of public panic, a forehead thermometer a tool for social control, convention centres become hospitals, while parks become contested public commodities. By compiling these objects and reflecting on their changing purpose and meaning this space aims to paint a unique picture of the pandemic and the pivotal role objects play within it.²²

Collecting COVID: Wales 2020 is a project of National Museum Wales:

We are collecting the story of now. We want to hear about your experiences and feelings of living in Wales during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Since 1937 we have been using questionnaires to collect information on how people in Wales live their lives. By responding to this questionnaire your story will become part of the national memory at St Fagans National Museum of History, ensuring that future generations will be able to learn about life in Wales during this extraordinary time.²³

The Museum of London’s Collecting COVID initiative is inspiring people to contribute material by highlighting objects in its collection related to previous epidemics:

As a major urban centre, London has faced several epidemics, including smallpox and the 1889 -1893 and 1918 flu pandemics. The museum holds collections relating to these outbreaks, such as the dress Queen Victoria wore to mourn the loss of her grandson to influenza in 1892, serving not only as a reminder of the suffering during that time but also of the effects on society and culture, changing the way people

²¹ <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/03/10/lessons-from-history-museums-and-pandemics/>

²² <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/pandemic-objects>

²³ <https://museum.wales/collecting-COVID/>

dressed and interacted. The Museum of London is seeking to collect both objects and first-hand experiences to reflect Londoners' lives during this time, in order to keep a record and to ensure future generations of Londoners will be able to learn about and understand this extraordinary period.²⁴

Museums within the Smithsonian Institution are also collecting, each with its own focus:

It's a difficult time to start a new collection. Museums across the region are closed, and many institutions are simply struggling to stay afloat financially. Smithsonian employees are all working from home, which means there are no workers to process objects as they come in. Lord's main goal right now is to get the word out about their project and to urge people to hold onto potential artifacts. "Many people throw away objects that we in the museum would be interested in," she says. Even an empty box that held personal protective equipment could tell future historians a lot about the current state of affairs. The museum is urging patrons to save everything from Zoom screenshots to shopping lists.²⁵

Planned long before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Smithsonian's forthcoming exhibition "In Sickness and In Health," which explores the history of infectious disease in the United States, will now incorporate the coronavirus pandemic. The Smithsonian's Division of Work and Industry will update its "American Enterprise" exhibition, which presents a history of American business, to reflect the economic impact of the present pandemic.²⁶

The "Collecting Community History Initiative: The West During COVID-19," an initiative of the Autry Museum of the American West, is forming a collection unique in its distinctive regional focus, including objects from the Navajo Nation, which has been devastated by the virus, including face masks inspired by Navajo design.²⁷ Like other museums, the Smithsonian Institution is collecting stories, especially stories associated with

²⁴ <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/museum-for-london-collecting-COVID>

²⁵ Alexandra Lord is chair of the National American History Museum's medicine and science division. <https://wamu.org/story/20/05/14/the-smithsonian-is-collecting-coronavirus-artifacts-to-document-the-pandemic/>. See also: <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/20/859750008/the-smithsonian-is-collecting-coronavirus-artifacts-to-document-the-pandemic;>

²⁶ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-smithsonian-curators-are-rising-challenge-covid-19-180974638/>

²⁷ <https://theautry.org/research/blog/collecting-community-history-initiative-west-during-covid-19>

objects.²⁸ As for the Historical Society of Washington D.C., they are collecting the present for the first time.

The Rothschild Foundation has been supporting the collection of Jewish ephemera—and now, specifically, Jewish responses to COVID-19 —at the National Library of Israel:

Please DON'T DELETE that email from your Rabbi offering to zoom the Shabbat service straight into your lounge. SAVE that notice from the kosher supermarket reassuring customers that there will be enough matzah for Passover. DOWNLOAD your synagogue's poster offering support for vulnerable people in the community. COPY that Facebook link from the Jewish community in Latvia showcasing its app to recruit volunteers. CLICK on the message from leaders of the Italian Jewish community offering psychological support services to its members. BOOKMARK Hamodia an Orthodox online newspaper branding itself as 'your coronavirus info hub.' The community that ostensibly frowns upon the internet is finally harnessing its power to collate and publicize rabbinic statements to close down synagogues and Jewish schools.²⁹

This effort reminds me of the Oyneg Shabes underground archive, organized by Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto, which collected every scrap of evidence – on the spot, in the moment, in real time.³⁰ Many other initiatives, from New York City³¹ to Australia,³² Argentina,³³ Canada,³⁴ Germany,³⁵ and India,³⁶ could be cited.

