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# No safe spaces: Notes on the National September 11 Museum

## ABSTRACT

*This article examines how the National September 11 Museum – and particularly its core Historical Exhibition – tells a specific narrative about 9/11 and also signals to viewers how to respond to that narrative. The museum’s design strategies are ‘read’ as an expression of one version of the September 11 narrative reflecting distinctive sensibilities and susceptibilities in post-9/11 American culture. Through a descriptive walk-through informed by the museum design team’s behind-the-scenes commentary, the article explores how the museum achieves its effects and their wider implications. At every level, the museum is deeply rooted in contemporary national conversations about security. Far more than a tourist attraction, the museum is also a powerful spatial, physical reflection of the current shape of the September 11 narrative in America as well as post-9/11 America’s deepest anxieties and challenges.*

## KEYWORDS

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World Trade Center  
trauma  
memorials  
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trigger warnings

The travel website TripAdvisor lists the National September 11 Memorial & Museum as #4 of 949 ‘things to do in New York City’. The museum alone ranks #2 of 250 such institutions in New York City, just after the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Tripadvisor.com 2016). For the many thousands of visitors every day, the Memorial & Museum complex in downtown Manhattan is

1. According to the National 9/11 Memorial & Museum, 300,000 people visited the Museum in the first month it opened and over four million in its first year (see <http://2014.911memorial.org/>; Associated Press 2014).

central to the way they experience the city as well as their understanding of the events that have become known collectively as '9/11'.<sup>1</sup> Since the museum opened its doors to the general public in May of 2014, it has served as a stop on a tour of New York, an educational institution, an architectural landmark, a place of mourning and a repository of unidentified human remains. Visitors to the museum include tourists from near and far, locals, families and friends of victims, survivors, campaigning politicians and more. Within each of these demographics, feelings about the museum vary widely. No other site in New York City is so charged with recent calamitous history, so fearfully symbolic, and so controversial in its every move. For example, in April of 2016 alone, the museum made headlines twice, first when one of its guards stopped a group of students on a field trip from singing the National Anthem on the concourse, and again when Donald Trump visited the site for the first time in defence of his 'New York values'.

From its inception, the idea of a museum dedicated to 9/11 raised concerns about how the story of that day would be told and – even more so – the effect it could have on visitors, and not only visitors who had a firsthand connection to September 11. Museum spokespeople often invoke this statistic, giving it pride of place as the first expository wall text in the museum itself: '[i]t is estimated that two billion people – nearly a third of the world's population – witnessed the events of September 11, 2001 in real time, simultaneously'. Although psychologists continue to debate whether the emotional impact of watching catastrophic events on television or online – 'vicarious' or 'secondary' trauma (Reuben 2015) – could be comparable to experiencing them in person, what is clear is that the destruction of the World Trade Center is considered to be a collective devastation, and the museum treats it as such.

More than a decade after the event, there remains an assumption that the mere presentation of material about September 11 would be traumatic for many visitors. In the early stages of planning, Joseph Daniels, the National September 11 Memorial & Museum President and CEO, stated that the museum's mission was to 'transmit the truth without being absolutely crushed by it. [...] We don't want to retraumatize people' (quoted in Cohen 2012). Museum director Alice Greenwald articulated the problem as 'how to shape a memorial museum that would offer a safe environment in which to explore difficult history' (2014); media designer Jake Barton emphasized the team's effort to assure visitors' 'psychological safety' (quoted in Peltz 2014). *Wired* reported that the museum's Board feared that its exhibitions 'risked becoming one massive trigger for victims and a trauma in its own right for everyone else' (Kuang 2014). The rhetoric around the museum – 'safety', 'trauma' and 'trigger' – indicates how important it was to the museum's design team and Board to foresee and attend to visitors' emotional experience. To enter the National September 11 Memorial & Museum is to be drawn physically and emotionally into the story it tells. In what it includes and excludes, through its architecture and design, the museum anticipates, manages and even creates visitors' responses to its content: that is, it produces not just a certain body of knowledge about September 11, but also cultivates particular responses in its visitors and forestalls others. In this article, I will examine how the museum – and particularly its core Historical Exhibition – tells a specific narrative about 9/11 and also signals to viewers how to respond to that narrative.

Most critics of the museum have tended to fixate on points about its underground location, its gift shop, its inept use of a Virgil quote, its high admission fee and other practices deemed ethically dodgy or tacky. To be

sure, the pressures on the museum's administration, designers and curators have been myriad, and the vehemence of some constituencies has been fierce. It would be impossible to design an institution dedicated to 9/11 that pleased everyone, and the museum today is elegant and forceful, informative and moving. My goal here is not to fault the museum for specific failings but rather to 'read' the museum's design strategies as an expression of one version of the September 11 narrative that also reflects distinctive sensibilities and susceptibilities in post-9/11 American culture. Through a descriptive walk-through informed by its design team's behind-the-scenes commentary, I will explore how the museum achieves its effects and their wider implications.<sup>2</sup> At every level, the museum is deeply rooted in contemporary national conversations about security that are especially revealing. Far more than a tourist attraction, the museum is also a powerful spatial, physical reflection of the current shape of the September 11 narrative in America as well as post-9/11 America's deepest anxieties and challenges.

