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Essay

September 11 and the Mourning After: Reflections on Collecting and Interpreting the History of Tragedy

JAMES B. GARDNER and SARAH M. HENRY

I

THE TERRORIST ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 caused people in all walks of life and institutions of every kind to reexamine their roles and responsi-

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bilities. For museum professionals, particularly those who deal with history as their subject, the self-examination has had a particularly poignant aspect. For many of us, our sense of obligation to the historic nature of the events and their aftermath combines uneasily with the sense that we are still too close to them to be able to judge clearly what is truly historically important. Historians, asked to provide context for these events, have had to consider whether history offers metaphors or perspective that can help us understand events that are still recent. Meanwhile, history museums are asked to act quickly to collect material whose significance we can only begin to assess.

These two aspects of the public history community's activities—collecting and interpreting—became the focal points of discussion at a meeting on October 4, 2001, at the Museum of the City of New York. Entitled “The Role of the History Museum in a Time of Crisis,” the meeting was co-sponsored by the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) and the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (NMAH). More than seventy people involved in public history attended, representing over thirty institutions. The participants discussed the dilemmas of collecting materials to document the tragedies, as well as the challenge to museums to present exhibitions and public programs that respond appropriately, sensitively, and in a useful way to the terrorist attacks and their aftermath. The two questions are distinct, but they are related in that both ask us to consider our obligations to the public. First, how do we fulfill our obligations to future audiences and future historians by collecting and preserving the raw material that can tell the stories that they will want and need to hear and tell? And, second, how do we fulfill our obligations to current audiences by telling stories that they want and need to hear now, in the aftermath of these apparently history-transforming events?

The meeting was a powerful experience in many ways. Several of the participants had been eyewitnesses to the tragedy; some had lost friends or colleagues; some had found their institutions directly responding to the attacks in unexpected ways, offering food, shelter, and medical care to dusty and bloodied people fleeing the disaster scene. Some had to figure out how to clean collections potentially contaminated by hazardous materials or human remains. All felt keenly their dual obligation to bring history to bear on the tragic present and to help to usher that still-raw present sensitively into “the past,” where it could be collected, preserved, and interpreted. All agreed on the need to avoid competitive collecting and recognized a shared responsibility to collect and interpret the events of September 11. Many

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noted that this was the first time that they had ever witnessed such a commitment to collaboration.

Recognizing the challenges that we all faced within our separate institutions and collectively, no one wanted to set up a new organization, yet we needed a way to communicate with each other and share information with the wider public. In the weeks that followed, MCNY and NMAH staff worked together to set up a public web site, www.911history.net, where institutions could post what they were doing and the public could post their ideas. We also established a listserv for interested museum and history professionals to discuss issues and concerns and share information on collecting, exhibitions, and programs. At the request of the larger group, we agreed to convene a steering committee to consider next steps for what we called informally the “9/11 History Consortium.”

II

The most passionately debated topic at the October 4 meeting was collecting: whether to collect at all—and if so, what to collect, and when or how we should move to collect materials that document what had happened on that late-summer morning and during the days and weeks that followed. It was clear that many of the dilemmas that confront collectors of materials from September 11 and its aftermath are no different from those that face any public historian trying to “collect the present.” On the one hand, material is more readily available when we act during or right after an event. On the other, it is not clear whether we have enough distance to tell what is important as events are unfolding. Some people also argue that we are better off relying on individual participants and witnesses to save what they see as significant and to offer their collections to museums at a later date.

But in many ways, as the October 4 meeting dramatized, the challenge of collecting the present appropriately and sensitively is particularly acute in the case of material from the September 11 events. The tragedy raised emotional issues for historians that compounded the problems created by the fact that the events were so recent. The task of ushering the tragic present into the historical past proved to be a professionally and personally trying one. On October 4, many seasoned public historians were feeling their way tentatively through waters that seemed largely uncharted. When rescue workers were still sifting through rubble seeking for survivors or for human remains, how could we even raise the question of preserving materials for posterity without appearing ghoulish, insensitive, or opportunistic? How could we balance the difficult questions raised by the memorial materials springing up in public places all over the country, when the task of preserving and protecting material seemed to conflict with its memorial uses? How and when should we begin to treat missing persons posters as

historic artifacts, when families might still be holding hopes that loved ones would be found alive? It should not be surprising that many historians experienced a kind of professional crisis of conscience, at least briefly. An epidemic of professional squeamishness seemed to be looming.

