

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Notes + Illustrations + index \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-20966-4.



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Published on H-Judaic (August, 2000)

Museology is a highly contested area of study. It has the potential to offend and anger as it has to indoctrinate or educate. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett presents the main theses of the study of museum display in a book which takes the reader on a richly interwoven and fantastic tour of museums and the broader problems of display.

Destination Culture is written with a sense of wit as well as academic integrity, which makes it a sensible and pleasant introductory approach to museological study and a welcome body of research for museum awareness containing a deeper look at the complexities of tourism. It is recommended for the teacher, scholar or interested lay reader. The Jewish component to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's analysis of the culture of curation and display is central to the text. The politics surrounding the museum debate has pertinence within the Jewish ethic, given the ways in which xenophobia and persecution punctuate the Jewish mindset and history. This aspect distinguishes it from other texts dealing with the discipline of the museum environment, making it important for an awareness of the display of Jewry, generally. Di-

vided into five sections, *Destination Culture* is structured to lead the reader into the field, supplying a rich array of incidental and central detail and dovetailing each section contextually. In each section, aspects of an argument or exhibition are given full-bodied discussions which rest on their aesthetics and the politics of their displays.

Part One, for instance, presents ethnographic objects and the polemic surrounding display of Jews under the rubric "Agency of Display." Here, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett illustrates the difficulties and contradictions in representing a people while retaining its idiosyncrasies, conflicts and diverse realities. "[Pre-First World War] Jews were a diaspora without territorial sovereignty ... the 'Jewish question' ... shaped the way they represented themselves" (80). This forms the basis to her discussion of nineteenth-century Jews and their displays of themselves and their culture in international expositions. It argues from the premise which questions the displayable nature of ritual objects, religious artifacts, performance and high art, and how this conglomerate reality of the Jewish ethos should stand together on a single plat-

form denoting "Jew." But the question is wider because Jews formed a considerable part of those in attendance: collectors, fundraisers and contributors from different social sectors. Here the problematics concerning the ritual, political and creative import are discussed, relating to what may nebulously be termed "Jewish" art, a classification which remains mired in controversy and indefinability.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's discussion on the problematics of displaying Jewish culture rests on contemporary debates which aim to redress imbalances imposed by earlier academic standpoints. She terms the display of objects behind glass "'scientific' museum displays" (89), the museum's equivalent for organised and racist propaganda. Part of this section is devoted to Cyrus Adler, a scholar in Semitics, who was responsible for many expositions focusing on the display of Jewish ritual, its implements and circumstances. "[His] conceptualization of biblical antiquities ... ensured a prestigious place for the exhibition of Jews and Judaism" (92). Adler's focus in the displays he initiated and directed were not on the culture's history, but its "science." Thus he hoped to promote religious tolerance and sympathy for the ritual ceremony.

Adler also undertook to make an international diorama of living Jews. Ephraim Benguiat echoed this type of display, in exotic dress which enhanced his own status as a businessman and collector. The difference between the two approaches was taxonomical: while Adler was type-casting ornamentation and objects, Benguiat aimed to recreate an authentic historical environment. Boris Bogen was another player in pre-First World War display of Jewry. Neither a collector nor an academic, he was an emigrant who amassed community support for his attempts to display Jewry in cultural heterogeneity and contemporary diversity. Rather than aiming at an isolationist and frozen perspective, he was looking towards contextualising its display "for helping

immigrants adjust to American life" (115). This is exemplified further in the discussion of Ellis Island, a shrine to American immigration. Here the distinctions between heritage, genealogy and cultural identity are blurred and the visitor is presented with games that centralise the provenance of the American immigrant. Problematically, all become included under an exclusionary historical rubric, which is factually misleading as it equalises individuals to the point of rendering them faceless. Rhetorically, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asks if "the perfection of the restoration [can] mitigate the imperfections of history" (181).

Another reverberation of these problematics are those in the section "Undoing the Ethnographic." With the 1990 Los Angeles Festival as a backdrop, the reader is given insight into the complex, constant presence of cultural baggage, be it performed or curated. This baggage is a broad tool that colours a display or indeed a display's reception and is one of the crucial turning points in self-aware curation and critique. The focus is also on the fieldworker who must integrate into a culture to understand it, and, conversely must continue to acknowledge her/his position in her/his own culture.

The focus moves toward a general understanding of museums' experiential and social roles -- they could be travel substitutes, places to mourn, tribunals addressing historical imbalances, vaults or displays of monsters, among other things. This brings about a basic dichotomy that compares the silent and untouchable museum with the tourist's museum, "a place alive, exciting and unique [representing or fictionalising] collective self-understanding" (139). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's book straddles the world and from historical beliefs to contemporary realities, her discussion focuses in part on the advantages and disadvantages of tourism in society, the economy and culture at large, through the seemingly ubiquitous vehicle of the theme park.