A visit to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum begins with a security screening. Although this has become routine for urban public attractions, the National September 11 Memorial & Museum's security apparatus is much more elaborate than most, more akin to an airport than a museum. Beyond the standard bag check, it requires all visitors to walk through magnetometers or pass hand-wand inspection. Americans have become accustomed to this high-alert post-9/11 climate, from the 'If You See Something Say Something' ad campaign to the Homeland Security Advisory System, with its bands of red, orange, yellow, blue and green. The latter was put into place in 2001 and retired ten years later after a steady stream of criticism for making people nervous without conveying any substantial information. Save a brief – and now almost comical – period in 2003 when the Department of Homeland Security raised the alert level to orange and advised Americans to stock up on duct tape and plastic sheeting as a prophylactic against terrorism (Meserve 2003), the coloured alerts, as one terrorism expert put it, 'don't tell people what they can do – they just make people afraid' (quoted in Chandler 2015). In 2011 the Department of Home Security rolled out the National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS), in which an 'elevated' alert warned of a 'credible terrorism threat' and an 'imminent' alert signalled 'a credible, specific, and impending terrorism threat against the US'. Neither was ever used because they had 'such a high bar' for activation. Shortly after the San Bernardino and Paris attacks in 2015, the US Department of Homeland Security announced that it would be making its third major modification in the national terrorist alert system, adding 'Bulletins' as a means of addressing the 'new phase' of global terrorism in which 'not having a specific credible piece of intelligence specifying a plot isn't the end of the story' (Dockterman 2015). The new 'pop up terrorism' is figured as an open-ended narrative with no clear plot points and no temporal or spatial containment: it could happen anywhere, any time. The resultant 'heightened security posture' is a hallmark of post-9/11 culture that is incorporated into the National September 11 Memorial & Museum.

The security screening at the museum shares with the aforementioned programmes the paradoxical quality of both promising safety and raising alarm. The ostensibly reassuring act of passing through security is dramatically reprised later in the museum in the Historical Exhibition, which screens videos of the September 11 hijackers clearing airport security with the weapons they used to take control of the planes. In that display, visitors are reminded of the cascade of failures in protocol; thus the portal to the museum, with

2. For those who have not visited the museum, there is a valuable 360-degree reconstruction by cs3Design Inc. on the museum's homepage. It does not, however, include the Historical Exhibition. There is some footage of the interior of the exhibition in features on wired.com (2014) and Chung (2014).

its rite of seeming protection, simultaneously signals the precarious conception of security – security that must be constantly asserted but is never fully achieved – in post-9/11 America.

After passing through the security gauntlet at the entrance of the museum and through the lobby, the first display is an installation entitled 'We Remember'. A series of staggered floor to ceiling screens with digital projections of a world map presents voices from many countries recounting how they experienced, saw or heard about the events of 9/11. The words are displayed on the screens and also played as audio, a 'soundscape' of overlapping accounts from around the world. 'I'll never forget where I was that day' one person begins and another picks up; one trails off with '[w]hat's going to happen next?'

Most people experienced 9/11 in an overwhelmingly visual way. The planes crashing, the buildings collapsing, the blanket of grey ash that cast the city into darkness and the smoking wreckage afterward were the dominant images through which the event was witnessed and were broadcast live and then looped over and over in the hours and days and weeks that followed. 'We Remember' noticeably eschews those familiar images. With only a diagram of the plane attacks and a schematic world map, printed and spoken words are the dominant media. 'We Remember' eases visitors into the violence of the day while cushioned by a sense of global unity. As visitors move through the museum, though, that sense of unity falls away; in its place is a feeling of increasing fragmentation and an emphasis on personal and national safety.

A ramp of dark polished wood leads visitors downward to the foundation level of the Twin Towers, 70 feet underground. The overall spatial direction of the museum is downward and inward. Visitors descend at the same time that they move gradually closer to the interior of the museum and its most charged spaces. In a massive, brightly lit area called the Foundation Hall, monumental artefacts with heroic names such as The Last Column and The Survivor's Staircase loom, along with an enormous American flag and the 60-foot slurry wall that kept the Hudson River from flooding the area. There are no recorded voices or sound effects here: only the silence of these massive objects. Wall texts describe them as 'foundations of resilience, hope, and community with which we might build our collective future'. Visitors mill around the open space of the Foundation Hall and pose for photographs with a mangled fire engine, a piece of steel that survived a plane's impact and searing fire, and other relics that produce an impression of resilience despite the damage to which they bear witness.

This impression changes abruptly as visitors move from the vast open area of the Foundation Hall to the Historical Exhibition, a conspicuously enclosed space at the centre of the north side of the bedrock level. A tall, freestanding black metal sign marks the approach:

Visitors are advised that the exhibition presents images and content reflecting the violence of the attacks and their consequences. The exhibition may not be appropriate for visitors 10 years old and younger. Adults accompanying younger visitors should exercise discretion before entering.

The Museum's website contains a similar warning: 'Please note: The historical exhibition may not be appropriate for visitors younger than 10 years of age. Adults accompanying younger visitors should exercise discretion before entering' (9/11 Memorial & Museum 'What to Expect').

An icon and note prohibit photography in the Historical Exhibition. It is one of only three areas (along with the time-lapse film *Rebirth at Ground Zero* and the 'In Memoriam' area, which features portraits of victims) where photography is not allowed. The Historical Exhibition is housed beyond the sign and behind a dark wall surrounded by a several foot wide perimeter of rough stone on the floor lit from above by an overhanging marble slab.<sup>3</sup> The floor perimeter is bordered on both sides by black iron guardrails. Altogether, the effect is that of a recessed inner core enclosed by multiple layers of fortification. Designer Jake Barton referred to the border around the Historical Exhibition as 'the envelope' containing disquieting content within (wired.com 2014). A path, also flanked by guardrails, bridges the stone perimeter and leads to the entrance of the space, which visitors pass into by way of a revolving glass door. The Historical Exhibition is thus marked repeatedly as requiring special prudence and deliberation.