Fortunately, the outbreak was short-lived. The model set by our colleagues in the military history field helped. Accustomed to sending curators to document military action, the historical offices of the armed services acted quickly on the scene at the Pentagon, developing definitions of scope of work, defining collecting issues, and creating work plans. Another helpful influence was the fact that the public embraced the necessity of collecting faster than the historians. Institutions like the Museum of the City of New York, the National Museum of American History, the New York Fire Museum, the New-York and New Jersey Historical Societies, the New York State Museum, and many others quickly started receiving e-mails, calls, and letters from the public suggesting and offering items for their collection. And in December, Congress weighed in as well, charging NMAH with collecting and preserving artifacts relating to the September 11th attacks.

Still, the question of what and how much to collect remains a difficult one. Indeed, whatever squeamishness might have existed quickly evaporated before the sheer magnitude of the practical challenges of collecting. Particularly sensitive was the question of the public displays of mourning that had appeared in streets and public spaces around the country. In the weeks after the attacks, parts of New York City had been literally blanketed with makeshift memorials. Union Square had become a sea of candles, photographs, poems, works of art, personal memorabilia, stuffed animals, and political manifestos. It had become a virtual civic church—a place of pilgrimage, prayer, and protest. The Brooklyn Heights promenade, with a commanding view of the still-smoldering skyline, was similarly adorned. The Mayor's Family Assistance Center (first at the Armory on Lexington Avenue and then relocated to Pier 94), the exterior and interior of every firehouse, police station, hospital, and school, the gates of St. Paul's Chapel and Trinity Church, countless street corners, subway stations, phone booths, and building entryways—all held evidence of the outpouring of grief from within the city and around the country and the world. The display was echoed outside the Pentagon, and in other places around the country. The material was deeply felt and often highly evocative, but it could literally be measured by the ton.

What should the attitude of museum curators be toward these types of objects? In Oklahoma City and at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C., they have worked to collect the majority of such items. But in those cases, the materials were being accommodated by federal institutions charged under the National Park Service's mandate to manage memorials. History museums with different mandates have different concerns. Given limited resources, practical questions can be paramount. Can

we even process and house such vast quantities of material? How do we deal with the conservation issues raised by the ephemeral nature of the photocopies, marker drawings, flowers, and other materials that were used to make the memorials? Museums always have to balance the cost of taking responsibility for objects offered to their collections with the benefit of preserving them, and in this case the potential costs could be considerable. What is the best use of our resources?

There are also ethical issues to consider. Should museums be the ones to remove memorial materials from public view, even if the intention is to save them? A few weeks after the tragedies, Arnold Lehmann, director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, argued that removing the memorial materials from the public square into the more sanitized environment of a museum might do damage to their spontaneity and emotional message: “These posters and great collections of flowers and candles are the real thing. This is made up of tears. What happens if, figuratively, you put a box of plexiglass over it?”¹ Removing materials, even with the best intentions, could also put museums in the position of declaring emotional closure for the public long before many people were ready to move on. The problem was compounded by the fact that the public reacted with equal alarm to the removal of materials (for example when the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation cleared the first round of memorials from Union Square Park when the first major rain threatened) and to the deterioration of those materials left in place.

History museums and the historians who work in them thus find themselves in the unaccustomed and in many ways uncomfortable position of working at the intersection of grief and history. In addition to doing our usual work of collecting, preserving, and interpreting history, we are also filling a new emotional need for the public: the need to understand what it means to be living in a moment of historic proportions. Historians’ priorities are objects that tell stories, that evoke moments and lives, not simply fragments or relics of more emotional than historical value. But although we may see a clear difference there, the public does not. When members of the public propose that a museum collect some fragment or object that they feel holds special meaning, it is hard to dismiss their ideas as inappropriate without treading on deep emotions.

Many museums have been working hard to hit the right balance on the issue of the preservation of memorials. Important examples of this type of material are being saved, including Bellevue’s “Wall of Prayers,” the collage of missing persons posters, poems, prayers, and tributes that grew up on a construction wall outside the hospital in the days and weeks after September 11. It became an icon for the loss that New York City had experienced, and also of the unexpected role of spiritual healing that the medical community

1. *New York Daily News*, 1 October 2001.

found itself playing. It is now in the collection of the Museum of the City of New York, where it is being conserved with the advice of Smithsonian conservators. Other institutions, particularly the New York Fire Museum, as well as many private individuals, have been instrumental in collecting and archiving the massive quantity of memorial materials from around New York City.

