

Title:

“Beyond the Rhetoric of “Never Forget”: Considering what a Museum of Forgetting Could be a museum of...”

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Museums devoted to representing and memorializing historical trauma are often premised on the ubiquitous rhetoric of needing to remember in order to prevent the recurrence of our worst atrocities. From the *U.S. Holocaust Museum* to Cambodia’s *Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes*, the imperatives “Never Forget!” and “Never Again!” frame the way in which we are to value and deploy learning and remembrance. Concerned with the outcomes of vigilance and redemption memorial museums frequently work with the belief that if we make people remember better and harder, if we expose them to facts, artefacts and even interactive role-playing experiences conveying what happened in a terrible past, we will somehow both avert the repetition of this past and honour its memory.

However, this premise assumes a certain calculation of memory and an untroubling faith that the accumulation of more knowledge and experience will lead to predictable and favourable results. “Making people remember tends to assume that you can calculate their responses to their memories,” writes Adam Phillips. “It tries to engineer solutions,” he continues, “when engineered solutions are part of the problem” (2005, p.3). While our best pedagogical intentions might strive to mobilize the memory of a terrible past in order to sensitize and inoculate people against possible future temptations of becoming complicit in mass violence, Phillips notes that we should be wary of the *bonne conscience* of the educator administering remembrance. He thus implies that there is a self-serving calculus that accompanies our desire to pedagogically manage memory. Appreciating the messy and uncontrollable surplus of interpretations unleashed by memory, his argument gestures us to consider how learning and remembering actually exceed instrumentality and manufactured outcomes: for, “where memory might lead – both what we might do with it, and what it might do with us – is unpredictable” (2005, p.3).

It could very well be that the relatively recent worldwide “obsession with memory” and its accompanying prescriptions, affirmations, revelations and attempts at managing memory for this or that lesson, are symptomatic expressions of a fear of memory itself. The memorial museum’s drive compelling people to remember and learn in a certain way (Never Forget!) so that the future can be mastered (Never Again!), betrays a fear of where memory might go given its varying interpretations and inevitable lapses. More precisely, it evinces a fear of what memory might bring up, what memory might force us to spit-out and recognize as being un-digestible and intolerable in light of our present historical conscience.

Concerned with recovering the displacements, fantasies and oblivions that memorial museums tend to renounce in the name of a calculated and forced form of remembrance, Phillips proposes that we take the function of forgetting seriously. In order to recover a sense of memory that is neither controlled nor predetermined, we need, he tells us, “the time-lag, the metabolism, the deferrals of forgetting” (2005, p.3). It is a matter of appreciating how forgetting affords us the time and space for the new and

unexpected. While he nowhere undermines the significance of those memorial spaces where the past through the care of the present is afforded an afterlife, he provocatively concludes by asking: “After so many memorials it may be worth wondering now what a Museum of Forgetting could be a museum of?” (2005, p.3).

Phillips’s question is intriguing on various levels. He asks us not only to consider how we mostly forget, re-write and fabricate memory through our memorial endeavours, but also to wonder about the potentiality of forgetting for *now* (during this worldwide “memory boom”) so that the prevailing manufactured and forced sense of memory can lessen its hold on our present interpretative possibilities. Phillips’s appeal for the necessity and significance of forgetting-for-now does not seek to bring down the museum, as it were. Rather, amid a time when the rhetoric of forced remembrance has rendered the enigmatic activity of forgetting into an anathema, he provokes us to *wonder* about forgetting as a way of opening up an unpredictable and non-compliant approach to remembrance and learning in the museum.

In what follows, I first turn to consider the source of Phillips’s claim regarding the excess of the memorial enterprise, drawing out the significance of forgetting for carving a perspective that allows us to live well with history. In the second section, I develop some of the claims regarding the significance of forgetting through a reading of Alicia Framis’s 2008 art exhibit entitled “Welcome to Guantánamo Museum: Things to Forget.” Specifically, I discuss how Framis’s hypothetical museum of the Guantánamo Camp prompts us to think through the dynamics of remembering, forgetting and learning in the memorial pedagogical enterprise. In the third and concluding section, I draw on what Maurice Blanchot (1995) enigmatically terms the “disaster.” Through this term I explore how forgetting might not be a matter of our own will. Considering the “disaster,” as an event that exceeds our ability to willfully forget, introduces an ethics of forgetting that opens us to the possibility of learning from memory’s failures and lapses rather through prescriptions of how memory should be utilized. The turn to an ethics of forgetting avoids the madness of total recall and the impossibility of total and willful forgetting, thus, implicitly tracing a more complicated relation between remembering and forgetting.