Greenwald and her team of designers have discussed the Historical Exhibition, in which most of the museum's most controversial material is displayed, as a thorny design challenge. She explained,

[w]e made the decision to segregate the history exhibit in the largest enclosed space at bedrock. From a visitor experience logic, it meant that people could come to this place and make the choice of whether or not they were ready or they wanted to go into the history exhibit, where we have to tell the story and the story involves difficult material.

(wired.com 2014)

One might ask why a visitor, having chosen to attend a museum dedicated to September 11, would then opt out of the Historical Exhibition. What is the value of a visit to a museum dedicated to September 11 that does not include historical exposition? Without the historical frame, the displays in the museum are anecdotal and spectacle driven: the scattered global narratives of 'We Remember', the ephemera and artefacts such as the 'Missing' posters and the titans of the Foundation Hall, are all presented with minimal context. Without the Historical Exhibition, a visitor's experience of the museum is also uninformed by any sense of how or why these acts of destruction happened, and the human, bodily dimension of that destruction is only minimally marked.

For visitors who do make the decision to pass beyond the advisory sign, over the bridge and through the revolving door, there are still more explicit and conspicuous warnings ahead, and more opportunities to leave. The exhibition is divided into three parts: 'The Day of 9/11', 'Before 9/11' and 'After 9/11'. That temporal but non-chronological arrangement reflects the circuitous, often backtracking, fashion in which the museum tells the historical narrative of September 11. 'The Day of 9/11' unfolds along a series of timelines from 8:46 to 9:02 marked on the walls. The layout is strongly reminiscent of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, with its chronologies and multiple resettings of the clock as it traces each of the hijacked planes' trajectories. Space narrows and the flow of visitors is directed more intensively inside the Historical Exhibition than in any other part of the museum. The corridors are restrictive and circular. Initially guiding visitors in a clockwise fashion for 'The Day of 9/11' display, the exhibit then pivots in a counterclockwise direction for 'Before 9/11' and 'After 9/11', doubling back upon itself. These subtle but moderately disorienting temporal and spatial arrangements are underscored by the cacophonous and graphically

3. This can be seen in *Wired's What Remains* video at 1:26-1:31 (wired.com 2014).

4. In 2012, the *New York Times* reported the Museum's use of the term (Cohen 2012). Later, outlets such as NBC reported that 'The museum also has what it calls "early exits"' (NBC 2014).
5. David Layman in an April 2016 e-mail.

dense atmosphere of the Historical Exhibition. The sounds and sights that had been largely separate in 'We Remember' and the Foundation Hall are combined as wailing sirens and tapes of desperate phone calls compete for attention with vitrines of fragile items and devastating photographs. Whereas earlier points in the museum focused visitors on a discrete object/sound/image at a time, the Historical Exhibition takes a more kinetic approach.

It is at this point that the Museum deploys its most unusual strategy of 'psychological safety'. Near images of planes crashing and a large photograph of smoke streaming out of the North Tower with 'people at windows and near the edges of the impact zone, some signalling for help by waving white cloths', there is an emergency door along with a separate door marked by a light blue rectangular placard inviting visitors to 'USE THIS DOOR TO LEAVE THE EXHIBITION EARLY'. The Visitor Map uses the same language to indicate four such doors through which visitors can depart the Historical Exhibition midway. Although the sign at the entryway addresses 'children under 10' as those for whom the content might not be appropriate, the early exits suggest that the material might prove overwhelming for adults as well. Jake Barton has remarked that

[t]he layout of the museum [...] tries very hard to be sensitive to visitors, to signal within the exhibition where there was challenging material and even more challenging material. So if and when someone does feel overwhelmed, we wanted to find a way that visitors could make their way out quickly and not be retraumatized as they were exiting. So we developed these things with the exhibition team called 'emotional exits'. Ways that people could exit and go into a safe, neutral zone [...].

(wired.com 2014)

'Emotional exit' was superseded by the more neutral 'early exit',<sup>4</sup> the term used by designer David Layman, who has been credited with developing this feature for the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. Layman explains that this is one of a number of techniques (including 'by-pass[es], blinds, alcoves, digital controls, view-throughs, sensory substitution, etc.') that can be used 'to deal with the visitor path in order to provide options to visitors for by-passing to varying degrees potentially emotionally disturbing content'. The early exit, as deployed in the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, he remarked,

is in one sense a fairly drastic technique that assumes the content is so emotionally devastating, so relentless, and cannot be otherwise mitigated; the option must be provided to the visitors to completely extricate themselves from the exhibit at one or multiple points. Given the magnitude of the tragedy of the 9/11 attack, there was no question but that these needed to be provided.<sup>5</sup>

Before examining the details of the museum's early exits, it is instructive to consider how other institutions handle similarly sensitive exhibitions. Layman notes that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC and the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City both deploy early exits. Edward T. Linenthal offers a detailed account of the USHMM, remarking on how explicit and violent photographs of victims on video-monitors are

hidden behind 'privacy walls', designed to limit exposure: visitors walk up to the walls and peer over to the monitors. This resolved the lingering issue of how the exhibit should accommodate children, and also resolved uncertainty regarding the presentation of horror.

(Linenthal 2001: 196)

James E. Young, whose scholarship on Holocaust memorials around the world has been highly influential and who was a member of the jury that chose Michael Arad's 'Reflecting Absence' design for the September 11 memorial, notes that the Dallas Memorial Center for Holocaust Studies 'has an "early exit" for survivors who may not want to walk through an actual box car on their way to the rest of the exhibition'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum offers visitors the option of skipping a reenactment of a meeting that took place the morning of 19 April 1995 that features the only live audiotape of the explosions.