It is important both historically and emotionally to preserve examples of these kinds of objects, but given the practical challenges of conservation, storage, and cataloguing, photo documentation may well be the preferred method to preserve the memory of the bulk of this material. For example, the New-York Historical Society worked with CityLore to photograph as many of the shrines as possible, and the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress collected photo documentation of memorial tributes that sprung up near the Pentagon and at the site of the World Trade Center disaster. Given the ephemeral nature of the materials and the practical problems of collecting, these photographs may be our best way to “collect” many of these objects.

Beyond these ethical and practical issues, serious questions about historical method and historical interpretation arise for institutions collecting objects of grief in large quantities. What exactly do missing persons posters, makeshift shrines, and commemorative art tell us about history? Certainly they are evidence of the grief evoked by the terrorist events, and they also tell us something about how our society mourns and copes with tragedy. Moreover, there is a point to collecting what people value and think is important—that is part of the story as well. On a more emotional level, it may be helpful for museums to be places where people can come to try to understand and reflect on our own society’s grief. Such reflection may be part of the collective healing process, as we review and remember how we felt and how we reacted, and try to grasp the enormity of the tragedies and their effects on us.

But how much do we need to tell that particular story, among all the stories of September 11? As emotionally evocative as the missing persons posters, spontaneous memorials, and commemorative art may be, they do not tell all the stories that we need to tell. The public’s attention has naturally been riveted on the material that evokes the most emotion, the objects that were created in order to express grief or to tell a story. But other objects, which were never intended to be artifacts of the tragedies, may well be better evidence of them. If indeed the terrorist attacks and their aftermath were the history-making events that many claim them to be—and even perhaps if they were not—the stories that need to be told and written about by historians in the future will be far more complicated than they may appear now.

Some important efforts to address these issues are underway. For example, the World Trade Center Emergency Documentary Task Force, a

collaboration of archival institutions organized by the New York Archivists' Roundtable, has defined its agenda broadly, including not only the search and rescue effort but also the role of government relief agencies, labor unions, the business community, residential communities, communications systems, arts organizations, transportation agencies, and others in responding to the disaster, as well as the effects the attacks had on them. The "September 11 Digital Archive" (a project of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and the American Social History Project of the City University of New York Graduate Center) is collecting e-mail and web-based records, along with oral histories that document the experience of diverse communities in relation to the attacks. Other oral history projects are underway at the South Street Seaport Museum, the Library of Congress, Columbia University, and elsewhere. Historians and history museums will need to continue to address the longer-term and more difficult stories of these events—the mobilization of the American people, the disruptions of daily life, the military response, the detentions and violations of civil liberties, and discrimination and racism, not to mention the anthrax scare that followed in October, threatening to paralyze our mail system.

And what about the context, life before the attacks—how do we put September 11 into historical perspective? Do we collect "normal"? What objects will help us understand the depth of anger and hatred that led to the attacks? September 11 did not just "happen," and we cannot understand it or come to terms with it apart from that historical context. At the October 4 meeting, Kenneth Jackson of the New-York Historical Society and Columbia University argued that this event was going to be the most documented ever in human history. If that is the case, then it will be inevitably used as a window into issues well beyond the specific events of September 11 and their immediate aftermath. Every historian knows that the inadvertent or unconscious evidence embedded in the historic record can be the most interesting and revealing material for understanding the past. What those will be in this instance we cannot say, but a broad-based collecting effort has the best chance at including the rich evidence that will support the broadest historical understanding in the future.

