

Commemorating Painful Pasts through Performative Practices

Hosted by the Department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholm University, Sweden, 15 - 17 June 2016

Artists, museum curators and educators are increasingly interested in devising more effective strategies of remembering painful pasts. To this end, many recent projects commemorating genocides, civil wars, dictatorships and terrorist attacks, invite audiences to actively engage in remembering and reflecting critically upon these historical events, and what they mean to contemporary societies. The term 'performative' best explains the active engagement that these projects demand from audiences. This term is used to describe artistic and educational projects which promote a high degree of participation, through hands-on activities and other audience engagement strategies. Furthermore, it can also denote the possible effects which these projects may have upon audiences, namely to encourage them to become agents of commemoration, to transform their relationship with the past, and to reach a position of moral and civic responsibility.

This conference, and its subsequent publication, invites academics, artists, and museum practitioners to explore the usefulness of performative strategies of engagement with painful pasts, and the impact these strategies have upon the public. We ask *whether* and *how* performative practices enable later born generations to deal with the legacies of trauma, to initiate reconciliation and to attempt forgiveness. Do performative projects motivate individuals from persecuted groups to ask for justice? Do they sharpen public awareness of democratic values, and make contemporary audiences more sensitive to discrimination and intolerance?

Coming from the field of Holocaust Studies, and having noted that performative practices are employed frequently in its commemoration, our goal is to widen our understanding of why and how 'performativity' appears in the memorialization of other dreadful historical events. Therefore, we are interested in projects commemorating genocides such as those in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Darfur, civil wars in South America, ethnic cleansings in former Yugoslavia, the Apartheid system in South Africa, the Soviet gulag system, the suppression under communist regimes and dictatorships, forced migration, as well as other major traumatic events in recent history. The variety of case studies from different backgrounds will help us to understand whether these methods are effective.

We welcome papers exploring artistic and educational projects that challenge the audience to contribute to social, political and civic activism and to strengthen democratic values within their societies. Examples of such projects may include spontaneous memorial acts, audience participatory projects, interactive theatre, exhibitions and artistic works that create immersive environments through the use of visual and tactile effects, and which involve a high degree of bodily engagement.

As we are particularly interested to learn more about the *effectiveness* of performative practices *upon audiences*, we encourage scholars to examine visitors' responses which have been captured both through interviews, digital and social media, and also through the observation of various non-verbal visitor behaviours displayed during visits at memorial sites.

Central questions to consider are:

- How do performative practices affect the visitor's understanding of the particular event in question?
- Do performative practices succeed in overriding the audience members' natural feelings of being distanced from these historical events both physically, emotionally and temporally?
- In the case of more recent traumatic events, are these practices useful in treating trauma, and in achieving justice for the victims of these events?
- Can performative practices be used to strengthen social activism and civic responsibility?
- In what sense are these projects innovative? In particular, how do they differ from similar performance practices from the 1970s onwards, which likewise displayed a high degree of audience participation?

The 3-day-conference will be held at the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholm University, Sweden, 15 – 17 June 2016

Keynote lectures and paper presentations will be open to the general public, whilst special sessions are reserved for internal discussions amongst conference participants only.

Please note: we prefer subjects which have not been previously published. Accepted conference participants are strongly encouraged to submit articles for publication soon after the conference. The work for the volume will undergo several editorial processes to ensure that its focus and purpose will be achieved.

Submissions for conference papers should reach us by 24 August 2015.

Please send an abstract (400 words) and a short CV including your institutional and departmental/museum affiliation and contact details to:

performative.commemoration@gmail.com

For any questions please contact the conference organizers: Tanja Schult, Department of Culture and Aesthetics Stockholm University, Sweden, tanja.schult@arthistory.su.se, and Diana Popescu, Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, Birkbeck College, London, d.popescu@bbk.ac.uk.