Why Forgetting?

Phillips’s attempt to give pause to our current fascination with memorializing tragic events speaks to a growing skepticism and sense of exhaustion regarding the memorial museum’s ability at fostering effective approaches for living well with history. In contrast to the memorial museum’s drive for fostering remembrance there are those who think that this push for memory is making us sick, bogging us down and overburdening us with too much history and too much horror; such museums are thought to be symptomatic of a culture paralyzed by the weight of the past and rendered impotent to act amid present injustices. “This mania for memorial museums is a sign of a society with an unhealthy obsession,” writes Tiffany Jenkins (2005, *n.pag*). She continues, “Today’s memorializing of suffering creates a new and damaging vision of people. It is a bleak outlook that sees humanity as constantly at the mercy of arbitrary violence.” Jenkins’s diagnostic urges that we learn to “forget the sort of remembering that replaces tradition, Kings and Queens with a theatre of trauma.” The worry seems to be that under the strain to memorialize and recall our wretched past, an enfeebled conception of humanity is

being constituted, revealing the inherent malady of our ideals and our impossibility to be otherwise.

The Nietzschean gesture here is undeniable and prompts us to briefly consider Nietzsche's thought experiment regarding remembering and forgetting. In "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life," Nietzsche, as is well known, writes of the burdens and excess of a historical consciousness that can ruin humans. With a type of primordial nostalgia for a lost paradise (before speech, learning and remembering) man seemingly envies the herd of cattle grazing unconcerned amid the eternal now. But this undifferentiated sense of time can never be for him. Burdened with the "increasing weight of the past," man "cannot learn to forget, but always remains attached to the past: however far and fast he runs, the chain runs with him" (1980, p.8). While the chain, linking the past and the present together, is the precondition for sustaining a world of human significance, the surplus of historical knowledge and obligations to the past overwhelms our capacity to cope with and live well in the present. Fettered with an unflinching memory of our debt to the past, historical consciousness not only robs us of happiness, but also allows us to see too much, exposing the insignificance and decay of all things. Nietzsche writes, "Take as an extreme example a man who possesses no trace of the power to forget, who is condemned everywhere to see becoming: such a one no longer believes in his own existence, no longer believes in himself; he sees everything flow apart in mobile points and loses himself in the stream of becoming..." (1980, p.9).

Jorge Luis Borges's short story, "Funes the Memorious," takes up Nietzsche's thought experiment, describing a young man who, after an accident, becomes paralyzed and loses the possibility of forgetting. The tragedy of Funes is that without the ability to forget he is forced to relive every experience from one moment to the next, down to its minutest detail. Overtaxed by his memory of everything, Funes is powerless to hold onto any meaning or significance. He is bothered and made sick by the immensity of time that just keeps pouring-in. Borges writes, "it bothered him to comprehend that the generic symbol *dog* embraces so many unlike individuals of diverse size and form; it bothered him that the dog at 3:14 (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at 3:15 (seen from the front)" (1964, p.65). Funes's total recall eventually reverts to nothingness: to the withdrawal of meaningful relationships to objects. He has lost the necessary separating-out and distance – the forgetting, the time lag – that could afford him with a perspective on the world. Completely swept by the stream of becoming, Funes is unable to learn how to select and expunge.

And this gets us to what learning to forget is for. Forgetting allows us to limit and so cope with our possibilities amid the flow of time. It is, as Nietzsche writes, "the art and strength of being able to... enclose oneself in a limited horizon" (1980, p.62). As an antidote to the excess of history, which shatters our horizon by exposing us to the arbitrariness of becoming, forgetting permits us to craft a perspective: an orientation to time that allows us to meaningfully act in the world and garner a sense of temporality. This is not the absolute forgetting of cattle shackled to a moment without past or future, it is, to be sure, an active forgetting crafted through and for the sake of something most significantly human – temporality. Forgetting is thus an art that we must learn to cultivate if we are to live well with history and so carve, as it were, a manner of bearing time.

The art of drawing limits, of selecting and expunging, is rather significant to wonder about as our present ability to store and accumulate evermore details from the

past outstrips our capacity to make meaning. “The museum, instead of being circumscribed in a geometrical location, is now everywhere...” (Baudrillard 1983, p.15). Admittedly, we seem to presently have acquired more information than we have time to metabolize. The contemporary memorial drive to accumulate “all that once has been,” along with the present technological advances for storing information, are amassing a seemingly impossible repository that overwhelms our comprehension and sense of temporality. We cannot possibly take it all in, lest we end up like Fuenes: whom Borges describes as “not very capable of thought,” and who eventually wastes away from congestion, more precisely, from not being able to cough-up and expunge (1964, p.66).