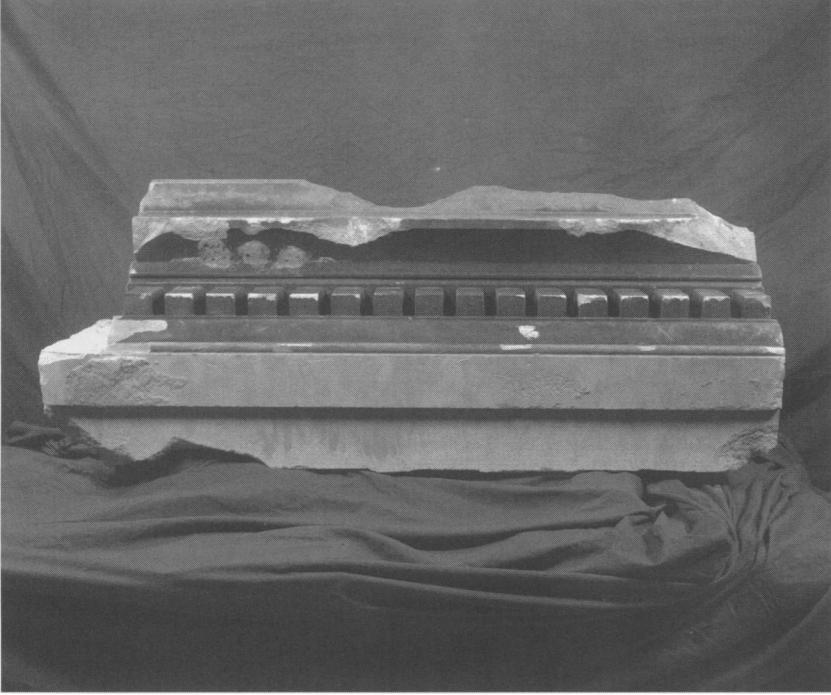
The difficult task of balancing these issues has been made somewhat easier by the lessons we have learned from others charged with curating tragedy. In the midst of our desire to provide perspective, context, and interpretation, we are reminded by the work of public historians at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, at the National Civil Rights Museum, at the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and elsewhere, that the emotional impact for the visitor of being physically confronted with the raw material of history can be a powerful step in the process of questioning and understanding broader issues. Pure emotion may not be

enough for historians and museums, but it is a critical first step, and the sheer power of some of the objects of grief cannot be underestimated. Both the disaster and the mourning after need to be analyzed.

III

Beyond individual institutions, the collaboration that began on October 4 began to bear fruit when, at the larger group's request, MCNY and NMAH convened a steering committee to consider next steps for the group. Representatives of institutions with broad historical mandates and broad collecting missions from the New York and Washington, D.C. areas met in early November to discuss what types of further collaboration would be most useful. As it happened, that meeting coincided with growing concern that the fast pace of the demolition work at Ground Zero was threatening the possibility of preserving significant parts of the history embodied and embedded in the debris. The top priority of that meeting became making certain that appropriate objects from the World Trade Center would be preserved rather than sent off to scrap heaps and landfills. Speaking on behalf of the larger group, NMAH, MCNY, the New Jersey Historical Society, the New York Fire Museum, the New-York Historical Society, and the New York State Museum sent a resolution to the Port Authority (the owners of the World Trade Center) urging that they work with an ad hoc committee to identify and set aside objects that would evoke both the terrorist attacks and the individuals who died. The Port Authority's positive response initiated an ongoing collaboration in which historians and curators have played an important role in the salvage effort.

Not surprisingly, actually retrieving material from the disaster site in New York has proved to be logistically complex, but it has been gratifying to see how quickly the various agencies have understood the importance of this effort. It is to the credit of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, for example, that they acted early on to establish a team of their own to salvage materials for a possible memorial. The large, aesthetically striking structural pieces that they selected tell an important story—the drama of the buildings themselves, and the catastrophic effect of the attacks on the materials of which they were made. Before any historian entered the process, they had already made a concerted effort to identify pieces of visual and narrative interest that could be a part of a future memorial, including crushed emergency vehicles, twisted pieces of metal, bits of the dramatic pieces of the north tower that stood eight stories tall, I-beams bent into horseshoes. These pieces speak to the tremendous physical forces unleashed by the attacks, forces that distorted some of the strongest materials on earth in ways that no human had ever been able to do before.



Smithsonian Photo by Hugh Talman 2002-5652

This piece of the Pentagon's limestone facade was damaged and charred in the September 11 attack. It appears in NMAH's exhibition *September 11: Bearing Witness to History*, connecting visitors to the devastating impact of the crash of hijacked American Airlines Flight 77. Transfer from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Pentagon Renovation Program. (Photo by Hugh Talman, courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.)