Versions of early exits are built into all sorts of American public attractions that expose visitors to intense experiences, from museums to amusement parks and haunted houses. However, most of the examples of early exits in memorial museums cited by experts are Holocaust related, and all are American: Layman remarks, 'I know of no non-American museums that employ an early-exit technique'.<sup>7</sup> What does it mean that countries that have been devastated by violence on a far greater scale than September 11 do not feel the need to provide visitors with early exits and 'segregated' historical presentations (e.g. European Holocaust museums), while these techniques of caution seem to be mandatory in American memorial museums at present? The Historical Exhibition, like the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in general, is deliberately *not* immersive or interactive in its approach. It includes no sense-impressions other than hearing and seeing. Tom Hennes of Thinc Design, which played a key role in the museum, explained,

[i]t's not about screams and sirens. You're at the site, but you never lose sense of the fact that you're there today, not back then. The there and then of the day comes through testimony, not immersive experience, which would be sensationalizing and exploitative, and potentially traumatizing.

(quoted in Davidson 2014)

This approach does effectively keep the material at a distance, but it contributes to the sense of a bloodless, disembodied experience. One might contrast it with the display of shoes at the USHMM in DC, the smells at London's Imperial War Museum's immersive trench warfare display, or the photographs of bodies and objects destroyed by the atomic blast at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, none of which is sensationalizing but nevertheless powerfully affect visitors. Clearly, the current expectations and standards for American memorial institutions – for their audiences' psychological threshold and resilience – are different than other countries.

The first two early exits in the National September 11 Memorial & Museum appear in 'The Day of 9/11' section; the other two are located in the 'Before 9/11' part. The second early exit appears in conjunction with material that Greenwald and her team describe as the most controversial and likely to be upsetting to visitors. An alcove display called 'Inside the World Trade Center' is prefaced by a small placard with light text against a black

6. In an April 2016 e-mail Young wrote,

[o]ff the top of my head, I can really think of only two other, both Holocaust-related, 'chosen paths' or 'early exits.' I know the National September 11 Memorial Museum also worked to 'contain' some of the most difficult images (the section on 'jumpers') within its narrative path. The two instances that come to mind are the 48" high 'fence' at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum around a sunken pit showing some of the most disturbing and graphic images and films of victims, to screen the images from young [...] visitors.

7. David Layman, e-mail, April 2016.

8. For clips from 'Inside the World Trade Center', see [http://gothamist.com/2014/05/14/wtc\\_wreckage\\_survivors\\_stairs\\_photo.php#photo-1](http://gothamist.com/2014/05/14/wtc_wreckage_survivors_stairs_photo.php#photo-1).

background on the doorway: 'Please be advised that the programs in this alcove contain disturbing content'. As the focus shifts to the interior of the Twin Towers themselves, the intensity of the stories increases along with the alerts. Inside the alcove, a second sign on the wall reads: '[p]lease be advised that these programs contain disturbing content'. The two nested warnings refer to a digital display 'highlighting the experiences of those inside and in the vicinity of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center from 8:46 a.m. through 9:59 a.m.'. As recordings play people speaking about their experiences, their locations in the buildings are highlighted on the screen.<sup>8</sup> The stories are harrowing; some speakers weep. Meanwhile, the outlines of the towers stand, counter-historically, as sturdy scaffolding for the tales of terror issuing from them. The display balances chaos and calm, realism and abstraction, and aural and visual representation as it steers viewers slightly closer to the terror. As in the 'We Remember' display, the 'Inside the World Trade Center' alcove exposes visitors to only one kind of sensory information at a time.

From 'Inside the World Trade Center', the ratio of visual and aural stimuli abruptly reverses as the exhibition moves to some of the most haunting images from the day. Visitors face a wall text with an eyewitness account that highlights vision: 'I kept looking up, saying, "I want to help you guys, hold on, please hold on." But I knew there was nothing I could do'. Underneath, a photograph shows a group of people reacting in horror to something in front of them; in the foreground two women cover their mouths in shock. Greenwald commented on the selection of this photograph titled 'Eyewitnesses': '[t]here were a couple of instances when we said, there is no other photo possible. You know from this photograph what they're looking at' (quoted in Kuang 2014).

After 9/11, the substitution of eyewitnesses for the actual image they are gazing at was widespread in American media. Live video footage and photographs of the falling people appeared briefly on TV, on the Internet and in newspapers, but then the images were largely excised and continued to be carefully edited from coverage of 9/11 for the first five years or so afterward. Meanwhile, there was a notable shift to footage of bystanders responding to the carnage that was not itself shown (Frost 2011). While this might seem like a benign kind of censorship, the implications were significant. Psychological studies after 9/11 singled out the viewing of falling people as a significant predictor of PTSD: this, of the many upsetting sights from the day, had a lasting traumatic effect on many viewers. The impact of these images of falling people was magnified by the way in which they were presented in the media. In his celebrated *Esquire* essay on 'The Falling Man', Tom Junod discusses how the images of 9/11's falling bodies were driven from mainstream American news sources into more obscure channels such as Internet sites that traffic in sensational and pornographic material:

[i]n a nation of voyeurs, the desire to face the most disturbing aspects of our most disturbing day was somehow ascribed to voyeurism, as though the jumpers' experience, instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten.