²⁸ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-smithsonian-curators-are-rising-challenge-covid-19-180974638/>

²⁹ <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/a-digital-geniza-collecting-COVID-19-ephemera/>

³⁰ Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (2009).

³¹ <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/coronavirus-museum-collections>

³² <https://www.museumnext.com/article/museums-contemporary-collecting/>

³³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAVUclSg0dm/>

³⁴ <https://humanrights.ca/stories/share-your-story#/>

³⁵ <http://www.museum-erding.de/index.php?id=14>

³⁶ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/international-museum-day-2020-preserving-the-pandemic-memorabilia-is-no-easy-feat/story-UkjmgCMFsspm82GdnuK8BI.html>

5. To Barbara: How do you see opportunity to strengthen solidarity among museums across the division of North-South or centre and periphery?

BKG: A good question and big challenge. As Claire Voon has noted, “Some have referred to COVID-19 as an ‘equalizer.’ But this pandemic only exposes and amplifies existing inequalities in America including the disparity of resources in the world of museums—which are themselves structures of hierarchy.”³⁷ This holds especially true of the North-South and center-periphery divisions. Both the South and the North have been ravaged by the pandemic, economic impact of the lockdown, missteps in public health policy, and limits in health care capacity, but some countries have fared much worse than others – and the worst is yet to come. Even the United States, of all countries, which should have been ahead of the curve, instead leads the world in infections and deaths.

The impact of the pandemic on museums is devastating. An estimated 13% of museums will close permanently, and as many as 30% will not make it through this period without emergency financial aid.³⁸ Nor is it so easy to close a museum.³⁹ As for life during the pandemic and in its immediate aftermath, many museums have migrated online, which is easier to achieve in the North than in the South. The North could collaborate with the South and could help the South to create an effective online presence. It could share technological expertise, online content that could be translated and shared in local languages, as well as offer insights into visitor responses to online experiences. The North could also share its experiences in managing the partial opening of museums as the pandemic abates.

6. Dear Barbara, I really liked your idea that the crisis is enforcing the new museum definition and gives us the task to enforce civil debates. I am just wondering if there are any examples that this is happening, already?

³⁷ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-three-museums-dealing-COVID-19-crisis>

³⁸ <https://hyperallergic.com/565254/COVID-19-unesco-icom-study/> and <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-three-museums-dealing-COVID-19-crisis>

³⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/29/arts/design/how-do-you-close-a-museum.html>

BKG: Please see answer to Question 2 above.

7. What more can be done for vulnerable and marginalised communities during this crisis.

BKG: Some museums are active on the front lines of the crisis, especially museums that are located in or near marginalized communities. The Jewish History Museum and Holocaust History Center in Tucson, Arizona, has turned the courtyard of the synagogue it occupies into a pickup station for free food in cooperation with Tucson Food Share. This museum is located in what was once the historic Jewish neighborhood, but is today Barrio Viejo, a diverse historic district on the edge of the downtown area. ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) in Boston has converted its Watershed facility, a postindustrial site in the Boston Harbor Shipyard and Marina, into a fresh produce distribution hub for the immigrant neighborhood in which it is located.⁴⁰

Other museums are donating protective equipment, encouraging their staff and volunteers to sign up as health care volunteers, reaching out to the elderly, especially those living alone and those with dementia, and providing food to the homeless.⁴¹ The National September 11 Memorial and Museum at the World Trade Center has been creating reversible masks for COVID-19 frontline responders, as well as for their own staff, and has amplified the impact of this initiative by partnering with the Stephen Siller Tunnel to Towers Foundation on a “buy one give one” incentive: for every mask purchased, a mask will be given to an essential worker.⁴² An inspiring message appears on each mask: “United in hope,” “We’re in this together,” “Compassion, now more than ever,” “In darkness we shine brightest,” and “Resilience.”

⁴⁰ <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2020/04/21/ica-watershed-becomes-a-fresh-food-hub-for-east-boston>

⁴¹ <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/26032020-practical-ways-museums-can-contribute-COVID-19> and

<https://www.facebook.com/fabriquedepatrimoines/photos/a.584602308300283/2903869743040183/?type=3&theater>

⁴² <https://store.911memorial.org/>