Once they were contacted by representatives of the museum consortium, the Port Authority team was quick to understand that historians and museums might look at the debris differently, to tell different stories. Aesthetics aside, small remnants of material from the building could speak to the human stories and histories that took place within and around the World Trade Center, both before, on, and after September 11, 2001. Analogies from Hiroshima and the Holocaust illustrated the point dramatically. The power of ordinary objects to illustrate extraordinary moments speaks powerfully through such objects as Shigeru Orimen's lunchbox, on display at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, or the thousands of shoes from the Nazi prison camp in Majdanek, Poland, on display at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Everyone quickly understood that sometimes the most seemingly ordinary or unremarkable objects are the ones that speak most eloquently about the human experience of tragedy.



In NMAH's *September 11: Bearing Witness to History*, this floor number sign from the 102nd floor of the World Trade Center provides context for individual escape and rescue stories. Gift of the Police Department, City of New York. (Photograph by Hugh Talman, courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.)

At the outset of the process, it was hard to know what we might find amidst the debris. In fact, every agency that we contacted in this salvage effort asked for a “shopping list” from the buildings, so that they could make sure to salvage the right kinds of items. Although we carefully explained that this is not generally the methodology of historians, “We’ll know it when we see it” was not a particularly useful guideline for either our own collecting efforts or to guide the efforts of the Port Authority, the Police Department, or other entities with jurisdiction. Curators at the New York State Museum and the New-York Historical Society helped to draw up a list of items that we hoped to find: clocks frozen to the time of the collapse, floor directories, emergency stairway handrails, primary election day notices, items from foreign companies that were tenants in the building, artifacts suggestive of the office culture and camaraderie that was lost—coffee apparatus, bulletin boards, or office decor.

In fact, to no historian’s surprise, the process of identifying objects has been far more improvisational and haphazard than this systematic exercise



Jerry Henson, head of the Interagency Support Branch in the Navy Command Center, was wearing this clothing when he was trapped under a heavy pile of debris in his Pentagon office. The story of his rescue illustrates the heroic actions that characterized September 11. Gift of Jarrell Henson. (Photograph by Hugh Talman, courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.)

suggested. Repeated trips to Ground Zero and to the Fresh Kills landfill led to the tagging of WTC signage, file cabinets, pages of a wall calendar, elevator gears, abandoned bicycles, signs from tenants, crushed emergency vehicles, along with many examples of the twisted structural debris that makes up the vast majority of the rubble. Most of the material from the two towers was destroyed in the disaster; as demolition proceeded, more material was revealed or unearthed every day. In many instances, safety issues limited the amount or types of material that could be removed from the wreckage, and plans to retrieve materials from the concourse level were limited by the assessments of structural engineers, who deemed much of it too unsafe to enter after a certain point in the removal effort.

Not only did we have to deal with the safety of retrieving the materials and the relationship of the salvage effort to the demolition and recovery effort, but

there has also been the question of the relationship of the material from the site to the investigations being conducted by the FBI and the NYPD. Here again, the precedent of the Oklahoma City effort and its relationship to laws of abandoned property and treatment of evidence have been useful guideposts. Looking forward, there is also great concern about how to decontaminate the objects from the disaster. With assistance from industrial hygienists working with the Smithsonian, the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), and the Arts, Theater and Crafts Safety committee of AIC (ACTS), we have been learning about the challenges facing us in terms of removing asbestos, fiber-glass fibers, PCBs, heavy metals, and other toxic materials.

Finally, successful collecting in this area required unraveling complex legal and bureaucratic knots. The bureaucratic issues were, of course, complicated by the fact that a multitude of government agencies on the city, state, and national levels were mobilized in a very short time to address a national crisis of unprecedented proportions. Few, if any, working within the system understood the entirety of the crisis management or recovery efforts. The result was a series of overlapping agencies all of which were involved in one way or another with the cleanup efforts. None of them were obstructionist on the issue of historical collecting—indeed, it was heartening that each one responded with immediate support and understanding of why this issue is important. But no one of them had the authority to finalize arrangements for collecting efforts. Their hesitation to act was sharpened by their fears about liability in releasing materials, given concerns about ascertaining ownership or addressing safety issues. Overall, considering how much confusion reigned in so many areas after September 11, it is not surprising that it has been hard for historians to sort out how best to get their issues on the agenda. Despite these challenges, museums in the coalition have been able to retrieve important objects from amidst the millions of tons of debris that had been the World Trade Center. Among the objects that are being preserved are fragments of police, fire, EMT, and other vehicles, dozens of pieces of debris, various small personal objects, architectural details, and an entire crushed fire engine, which is now in the collections of the New York State Museum.