(Junod 2015)

Images of thunderstruck, wondering spectators were enlisted, along with pictures of brave firemen, to shift the collective gaze away from the awful facts of bodies destroyed: signs of a vulnerable nation.

The phenomenon of the 'disappearing' falling bodies – shockingly present one day and conjured away the next – echoes the structure of trauma: an event not fully understood in the moment, so that it must be returned to later. In PTSD, Cathy Caruth writes,

[t]he pathology consists [...] solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.  
(1995: 4)

The suppression or censorship of these awful images, which was intended to protect viewers from being 'traumatized', arguably reinforced the traumatic structure of the event (Frost 2008).

Now the falling people are an inevitable part of the narrative of 9/11, but the museum handles them much in the same way the American media did in 2001. The intensity and degree of exposure is deliberately and gradually sequenced: first only implied in the bystander photographs and then described in a wall text.

Almost immediately after hijacked Flight 11 punctured the North Tower, men and women faced such intolerable conditions of smoke and heat that some fell or jumped to the ground below. Estimates of the number of people who died as a result of falling from the Twin Towers range from 50 to more than 200.

On the side of the wall, there is a conspicuous sign with two bands of clashing colour (a design that calls to mind the Department of Homeland Security's colour-coded alert scale): a red band with 'ADVISORY' in large white block letters, and below, a band of black with smaller white text stating 'This area of the exhibition includes content that may be particularly disturbing'. As the only advisory in the Historical Exhibition marked in bright red – the colour of high alert – it prepares visitors to be not just disturbed, but 'particularly' so. A black pedestal stand of tissues in this alcove also signals that visitors may well – should? – have a strongly emotional response to the material.

Greenwald has discussed her team's struggle to determine '[h]ow to present what we call the choices story. [...] The people who either fell or jumped to death' from the towers. 'It was a horrific moment of a choiceless choice for these people', she said. 'Choiceless choice' is a phrase memorably used by the Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer in the context of Second World War concentration camps, one of many instances in which the museum team – many of whom also worked on Holocaust-related institutions – has drawn analogies between September 11 and the Holocaust. These comparisons were not unusual among commentaries in the immediate aftermath of September 11, but while they have largely faded elsewhere, they remain strong at the museum.

In the centre of the alcove is a photograph by Jose Jimenez entitled 'Trapped'. Shot from afar, it shows a corner of the North Tower with smoke pouring from the floors and people hanging from the windows. Beyond the photograph, the narrative again turns back to the eyewitnesses, with their testimony printed on a wall. One eyewitness describes a woman holding her skirt down before she jumped. Another remarks:

[y]ou felt compelled to watch out of respect to them. They were ending their life without a choice

and to turn away from them would have been wrong.

These statements, presented with line breaks, like poetry, imbue the awful descriptive content with an almost lyrical quality. They move the narrative of the falling people forward from the stunned bystanders depicted in 'Eyewitnesses' to describe the scene not as one of primal frantic terror, but rather as one of humanity and reverence. Watching itself is recalled not an act of horror, shock or voyeurism, but rather as an act of 'respect': witnessing as a collaboration between the living and the dead. The final sentences in this sequence serve as a directive for how museum visitors should react to the images that follow.

Around the corner from the witness statements, behind the wall mounted with the 'Trapped' photograph, and in a dark alcove that is hidden from visitors unless they choose to pass beyond the red advisory sign, still images of falling people are projected on a darkened wall, about three feet above visitors' heads. Each photograph – five in total, including Richard Drew's iconic 'Falling Man' – appears briefly and then fades, giving way to the next. The images were carefully chosen: only those in which the people cannot be identified have been included (Sutton 2012). Greenwald recalled that the curatorial team was concerned that photographs, framed and unframed, seemed to be 'the equivalent of a gallery display [...] It aestheticized the moment. We recoiled from it'. Video was deemed even worse: 'totally disrespectful and inappropriate', Greenwald stated. Hence, the museum's most direct and graphic visual representation of death on September 11 is the bodies suspended in air, in their last moments of life.

There is a widespread assumption that there were no bodies around Ground Zero, because they were incinerated. Newspapers largely promoted this idea. *The Daily News* ran a photograph of a severed hand and was severely reprimanded for it. The Naudet brothers' 2002 documentary, *9/11*, for example, was edited so that the sounds of people striking the ground were minimized; the filmmakers avoided recording falling bodies (Tucker 2002). This absence of damaged bodies was echoed in the 'Missing' posters that appeared throughout Manhattan, which were a feature of the media, but gesture towards absence rather than death (Miller 2003). In fact, as Greenwald notes, '[t]he historical reality is that there were body parts littering Lower Manhattan'. Of the substantial photographic and audio record of those deaths in the museum's archives and elsewhere, Greenwald remarks, '[w]e do not feel the need to display that' (quoted in Cohen 2012).

The point is not that the gruesome details of the deaths need to be magnified, as in some 'thanatourism', but rather that the concrete, bodily component of the disaster is hardly represented at all. A comparison to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is instructive here. Since 1973, the museum displayed a trio of wax mannequins, flesh melting, stumbling through a tableau of the destroyed city. In 2013, the museum announced that it was going to replace the mannequins with photographs of burned body parts and artefacts. The Chair of the Hiroshima Prefectural Confederation of A-bomb Sufferers Organization proclaimed that '[t]he mannequins now on display are not good enough. The reality was far more appalling. If the figures are to be kept, why not display more figures and show the misery

of the atomic bombing more realistically?'. This desire – of the survivors themselves – for more realism rather than less, stands in stark contrast to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum's choice to be as reticent as possible about the bodily destruction of the events it documents (Tanaka 2013; Zwigenberg 2014).