At times Nietzsche appears to completely reject history. However, his point is not to deny history but to learn when to forget and limit it, so that we can craft, as Phillips discusses in his essay “Close-Ups,” the right distance that “makes redescription possible” (2004, p.148). Without crafting the right distance to history we are too close to it to develop any perspective. There is an ecstasy and excess, in being too close, that short-circuits symbolization. As Phillips writes, “Too much closeness means too much of something – call it feeling, though it could be called various things – means too little of something else, call it meaning, or simply words” (2004, p.148). Learning to live well with history requires drawing out words, meanings, and interpretations that can help us to wonder about the right proximity “that makes the past memorable rather than spellbinding. That makes the past ...into something that one can consider the advantages and disadvantages of knowing about” (Phillips 2004, p.143). Ultimately, it is a matter of getting our timing, as well as our distance, right; for the possibility of bearing historical remembrance without being wrecked by it, necessitates our ability to garner a perspective in order to read and judge when is the right time to forget and when is the right time to remember (Nietzsche 1980, p.10).

Things to forget: Where things end up and end

The Catalan artist Alicia Framis’s 2008 work entitled, “Welcome to Guantánamo Museum: Things to Forget” stages provocative issues around the dynamics of remembrance, forgetting and the complexities of getting our timing right in the memorial museum enterprise. The first part of Framis’s project, presented in the exhibition “Extraordinary Rendition” at the Galería Helga de Alvear in Madrid in June 2008, consisted of photographs of true-to-scale architectural maquettes of a hypothetical memorial museum to be constructed at the still operative US detention camp in Guantánamo Cuba (see: *figure one*). Her exhibit also incorporated a worktable for rendering artifacts from the camp into souvenirs and objects to furnish the future museum. The artist statement asks us to consider that, like other sites of horror and degradation that have been turned into memorials, “the Guantánamo prison will probably be turned into a museum.”

Everything ends up and ends at the museum, even the most extraordinary rendition. At a certain level, Framis’s hypothetical museum gestures us to consider how horrible political events often end up memorialized in the museum and drained of their political urgency. Her work can be read as an indictment of what Nietzsche terms, “the repugnant spectacle and blind lust for collecting, of a restless ranking together of all that once has been” (1980, p.21). As the pervasive drive for “museification” usurps the traces of bare life played out at the Guantánamo prison, history appears to be more and more a

lesson on the continuity of the same (pain and degradation) across time. Framis's somber and minimalist maquette of the Guantánamo museum reminds us of the structure and form of other memorial museums marking the horrors of the concentration camp. Through her hypothetical exercise the Guantánamo camp appears as one more in a series of sites awaiting its end in the museum. The antiquarian like tendency to amass, preserve and revere connections between seemingly similar museums sites of trauma ends up shaping a global topography vainly entangled within the accumulation of identical instances of horror. Political events and political pedagogy apparently end up and end here.

Framis's non-descript and colorless human figurines placed around the true-to-scale model camp leave us with an impoverished and disorienting sense of how humans will actually relate, engage and learn from this site. The pedagogical opportunities appear as stilted as the characterless figures positioned to enter the grey model camp. In this sense, Framis stages something akin to what Paul Valéry observed in his 1923 essay, "The Problem of Museums," where museum visitors are left with a sense of loss and impoverishment as they make their way through the museum. Valéry writes of his disorienting visit to the museum, "I lose all sense of why I have intruded into this wax-floored solitude, savoring of temple and drawing room, of cemetery and school. (...) The museum exerts a constant pull on everything that men can make (...). I cannot but think of the bank at a casino, which wins every time" (1972, p.202, p.204). The meeting of mausoleum and bank casino describes the surreal sense of accumulation that is operative in the museum. The deadening logic of the commodity, in which everything accrued enters the universal-equivalence of exchange to become the same in a series, forecloses the pedagogical promise of encountering and learning from unique objects in the museum. Something like this loss of aura is also at play in Framis's work. For, along with the small model camp, she also equips her exhibit with a worktable on which all artifacts from Guantánamo prison, like the orange jump suits worn by the inmates or materials from their cells, will eventually end up cut-up and turned into souvenirs and merchandize bearing the label – "Things to Forget" (see: *figure two*).