The broader collecting process will continue for a long time. The challenges now remain much the same as they were on October 4. How do we make sure that all the stories of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath are documented? How do we fulfill our obligations to future historians? Prognostication is uncomfortable for historians, who often feel hesitant analyzing the recent past or the present, let alone the future. And yet we have had to project ourselves into the position of future researchers, perhaps guided by our own experience as researchers, to collect ambitiously, to leave a record not only of the events themselves but of how the tragedies of September 11 are interwoven into the fabric of the social, economic, political, and cultural life of early twenty-first-century America.

IV

While collecting speaks to how the September 11 terrorist attacks become and inform history, the other business of museums—interpreting—also speaks to the reverse dynamic: how history helps us to understand and contextualize these tragic events. To put it another way, if collecting is about our obligation to future audiences and scholars, programming raises the question of our obligation to the present. In the months since September 11, museums of all kinds have reconsidered their exhibition and public programming schedules in light of the new context.

Many museums recognized that they had an important place in the process of civic healing. The weekend after the tragedies, the *New York Times* reported that New Yorkers were returning to museums to find respite—solace in beauty, escape from the harsh realities by which they had been bombarded. But we recognized that they also turned to museums as a place for contemplation and reflection on what had just transpired, and that we as institutions needed to acknowledge and in some sense pay homage to the tragedies we had all experienced.

Several institutions started with simple gestures—providing opportunities for visitors to contribute their own reflections by writing in memory books, by lighting candles, by drawing pictures. This allowed visitors to participate, not simply to observe, and acknowledged that the museum’s voice is not the only one that should be heard. Many museums opened for special hours or free of charge, collected donations of blood or money for the relief efforts, or opened special places for contemplation. Several started public programs to begin addressing context and providing different perspectives. For example, the National Museum of American History put together a series of monthly noontime discussions for the public and staff that brought historical perspective to bear on contemporary issues and concerns growing out of the terrorist attacks. The New-York Historical Society scheduled a series of public conversations about September 11 and history. The Museum of the City of New York created an area on its website called “Virtual Union Square,” which invited visitors to contribute their artwork, photos, or remembrances in the way that New Yorkers adorned Union Square in the days after the tragedies. And, to mark the first anniversary of the attacks, on September 11, 2002, museums across the country are developing programs that examine American freedoms as part of a day of remembrance sponsored by the American Association of Museums and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

New exhibitions were also planned in response to the tragedies. Museums received proposal after proposal to create memorials to the victims within their walls. Although history museum curators understand that the task of memorialization is something quite different from the historian’s usual task of interpretation, individual museums have addressed the issue in different ways. For some, it was clear that memorialization in the face of

this enormous tragedy is part of their museum's mission as a cultural institution and a part of the public sphere. For example, in late November, 2001, the New York State Museum created a memorial to the victims of the World Trade Center attack in their Terrace Gallery, in the form of silhouettes of the twin towers made up of small bronzed elements suspended in two 20-foot high windows, representing all of the individuals lost. In contrast, the National Museum of American History initially emphasized that it engages in interpretation and providing historical perspective, not memorializing the past, which they saw as an exercise in evoking emotion, not providing meaning. But the NMAH has subsequently moved forward with the development of a first-anniversary exhibition that is more memorial than interpretive. At a time of tremendous, almost overwhelming outpouring of public grief, this has been, on all sides, a hard line to tread. How do museums maintain critical distance without seeming cold-hearted? How do we remain compassionate without sacrificing the perspective that our institutions bring to the process of understanding the past and the present?

Several institutions worked quickly to create special exhibitions that reflect directly or indirectly on the tragedies themselves. The New York Fire Museum created an ever-changing display of the memorial material from the disaster and mourning, as well as a special installation called "New York—Beyond Their Wings," photographs of a fire company days before the attack paired with images of the World Trade Center collapse and its immediate aftermath. The New-York Historical Society's "History Responds" is planned as a multi-year series, including a show of photographs of the tragedy by Magnum photographers, an exhibition called *Missing: The Streetscape and Wordscape of a City in Mourning* of photos of the memorials by CityLore, and many others. The South Street Seaport Museum will open *All Available Boats: Harbor Voices and Images 9.11.01*, on the port workers who helped to evacuate people fleeing lower Manhattan on that tragic day. The Museum of the City of New York is staging an exhibition of photographs commemorating the spirit of the New York Fire Department called *Brotherhood*, inspired by the book of the same name, as well as a first-anniversary exhibition of children's art in collaboration with the New York Child Study Center entitled *The Day Our World Changed*. The National Museum of American History's first-anniversary exhibition is entitled *September 11: Bearing Witness to History*, and will include objects from all three attack sites. A traveling exhibition called *Missing: Last Seen at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001* is taking a sampling of missing persons posters on a national tour.