In 2014, Tom Hennes commented that 'a museum like this one must aim to shake the familiarity that robs us of our shock and horror, blunting our moral reactions' (quoted in Kuang 2014). While shock and horror are an inescapable part of the 9/11 narrative, the museum pointedly aims to minimize them. Steve Kandell, whose sister died in the attack, wrote this about his visit to the museum: 'I didn't want to duck and hide, I wanted to run straight into the absurdity and horror and feel every bit of the righteous indignation and come out the other side raw' (2014). Even those visitors who take in every part of the museum will not see the extent of the horror, as it has been tempered by the designers and curators.

There have been many points in history when showing the human carnage of war, atrocity and disaster was not deemed taboo and was even thought to be necessary. Homer's *Iliad* and Goya's *Disasters of War* are good examples of this. In memorial museums dedicated to other historical traumas, the physical traces of bodies (corpses and body-parts as well as shoes and hair, for example) have been an important part of mourning, as they invoke individual people instead of symbolic, abstract entities. In the numerous methods of shielding visitors from the deaths of September 11, through multiple advisories and physical barriers that occlude vision, and in showing only obscured, elusive images of suspended figures, the museum replicates the way post-9/11 American media represented that part of the attack, rather than adding to, deepening or expanding it in another direction.

From the slideshow of the falling people, visitors move to coverage of the Pentagon destruction, where 125 people were killed when Flight 77 struck the building. Material on 'Pentagon Under Attack' is tucked away in an alcove that is prefaced by another black and white advisory sign, 'Please be advised that the programs in this alcove contain disturbing content'. Inside the alcove, in the same manner as the 'Inside the Twin Towers' display, there is a descriptive wall panel with a second advisory in softer language than the 'Trapped' alcove. The second exit appears here, at the end of the sequence spanning from the testimonials inside the towers through the falling people and the Pentagon wreckage.

Some visitors praised the September 11 museum for 'allow[ing] visitors' to 'decide how much of the most emotionally provocative moments they will experience', and some welcomed the early exits, including a July 2014 reviewer on TripAdvisor who commented 'I got about half way through and then asked for the exit. I didn't want to keep seeing the footage of the planes hitting the buildings and people jumping'. Others have been more critical of the advisories, such as a *New York Magazine* reporter who wrote, '[a]t times, the sensitivity becomes glaring' (Davidson 2014).

The third and fourth early exits are located along the far wall of the final, 'Before 9/11', portion of the Historical Exhibition. The third's placement seems to be primarily a consequence of the shape of the space. The door accompanies a display about the 1993 World Trade Center bombing that details the plot, the conspirators, Ramzi Yousef, the investigation and the trial. While historically significant, the displays around this exit do not seem as charged as other material.

9. For an account of the process through which the museum settled on how to depict the perpetrators, see Cohen (2012).
10. Other phrases that have spiked in post-9/11 America and stem from the same security culture environment include 'plot spoiler' and 'out of an abundance of caution'.

The final early exit is conspicuously placed before the coverage of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks. 'Al-Qaeda', a wall text explains, 'represents a tiny fraction of the global Muslim community'. Approaching the exit, visitors are guided through a corridor that includes, on the left side, information on Islamism and the Roots of Al Qaeda, the Soviet Afghan War, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, and the Persian Gulf War. On the right side is installed a video called *The Rise of Al Qaeda*.<sup>9</sup> This nearly seven-minute film was the subject of major debate over its terminology (e.g. 'Islamist' and 'jihad'), and the way it was seen to conflate Islam and terrorism (Otterman 2014). Further along the corridor, 'The Plot Comes to America' unfolds on the left side of the wall, with a timeline running from 2000 to late summer 2001 ('Hijackers arrive [...] Flight Training [...] More Hijackers Arrive [...] Surveillance Flights [...] Final Preparations').

Directly across from Early Exit # 4 is a light box with a black background (one news source described it as 'an inconspicuous panel' [NBC 2014] with pictures of the hijackers' faces arranged by flight. The text is dim so that it is difficult to read. Museum spokespeople originally told reporters that the hijackers' photographs would be 6×4 inches. However, there was a lengthy debate about whether or not and how to display these images, with some relatives of victims saying that they did not want to see these faces at all in the museum, and others worrying that any presentation of the terrorists would inevitably have the effect of martyring them. As the process unfolded, the photographs of the hijackers were shrunk to 2×1 ½ inches (Cohen 2012). The museum borrowed one aspect of its display from the FBI's internal September 11 exhibition, which opted to 'display the hijackers' photographs on a ledge so that visitors could avoid a head-on confrontation.' The photos were positioned on a slanted background 'in a narrow partitioned alcove' so that visitors would, as Alice Greenwald put it, 'have to turn physically and look down to see them' (Cohen 2012). Like the images of the falling people, the images of the perpetrators have been arranged to regulate and limit visitors' exposure to them. Throughout the museum, some aspects of September 11 are clear, foregrounded and exalted (e.g. The Survivor's Staircase, The Last Column), and others are minimized, dimly lit, or tucked behind pillars and warnings (the falling people, the perpetrators). In the physical, spatial presentation of the material, certain elements of the September 11 narrative are openly commemorated and others are accompanied by warnings, early exits and boxes of tissues. These techniques of audience guidance in the museum imply a hierarchy of what is 'appropriate' to examine openly and what is not, and what protective measures are thought to be necessary.

