



## Call for Papers, 2019 Mellon Conference

*Traversing the Gap:*

*Relevance as a Transformative Force at Sites of Public Memory*

June 19-21, 2018

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum is pleased to announce the second Andrew W. Mellon Conference entitled, “Traversing the Gap: Relevance as a Transformative Force at Sites of Public Memory” on June 19-21, 2018.

As time passes between the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the present, efforts to engage the public in the process of constructing and making sense of the events—as well as their relationship to them—becomes increasingly difficult. Time distances visitors and those who work on memory-related initiatives from communal traumas and the historic sites that commemorate them, interfering with processes of understanding and empathy. Due to this phenomenon, our conference explores the concept of “relevance,” as a state of staying connected to a communal trauma to educate, foster growth, and encourage empathy. In such a way, memorials, museums, and historic sites become not only places of honoring victims but also places that support transformation at the individual and cultural levels.

Located in the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, the conference will be an interdisciplinary exploration of “relevance.” According to some scholars and museum professionals, relevance is an internal, cognitive process that activates prior knowledge or helps witnesses identify commonalities between their personal histories and the histories of those victimized or affected by historical violence. This process of activation can be a socially-mediated experience, occurring in interactions within people and communities (Nielsen, 2014).

Not everyone agrees, however, on this understanding of relevance. Some museum professionals and theorists prefer to call the approach outlined above as “familiarity,” and instead define relevance as an unleashing of new modes and understandings among audiences who may not initially identify with the content or setting (Simon, 2016). In this sense, sites of public memory invite visitors into an encounter with narratives that have the potential to transform the self and relations with others (Ellsworth, 2005). Within memorial and museum environments, audiences confront histories and lives radically different from their lived experiences. Opportunities arise for awareness, new learning, and activism across gaps of time and social location, such as race, gender, ability, and sexuality (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Rose, 2016; Simon, 2014). Regardless of the tactics or the pathways in which relevance emerges for audiences, we take interest in relevance as an endeavor to make sense of life events and the self, as the thinking and feeling undertaken to better understand the present world and the recent past.

Paper and workshop proposals are encouraged to explore this issue of relevance, examining the cultural institutions, educational interventions, theoretical models, archives, bodies, and texts that contend with cultivating connectivity, interaction, and meaningful engagement with a wide range of audiences. Central questions for inquiry include:

NATIONAL SEPTEMBER 11 MEMORIAL & MUSEUM

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- How do sites of public memory both consider and cultivate “relevance” in their audiences?
- What kinds of theoretical models are needed to frame and analyze relevance at sites of public memory?
- What strategies do these sites use to understand their audiences? How do these understandings drive content or exhibitions at the site?

We invite paper and panel proposals from scholars, practitioners, museum professionals, and graduate students who can speak to the conference theme. Please send an abstract of no more than 300 words and CV to the conference organizers (Drs. Stephanie Arel and Cathlin Goulding) at [2019conference@911memorial.org](mailto:2019conference@911memorial.org) by **December 31, 2018.**

Panel proposals should include an additional abstract for the theme of the panel. Some financial assistance will be available to help offset the cost of attendance. Selected papers may be included in a follow-up edited volume.

Featured Keynotes include:

- **Dr. Adam Brown**, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, New School for Social Research; Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, New York University School of Medicine
- **Dr. Lisa Yun Lee**, Associate Professor of Art History and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago; Director of the National Public Housing Museum
- **Dr. Karen Till**, Professor of Geography at Maynooth University; Director of the *Mapping Spectral Traces Network*

#### References

- Ellsworth, E. (2005). *Places of learning: Media, architecture, pedagogy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2007). *Museums and education: Purpose, pedagogy, performance*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nielsen, J. K. (2015). The relevant museum: Defining relevance in museological practices. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 30(5), 364-378.
- Rose, J. (2016). *Interpreting difficult history at museums and historic sites* (Vol. 7). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Simon, N. (2016). *The art of relevance*. Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0. Retrieved from <http://www.artofrelevance.org/read-online/>
- Simon, R. I. (2014). *A pedagogy of witnessing: Curatorial practice and the pursuit of social justice*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

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