Other exhibitions have reflected on the history of the World Trade Center itself, including the now-homeless Skyscraper Museum's exhibition on the history of the Twin Towers, to be displayed at the New-York Historical Society, or the National Building Museum's exhibition *Twin*

Towers Remembered, of thirty years of Camilo José Vergara's photographs of the World Trade Center, which also traveled to the New-York Historical Society.

A separate and very important question is how history museums can use history in a way that is useful to their public in the present context. It is really one of the oldest questions in our profession—does history actually help us understand the present? Many museums looked into their collections to try to understand what in our history can help us at this time of crisis. The National Museum of American History put on display Norman Rockwell's World War II-era *Four Freedoms* posters, noting that they came from very different times and circumstances but offering them as inspiration and evidence of our resilience as a people. The Museum of the City of New York also emphasized the theme of resilience through a new exhibition called *Manhattan Skylines*, exploring the changing skyline over the past century and more. The Museum of American Financial History collaborated with the U. S. Department of the Treasury to develop an installation reflecting on the history of patriotism called *Bonds of Patriotism* in the storefront windows of Macy's on Herald Square, while the Asia Society looked at the history of Afghanistan in *Through Afghan Eyes: A Visual Journey of a Community in Conflict, 1987–1995*.

The impact of these events went beyond newly planned exhibits and programs—many museums also have had to grapple with the ways that existing and planned offerings take on new dimensions and unintended meanings. For example, NMAH's exhibition *A More Perfect Union*, on the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, has taken on new relevance in the context of suspicion and mistreatment of Arab Americans today. At the MCNY, the exhibition *A Community of Many Worlds: Arab Americans in New York* also took on an added significance in the new circumstances, and it was expanded into an exhibition space three times the size of the original and rewritten to address the changed context. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the American Museum of Natural History have also used their programming to promote tolerance toward Muslim and Arab Americans.

In some cases, the changed context gave curators some pause. For example, the NMAH found itself facing unexpected concerns with respect to *July 1942: United We Stand*, which opened in March 2002. Under development for several years, this exhibit grew out of the institution's ongoing commitment to interpreting the history and meaning of the flag, but the new context of September 11 and ardent patriotism shifted its meaning and weight. Developed to tell the story of a patriotic campaign by magazine publishers sixty years ago, it took on contemporary meaning connected to current efforts to mobilize the American public and honor those fighting for their country. And although no parallel to World War II mobilization was intended, that may be what visitors see.

These specific exhibitions and programs are just the earliest round of responses to the recent events. The questions that they raise will persist: How do we do our work as public historians in this new climate? As the nation rallies in response to terrorism, how do we avoid getting caught up in a wave of celebratory, uncritical patriotism? Can we avoid jingoism and propaganda? Can we achieve the balance and perspective essential to our role as historians and educators? Can we do good history in this climate? How do we balance the need for historical distance with the sense of urgency that we do something more substantive soon? And what would that “something” be? Should we do no more than share whatever objects we collect with only minimal interpretation? Should we venture into the potentially treacherous territory of historical analogies and parallels? Can we bring historical perspective to this time of crisis? Should we focus less on the events of September 11 and more on the need for tolerance and respect for difference in this time of crisis? Dare we raise alternatives to war? Or the reasons for anti-Americanism?

The challenge for history museums is to steer a course that responds to the needs and concerns of the public without compromising our commitment to making meaning of the past. But then that is always our goal. What is different with September 11 is the level of emotion that constitutes the context for our work. As historians and curators, we are often uncomfortable with emotion—we prefer the safety of historical interpretation. But we cannot retreat into that safe haven. In the aftermath of September 11, we face new challenges to our sense of our work and ourselves as professionals, and it is critical that we respond to those challenges thoughtfully and positively, embracing the opportunity to help our visitors understand these tragic events and contributing to the nation’s healing.