The discussion next turns to heritage as a structure in different social contexts. Here, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett considers the museumification of historical periods and the ubiquitous tourist, tying her arguments together as a means to re-understand location as destination. Inescapably, cultural realities and practices change with tourist input. In Jewish heritage, this is understandable through "cultural trash which ... return[s] as 'folklore'" (160). Misunderstanding religious ritual practice may lead to distorted representation, and possibly cultural self-hatred due to embarrassingly ill-reflected practices. But "fifty years later the vituperation ... would give way to nostalgia and ... customs that had been burlesqued would be offered as a critique of Jewish respectability" (161).

The socio-political dangers inherent in removing an aspect of a culture from its context for tourist edification are examined with reference to the Maori people, through the living museum, a concept which has temporarily been transmuted to address post-colonial realities. "A new generation of [native] museum professionals is proactively addressing the stewardship of cultural property, its presentation and interpretation in museums" (165).

Moving from the concept of the living museum to that of a virtual one, this rollercoaster of a text takes the reader to visit absences of things brought into tourist access with sophisticated computer technology. Making museum displays virtual through technology makes the artifacts easy to consume and for this reason, dangerous as the technology is capable of trivialising historical tragedy like the Holocaust in the face of the mindset which comprises "Distory" (i.e., "Disney History"). By the same token, virtual reality as a means to display history didactically has its own intrinsic role in the contemporary exhibition space, which indeed can transcend the limitations of geography.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's discussion of the Los Angeles festival addresses the issues of displaying

art and culture in a didactic arena and contemporary context. Here, audience behaviour and audience digestion of avant-garde realities is explored. "If audiences ... could enjoy what they did not understand, they might become more receptive to contemporary art more generally" (222). But more than receptivity to goings-on in art, is the possibility of the wo/man-in-the-street becoming attuned to interculturalism. Peter Sellars, the organiser of the Los Angeles Festival comments, "'We live in a culture of exile' defined both by the massive immigration of the last three decades and by an unnamed internal exile from our own selves ... our effort ... to recover the lives of others is a need ... to recover the missing pieces of our own lives" (234). This exploration of how contemporary art/culture faces the past represents debates in the critical and cultural development of display for the lay audience and the performance/visual artist alike. It highlights the contradistinction between "infotainment" and art through a convergence between ethnography and the avant-garde and a removal of overtly racist indications of ethnic origin, tantamount to the slapping of a label of provenance onto a Torah covering, which will by default deny its visual realities.

By the same token, the display of African Art questions how certain articles be made visible because of the disciplines of cultural secrecy from which they originate. In a chapter dealing specifically with the complicated methodologies surrounding African Art, its display and history, the reader is brought into the debate surrounding exhibiting objects with functional value as art, and recontextualising an object tainted possibly by brutal colonialist intervention, in the constructed museum environment. Also, the issue of secrecy is brought to the fore, together with the question of how much should be revealed or concealed, not only in the parameters of African objects, but in performance, and in audience attraction.

In terms of the debates concerning multiculturalism, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett cites a New York

cartoon, which sees the African-American, "Yo," as the Yiddish expletive "Oy" spelt backward. It is with this framework that she invites her reader to relook at preconceived museum- and by extension, social motives and understand the display of cultural realities as different parts of the same mechanism.

The final chapter to this work considers the topic of bad taste, in terms of display, body politics, classic taste and the concept of kitsch. It presents a light-hearted yet academically based look at the conditioning which renders certain objects transiently fashionable and which have the power to excommunicate them from social behaviour codes or tabulate them among the most acceptable. It represents a agreeable conclusion to a book both heavy and light, both complex and satisfying to read.

Destination Culture is a deceptive book. It is a relatively small publication, bearing a well considered body of illustrations and elegant pagination and layout. Many of the illustrations have been photographed by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett herself, which lend a sense of humanness to the document. On first examination, it appears to be a modest publication. Yet once one becomes involved in its pages of text, it becomes evident that this is not only a meticulous and elegant book, it is textually an enormous one. The breadth of its discussion is encyclopaedic and its contribution to the field monumental. In so many ways, this text has brought together, under one roof, as it were, a rich multitude of debates from a diversity of specialisations, all of which contribute to and enrich museology as a field in the arts, in the economy, in the social sciences and in the public domain.

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Citation: Robyn Sassen. Review of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

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