

The Atrocity Exhibition

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On first reflection, we might assume that objects tied to abhorrent events deserve no place in the museum. The association of the museum with all things historically precious and valuable is an idea that remains largely stable in public consciousness. In history museums, the prized object has qualities related not primarily to the aesthetic excellence found in art museums, nor the rare and representative specimens that fill natural history museums, but to that of authenticity. The subcategory of memorial museums, for their part, are acutely aware of the role of primary artifacts, not only because they give displays their powerful appeal, but also because in many cases they exist as tangible proof in the face of debate and even denial about the veracity of what transpired. Yet, compared to conventional history museums (dedicated to the stories of, say, an immigrant group, a form of labor, or a region or nation) there is a fundamental difficulty with the object base of memorial museums: orchestrated violence by nature destroys, and typically does so efficiently. This primarily results in memorial museums' collections being restricted in size and scope. The injured, dispossessed and expelled are left object-poor. Moreover, the clandestine nature of much political violence means that perpetrators aim to purposefully destroy evidence of their destruction. Records and bodies are buried.

Material World

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Figure 1. Objects discovered in the 'partisan bunker' at the Museum of Genocide Victims, Lithuania. Copyright the Museum of Genocide Victims, Lithuania. Used with permission]

When materials are gathered, the process often proceeds in an archaeological fashion. This image of a glass-floor section at Lithuania's Museum of Genocide Victims, which reveals pliers, keys, a belt, a flask, a knife and other KGB officer ephemera, conveys this notion literally. Such exploration can, at best, make the formation of a memorial museum collection a revelatory process, where ordinary people are provided a space in which they can come forward to share materials, and their experiences. This entrustment of confidences can lend memorial museums' collections hefty moral weight.

Yet it also produces an equivalent sense of volatility in the way they are utilized. The combination of the calamitous 'story' of the event, its political and moral gravity, and the scarcity of material traces left behind makes the objects that are shown all the more vital. Where other large generic history museums can turn their hand to a wide variety of topics, the relationship between the memorial museum and its event is typically singular and intimate. Despite memorial museums having an uncommonly circumscribed mission – that is, to illuminate, commemorate and educate about a particular, bounded and vivid historic event – this situation does not mean that the process of exhibiting objects is especially straightforward.

A marked feature of the memorial museum collection is that it is defined by – or even held hostage to – what the perpetrators in each event produced. Memorial museums must hence decide how to incorporate, frame or repudiate the output that the calamity generated, given that it constitutes the very stuff of public recognition. The First World War, for instance, was shocking to the public at large due to its sheer apocalyptic carnage. Yet memorials practiced strategies of avoidance and transferal. Little of that bloodiness was translated into direct words or images; death was treated through allegory, metaphor and allusion.¹ While the Holocaust is notably associated in object form with the industrial machines that effected the disappearance of human bodies (such as boxcars, gas chambers, and ovens), it also produced, as terrible 'byproducts,' clothing, money, jewelry, eyeglasses, watches and hair. These secondary moveable items are emblematic for Holocaust museums worldwide, along with keepsakes and diaries hidden by victims, official Nazi regime equipment and insignia, and civilian artifacts from the period that help to evoke a sense of 1930s and 1940s *mise-en-scène*. With Holocaust museums as a dominant frame of reference, the development of memorial museums has proceeded with allied expectations about the kinds of objects sought. If this has consolidated a 'generification' of memorial museum objects, what can we say about the understandings they support or preclude? What alternative sets of objects might be shown, and to what effect?

The proliferation of memorial museums worldwide now mark events involving diverse forms of violence. Those in Dhaka, Nanjing, Taipei, Bosnia, Phnom Penh and Kigali share a sense of intense brutality that was intimate and corporal, yet socially dispersed – that is, attacks occurred one-by-one, but were also part of a much larger national pattern. Sites in these countries tend to display objects related to the bare action-and-effect of these encounters – the weapons of the assailants, and the remains of their victims. They display what the perpetrators aimed to effect: lifelessness.

Memorial museums in Perm, Vilnius, Sighet, Budapest, Tallinn, Santiago and Buenos Aires based in detainment and torture centers also involve a sense of intimate violence; the systems of political terror aimed to produce compliance, through either the damaging or disposal of bodies. Where torture instruments are displayed, these are usually counterbalanced with testimonial from

survivors. While the idea of objects 'revealing the truth' is an aspect of all memorial museums, it is an especially pertinent oppositional strategy in memorial museums detailing histories of harsh suppression. They aim to foil what the perpetrators sought to effect: silence.

In contrast to visceral, somatic weaponry, cells and shackles, Hiroshima and Chernobyl produced (in starkly different contexts) forms of vaporization. What remained were the otherworldly effects of the nuclear fallout on everyday objects and streetscapes. The display of alienated objects produces a distancing effect from human actions, communicating unearthliness.

Terrorism in Oklahoma City, New York and Madrid similarly produced objects contextualized by the instant of the attacks. These events are defined more closely by the exact architecture of the violence – a government building, commercial tower, and transport hub, respectively – that housed (and were calculated by attackers to contribute to) carnage. Those objects recovered from the sites (and added to through spontaneous memorials) are intended to stand in as random, luckless fragments of lost lives.

From this preliminary synopsis we can anticipate the kinds of objects on display. But memorial museums face a challenge in this regard: while most visitors will arrive with some familiarity of the most notorious symbols of the atrocity, is it best that institutions foreground these as access points in the hope that they form a gateway to deeper understanding? Alternatively, should the particulars of any event (and especially those produced by offenders) be presented as merely circumstantial, so that visitors' attention is instead turned to larger principles such as political freedom or human injustice? While curators in memorial museums will seldom approach this issue through an either / or scheme, it is a useful frame for introducing the potential effects that the illumination of different categories of objects might engender.

1. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 22.

These ideas represent a short section from my forthcoming book [Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities \(2007\)](#) Oxford and New York: Berg