Since around 2006, two strategies of psychological management – so-called 'trigger warnings' and 'safe spaces' – have surged in American culture. To be sure, neither catchphrase originated with 9/11, but frequency searches such as Google Ngram and trend alerts indicate that they proliferate after that date (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015).<sup>10</sup> Trigger warnings came to the forefront in 2014 in the context of higher education, when students at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for example, demanded that teachers who present 'content that may trigger the onset of symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' give students advance notice and allow them to opt out of exposure to that material (Jarvie 2014). The goal of such advisories, the students there and elsewhere in the country asserted, was to promote so-called 'safe spaces' for learning: that is, environments in which participants are protected from potentially 'triggering' material.

There is a strong correlation between the demand for trigger warnings and safe spaces and the security climate of post-9/11 America. As the world seemingly becomes increasingly 'unsafe', or so the never-ending but non-specific threats of NTAS suggest, security becomes more and more embedded in our daily lives, and notably in those that are supposed to cultivate intellectual exploration, risk-taking, and critical thinking. The former president of the Modern Language Association, Margaret Ferguson, connects the trigger warning trend in higher education to the political landscape: '[i]n a nation deeply concerned with homeland security, it is perhaps not surprising that a high value is placed on students feeling psychologically secure even in the learning environment of the classroom'. Jeet Heer makes a similar point in his 2015 *The New Republic* article 'Generation PTSD':

[m]ost current college students grew up in the shadow of September 11, with the specter of large-scale terrorism always looming and with a steady stream of soldiers returning home to grapple with their demons. It is no wonder that they feel that they, too, deserve security, even in the precarious and flimsy form of trigger warnings and safe spaces.

Even though their demographics may differ, the environments of a museum and a classroom are united in their common pedagogical goals; advocates for trigger warnings in both share a common assumption that these educational spaces should be more 'safe' than the world outside them. Some critics argue that trigger warnings infantilize students (Shulevitz 2015; *American Quarterly* 2015). The imprecision of terminology in the trigger warning debate in higher education is important, as clinical PTSD is often conflated with being upset or disturbed. Just as the majority of college students do not, statistics would suggest, suffer from clinical PTSD, the majority of visitors to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum are not likely to either.

Trigger warnings, content advisories, and early exits attempt, in different ways, to allow the subject to control the flow of information and experiences that come 'out of the blue', to use a phrase that's often been associated with 9/11. Hennes remarked, '[w]e are allowing people to choose [the] depth of experience by designing [the museum] in such a way that people don't get surprised by something they didn't expect'. In theory, strategies such as trigger warnings and the advisories in the museum bind distressing material to a psychological sense of mastery and wellbeing. Similarly, taking an early exit is essentially an act of prolepsis, opting for closure and certainty that the world outside does not permit. Trigger warnings cultivate at the same time a feeling of agency and vulnerability, as they are based on the premise that the subject cannot bear to confront certain material and should not have to. But avoidance is not an effective therapy for treating anxiety or PTSD: it is, rather, a perpetuation, an accommodation and even a symptom of them. Complete safety is now an impossible standard, but the desire for it persists.

Post-9/11 American culture noticeably generates narratives of victimization, vulnerability and shattered innocence that justify trigger warnings and safe spaces. On the one hand, trigger warnings and early exits might seem to be symptoms of 'comfort culture', as Marita Sturken has described the 'sense of reassurance that mediates the fraught, painful, and difficult world in which the United States finds itself at this moment in history': reassurance that typically depends on depoliticization (Sturken 2007: 6). On the other hand, the counterweight to comfort culture is high-alert culture. David Layman explained that

[t]he main message [of the museum] was to take this information in [...] and take it with you as a part of who you are. There will be times when they'll strike at us again; we just need to be vigilant.

(quoted in Kleinman 2015)

Vigilant or hypervigilant, a clinical term referring to the experience of being constantly tense and on guard?

A person experiencing this symptom of PTSD will be motivated to maintain an increased awareness of their surrounding environment, sometimes even frequently scanning their settings to identify potential sources of threat. Hypervigilance is often accompanied by changes in behavior, such as always choosing to sit in a far corner of a room so as to have awareness of all exits. At extreme levels, hypervigilance may appear similar to paranoia.

(Tull 2017)

While the museum's warnings and early exits are designed to relieve people experiencing distress, they also, arguably, foster hypervigilance. The museum's factsheet explains that 'Al-Qaeda hoped that, by attacking these symbols of American power, they would promote widespread fear throughout the country and severely weaken the United States' standing in the world community'. NTAS Bulletins, security culture, early exits, and trigger warnings all suggest that 'widespread fear' is the new normal in America. The museum allows audiences to avoid distressing history at the same time that it induces fear: a debilitating posture. The two sides of the dominant American 9/11 narrative, as reflected by the museum, are heroism and victimization, elaborate security and early exits. Both are artificial and incomplete constructions.

The 'After 9/11' section of the Historical Exhibition includes information on 'the questions arising out of 9/11 and the ongoing ramifications, including 9/11-related illnesses and the evolution of national security' (9/11 Memorial & Museum). However, as Justin Davidson wrote in *New York Magazine*,

[w]e learn little or nothing about torture, or rendition, or Abu Ghraib, or Tora Bora, or drone raids on Pakistan, or the Bush administration's spurious linkage of 9/11 and Saddam Hussein to justify the war in Iraq. We are spared Rudy Giuliani's constant campaign invocations of his role in 9/11.