While Framis's worktable projects appear to confirm Valéry's point regarding how the museum absorbs all things and experiences into a reifying economy of sorts, where everything *ends up* as a commodity, there is something else at work here that I think can help us to consider "what a Museum of Forgetting could be a museum of." Framis's worktable projects are to be undertaken by students, who will work through the material remnants of Guantánamo by handling, cutting, re-designing and stitching back together items to be unleashed, by being exchanged and put (symbolically) into circulation, beyond the ends of the museum. The duty to remember is purposely turned on its head, as we are encouraged, according to the artist, to use this work so that we can learn to forget and overcome Guantánamo.

If we follow Nietzsche we might describe this project of active forgetting as an exercise that helps us live well with history, allowing us "to replace what is lost and reshape broken forms" (1980, p.10). Or, in psychoanalytic terms, we might portray it through the art of redescription, allowing for objects to be re-made again through symbolization. That is, as a re-assembling (or type of re-mending/ remembering) that allows for the act of forgetting: for masticating, digesting and metabolizing, and so turning one thing (by tearing it apart) into another. Working and re-working material

fragments from Guantánamo would allow us to take our time with what cannot be swallowed whole or fully and finally taken-in. Rather than repetitively re-enacting in an unconscious manner what is too horrible and what operates outside of the symbolic, Framis invites us to make things, to use symbols, that can help us circumscribe a place and event that can never be truly redeemed. In this way, the project allows us to externalize the internal objects associated with this site: the complex fantasies and feelings of sorrow and concern, guilt and shame, anger and fear that the extraordinary Guantánamo prison marks.

The project is also an activity of learning to let go, as it were, of allowing our eventual re-compositions to circulate beyond our intentions in a living relation with the present. What all this suggests is that a Museum of Forgetting could thus be a museum of interpretative openings rather than a place where things end up and end. The museum is thus reconceived, borrowing Elizabeth Ellsworth's vocabulary, as a place where things are *in the making*: "a zone of historical indeterminateness that allows room for experimentation" (2005, p.11) beyond instrumental outcomes or ends.

Framis's project, of course, is an artistic-metaphoric intervention prompting us to think through our terms so that we may discover new and perhaps more productive ways of conceiving of the memorial pedagogical enterprise. Her work stages how it might not be a matter of choosing between what we want to forget and what we want to remember, but of asking: which forms of forgetting do we want to use? (Phillips, 2004).

Disaster

However, we have to admit that active forgetting is limited, that forgetting might not be a matter of will or of one's making. Some events cannot be reshaped and mended; some events never enter consciousness but devastate it. What Maurice Blanchot (1995) calls the "disaster," points to an event of such magnitude and disturbance that it exceeds the mind's ability to remember or willfully forget. Drawing numerous references and allusions to human devastation throughout his enigmatic text, Blanchot's notion of the disaster seems to echo Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (2006) who describes how traumatic events rupture our psychical ability to properly register and retain experiences. The disaster is such an extraordinary event that it disrupts our sense of history producing a temporal (trauma like) gap in which nothing is perceived, associated or given to memory. Blanchot writes, "when the disaster comes upon us it does not come" (1995, p.1). We are dealing here with an immemorial instance, a limit experience, which is "always already past" and "has always already withdrawn" from us (1995, pp.1-2).

Rather than beginning with our will to remember or to forget, Blanchot exposes the immemorial condition of having always already missed the disaster, where everything seemingly appears as it was, as though there was no disaster to begin with. Thus, the problem of history is posed as a problem of attending to something that is properly beyond historical consciousness and that has no signification, temporality or measurability in historical terms. The problem, in other words, involves our need to attend to a disaster that touches us while it passes us by "leaving everything intact" (1995, p.1). Consequently, for Blanchot we always begin from a point of radical originary forgetting – a forgetting that is beyond being willed, deployed or cultivated. He

writes, “the disaster is related to forgetfulness – forgetfulness without memory, the motionless retreat of what has not been treated – the immemorial, perhaps” (1995, p.3).