(2014)

Bodies of American warriors as well as their opponents killed abroad are, at this time, largely missing from the museum narrative. The literal boundaries that the museum erects around the Historical Exhibition and its most sensitive displays reflect the boundaries it draws around the narrative of 9/11. That narrative, in turn, minimizes America's political and military aggression around the world that predated and followed 9/11 such as the Gulf War and operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and other operations of global violence that contradict the narrative of US victimization. The museum also overlooks the immigrant and working class populations that were displaced after September 11 in its bordering neighbourhoods such as Chinatown. It seems that one population's 'safe space' is attained at the expense of others (Sorkin

and Sharon 2002; Liu 2007). All of these elements are part of the American 9/11 narrative: covert violence, overt aggression, protection of economic interests, censorship, prejudice, and the attempt to assert control after devastation.

At this point, it is worth revisiting the never realized cultural institution that was originally planned to be built next to Arad's memorial: the International Freedom Center (IFC). The aim of the IFC, with a committee of advisors that included cultural historians, was to consider the September 11 attacks in relation to other world events and to promote global freedom. The IFC was to be a 'place of education and engagement, helping people to understand, appreciate and advance freedom's narrative of hope'. It was precisely this impulse to expand the meaning of '9/11' beyond the singularity of one time and place, to put it in the context of other events, that led George Pataki, bowing to protesters, to cancel the IFC in 2005 (Dunlap 2005). The IFC's mission was comparative and culturally diverse. It would have had the flexibility to address the interlacing of local and global factors around September 11: to explore the connection of planes striking the Twin Towers to American intervention and wars abroad, to global capitalism, to the offshore torture of suspicious foreigners, to Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and drone strikes and dark zones, and to the rise of ISIS. It would have been able to broach the skirmish over the so-called 'Ground Zero Mosque', the displacement of Chinatown, and the areas that were obliterated by the World Trade Center, such as Radio Row and Little Syria. The IFC's goal was to cast 9/11 as an ongoing event with antecedents, rather than a complete historical rupture. This would have been a strong complement to the monumentalism and spatial, temporal specificity of the museum that 'won out' at the site.

An institution of and for its moment, the National September 11 Memorial & Museum met the demands placed upon it with great resourcefulness and ingenuity. However, moving forward, the museum will need to evolve and become more capacious. With time, it may well become more like the defeated IFC, and also more like European memorial museums. The coming generations of Americans that will be hardly aware of the events of September 11, 2001 will require a different kind of education and exposure that is likely to be more immersive and comparative. At present, there is one part of the museum that allows for expansion and inclusion of the abovementioned political developments that do, in many cases, contradict the museum's carefully articulated national narrative. The digital display called 'Timescape', designed by Jake Barton, features an algorithm that trawls a large database of news and archives and displays stories related to September 11 (Shanani 2014). Updating itself constantly and pulling together key words and themes on a timeline, 'Timescape' draws connections that the museum itself avoids articulating elsewhere. Interestingly, the moment that the museum reaches beyond its set narrative, when it seemingly abdicates control and is open to the contingencies of history, the moment it is seemingly 'uncurated', is the moment it comes closest to representing September 11.

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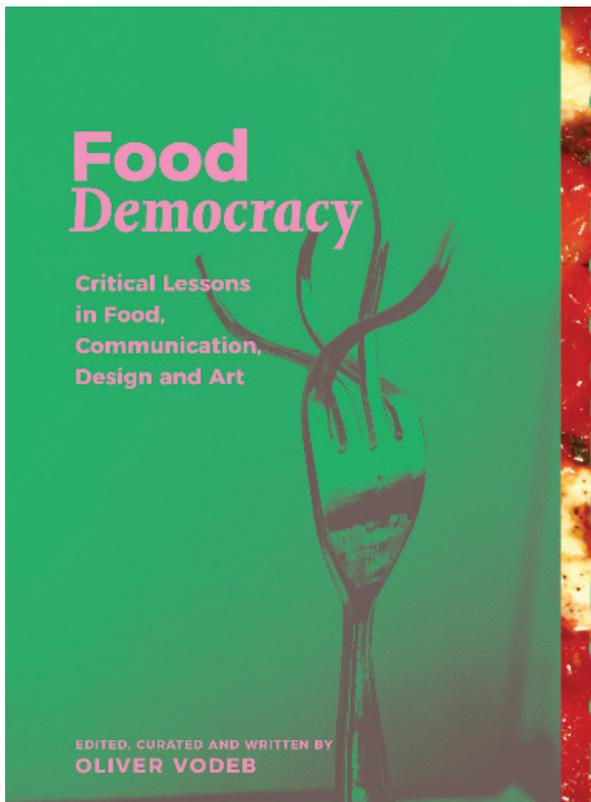
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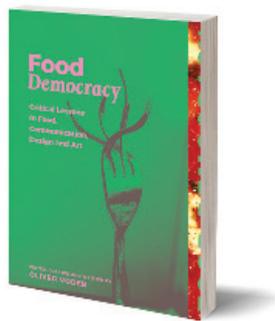


## Food Democracy

Critical Lessons in Food, Communication, Design and Art

By Oliver Vodeb

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In a world where privatization and capitalism dominate the global economy, the essays in this book ask how to make socially responsive communication, design and art that counters the role of the food industry as a machine of consumption. *Food Democracy* brings together contributions from leading international scholars and activists, critical case studies of emancipatory food practices and reflections on possible models for responsive communication design and art. A section of visual communication works, creative writings and accounts of participatory art for social and environmental change, which were curated by the Memefest Festival of Socially Responsive Communication and Art on the theme of food democracy, are also included here. The beautifully designed book also includes a unique and delicious compilation of socially engaged cooking by the academic and activist community.

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