While Nietzsche grapples with cultivating active forgetting in order to establish a human horizon (a willed limit) that allows us to cope and live well with history, Blanchot uncovers an originary forgetting that radically imposes and subjects us to an extreme experience, which we cannot finally register, overcome or master (1995, p.51). With Blanchot we thus move to an ethics of forgetting where the point is to somehow remember, at the very least, that we inherently begin by forgetting. In this way, his ethics prompts us to be attentive to the fact that, because we cannot actively choose to forget the disaster, we are always already forgetting and leaving things out of our understanding and engagements with the world. In other words, the disaster obliges us to heed, “...the partial, simplifying, reductive character of comprehension itself” (1995, p.76). For Blanchot the ability to comprehend or represent something does not mean that we can fully know it, rather to say that we know something implies that we partially forget and remember incompletely through representation or comprehension. “[K]nowledge – because it is not knowledge of the disaster, but knowledge as disaster and knowledge disastrously – carries us, carries us off, deports us ... straight to ignorance, and puts us face to face with ignorance of the unknown so that we forget, endlessly” (1995, p.3). Our active and forgetful practices are particularly pertinent to heed with regards to our representational work (like writing, theorizing, and by extension curating) that always proceed and find their very possibility through excluding, simplifying and thematizing. Blanchot writes, “Forgetfulness is a practice, the practice of writing that prophesies because it is enacted by the utter renunciation of everything: to announce is perhaps to renounce. The theoretical battle, even if it is waged against some form of violence, is always a violence of an incomprehension; let us not be stopped short by the partial” (1995, p.76).

With all this in mind what would it mean to once more pose Phillips’s question, “what a Museum of Forgetting could be a museum of”? We are, admittedly, left wondering to what end does this radical forgetting lead us toward if we cannot really memorialize or represent the past without always already forgetting? While Phillips mobilizes forgetting as an opening of sorts that challenges the ends of memory, doing away with any prescribed meanings and implications of what memory will do or where it will go, Blanchot, for his part, subjects us to an originary forgetting that does not excuse us or release us from its effects. In other words, Blanchot also provides us with a sense of forgetting as an opening, but this opening exposes my continuing implication and complicity in forgetting. As such, this opening exposes the need for constant vigilance, for an attentive regard to how, through our knowledge, representations and comprehension, we inevitably produce remains that remain forgotten and whose implications we cannot necessarily escape. In this sense, Blanchot’s radical forgetting offers a poignant ethical supplement – gesturing towards a residual reading – that opens and exposes the immanence of our present representational practices and the limits of our will to memorialize or to forget. Blanchot thus activates an insistent and impossible reading of what remains forgotten in order to attune us to what is not here: to what is presently excluded, or what temporally exceeds our self-enclosed horizon.

Returning to read Framis’s exhibit, “Welcome to Guantánamo Museum: Things to Forget,” proves productive for further considering “what a Museum of Forgetting

could be a museum of” in light of an ethically inflected sense of forgetting. While the photographic image always points backwards, recording a past-ness and a unique instance in time, Framis’s photographs of a future museum for a present ongoing event (the still functioning Guantánamo camp) admittedly complicates the unrepeatable lived instant of time captured by the photograph. Rather than a witness “to what was” the photographs of this future non-present museum can be read not only as a rehearsal for where things will end up (as discussed in the previous section), but also as an evocative trace that might allow us to attend to what we are presently forgetting: the extraordinary event of Guantánamo which is passing us by, leaving everything seemingly intact while invisibly wrecking havoc on lives and riddling democracy and justice. Framis’s photographs and props of this would-be museum thus appear to work as a type of mnemotechnic device, providing an architectural form, as it were, for forging attention and links amid the scattered fragments and dissociations (the disaster) of our time.

However, the mnemotechnics at work here are not so straightforward. The curious and significant point to note is that Framis is not sorting and storing items to be remembered within an existing architectural form. Rather, the fictive-future Guantánamo museum project works as a complex remembering-learning prop that allows us to call up an “anachrony” in our present, provoking a sense of untimeliness and dis-adjustment amid the contemporary (Derrida 1994, p.99). By exhibiting a museum that runs counter to our time, Framis’s exhibit ends up acting on our time, opening questions around what remains presently unthought and presenting afresh the complexities of what could be the role of the memorial museum today. Particularly, what could be the role of such museums with regards to a present-extraordinary event that is presently not registered in a straightforward sense, since Guantánamo exists under a state-of-exception. To exhibit the untimely is “perhaps to bring to the surface something like absent meaning, to welcome [that] which is not yet what we call thought” (Blanchot 1995, p.41). A museum of forgetting could be a museum of what remains other than history in history, welcoming and giving time to something that our own present considers to be a non-event or has not yet properly thought of as an event. Through Framis’s untimely provocations we can thus ponder that perhaps it is *now* and not tomorrow that we most urgently need to think about and welcome a museum for Guantánamo.



Figure One: Alicia Framis's 2008 work entitled, "Welcome to Guantánamo Museum: Things to Forget."



Figure Two: Alicia Framis’s 2008 work entitled, “Welcome to Guantánamo Museum: Things to Forget.”

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