



*Bruno S. Frey is a renowned economist who has worked on the analysis of phenomena related to artistic activities from an economic point of view. He was Professor of Economics at the University of Constance and since 1977 has been Professor of Economics at the University of Zurich. He is the author of numerous articles in professional journals and books, including Not Just for the Money (1997) and Arts and Economics (2000). He has also taken part in major research projects at the international level on Economics, Values and Heritage Conservation and in the international debate on how museums should see profit-making activities as a possibility of enlarging their freedom of action.*

*Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a worldwide known anthropologist, is Professor at the Performance Studies Department of the Tisch School of the Arts, New York, where she teaches History and theory of museums, world's fairs and tourism in conjunction with their Museum studies programme. Her work Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage (1998) explores the museum as a historical formation and emergent medium in relation to its changing role in society. Barbara Kirshenblatt also consults for many museums, most recently the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews (Warsaw).*

## | CURRENT DEBATE

### THE DEMATERIALIZATION OF CULTURE AND THE DE-ACCESSIONING OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

*Bruno S. Frey, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett*

— ISABELLE VINSON: In your book, *Destination Culture*, you argue that heritage is a contemporary creation and is the result of a process of display. Has this position in some way been inspired by the dematerialization of heritage artefacts in the Information Society?

— **BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT:** This is an interesting question. There are three issues here. First, I argue for a notion of heritage as a mode of cultural production in its own right. It is in the nature of this mode of cultural production that something new should be created through processes of repatriation, preservation, conservation, reconstruction, re-creation, and interpretation. What is new is the relationship to that which is designated 'heritage'. That relationship is defined by different understandings and values, particularly when the object of a heritage intervention has lost its use value or economic viability (old mines, buildings, trades). Display is central to the production of heritage because it gives the endangered or outmoded a second life as an exhibition of itself. This is what I mean when I say that heritage emerges from new modes of cultural production, reproduction, and transmission and is shaped by new protocols and new economic obligations and expectations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in UNESCO's various world heritage initiatives, most recently in the area of intangible heritage.

Second, I am less concerned with the dematerialization of artefacts and prefer to explore how material artifacts acquire new and increased value in the information society. Just as photography freed painting and sculpture from their obligation to record the world, it could be said that digital media and information technologies can free museums to rethink their normative approach to information, what I would call their 'informing museologies'. As collections and installations become doubly historical, first, as part of the historical record, and second, as part of the history of museums, museums can exploit the potential of a 'performing museology'. Whereas informing museologies deploy the authority of the museum to convey information through objects, performing museologies reveal the very nature of the museum as an active agent in constituting knowledge and experience. Performing museums put the museum itself on display. They foreground the uniqueness of the museum as a medium (and not only as a repository). Performing museologies put the information society into a wider historical context even as they historicize the museum itself. Above all, they do this museologically.

Third, we need to pay attention to the creation of new kinds of artifacts, including digital ones, as well as to the relationship between material objects and their remediations. Responses to the attacks of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath have made these issues particularly clear and challenged museums to respond to the rapid proliferation and circulation of 'objects', both material and digital. Spontaneous memorials proliferated in all media and spaces, as artefacts,



images, words, and events moved from one medium to another and back. Analog photographs were digitized or photocopied. Digital photographs appeared on websites, but were also printed on hundreds of fliers that were posted around the City. These fliers and photographs became the centrepiece of improvised shrines, accompanied by fresh flowers, candles, drawings, postcards, flags, and possessions of the deceased. Shrines were photographed, digitized, and posted online, but also the actual shrines were collected and preserved for future exhibitions and permanent acquisition by museums. The National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. created not only a thoughtful exhibition of artifacts salvaged from the disaster sites, but also they produced a particularly effective website, with images of those artifacts, the stories associated with them, and curatorial reflections on the entire process of collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting the material evidence of tragic and traumatic events of overwhelming immediacy. This is not business as usual.

— **ISABELLE VINSON:** **A sensitive issue is in debate in the museum world today, which is to put an end to the principle of inalienability of museum collections. If objects are no more important, what are the consequences on museum missions and who has the authority to decide on the de-accessioning of museum collections?**

— **BRUNO S. FREY:** The effect of giving museums the option to ‘de-access’ some of their holdings is very positive. Each museum has then the possibility to concentrate its collection on those exhibits or works of art which are really crucial. When no ‘de-accessioning’ is allowed, museums are burdened with objects which do not fit and which therefore are rarely or never shown to the public. Most museums are only able to exhibit a very small share of their holdings: in many cases not more than 10 per cent. It is also well known that many museum collections are not the result of any systematic policy, but many objects have come into their possession by historical fluke. The resulting biases can be corrected by allowing museums to actively manage their holdings and the digitization programmes are important in this perspective. The digitization of the images of museum objects clearly improves the state of information among actors in the museum world and, in the same time, enables more and more beneficial exchanges among museums. It also allows museums to sell objects they do not need to buyers outside museums. Often the museums do not know what they

possess. A good digitization programme helps them to get a better knowledge of what they really want to keep and what part they can sell without loss. But at a time when public investment in the cultural field is contracting globally, such selling should certainly not be a substitute for the subsidies received from the government. The revenue gained by selling part of the collection must stay at the disposition of the respective museum. It should be clearly earmarked as special and additional funds which the museum can use for activities otherwise impossible to undertake. One possibility is to finance new artistic and cultural programmes.

— **BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT:** When I say that ‘ethnographic objects are made, not found’, I am referring to the processes by which the material world in which we and others live become collectible and exhibitable. I suggest that ethnographic objects are ‘disciplinary artifacts’. They are ‘created’ by ethnographers, just as archaeological artefacts are ‘created’ by archaeologists, not by Aztecs or Mesopotamians. Of course, in their earlier lives, such objects were made by others, but they were not yet ethnographic or archaeological or historical. Stone tools and clay pots do not begin their lives as ethnographic or archaeological objects, but that is what they can become thanks to ethnographers and archaeologists and their disciplinary operations. To the extent that some fields were once or still are museum disciplines, collections materialize such knowledge formations. But, as knowledge formations change, as scholars turn to other kinds of evidence, these fields migrate from the museum to the university or research centre, leaving older collections behind. Museums become, at least in part, the repository of outmoded, rather than current, knowledge formations. While to the fields in question, these collections may have lost their relevance, they can acquire new value for the history of those fields and the relationship of museums to them. At the Mütter Museum at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, what was a state-of-the-art collection of anatomical pathology and model of medical pedagogy in the nineteenth century became an embarrassment to twentieth-century doctors. They had to be persuaded of the value of preserving and reinterpreting old collections and installations as part of the history of how medicine was taught.

As to the importance of objects to museums – the idea that objects are a founding principle of museums – this too is a historical question that must be linked to the changing relationship of objects to knowledge formations and pedagogies. After all, the museum is not only a historical formation, but also an



emergent phenomenon. The circumstances at the time when museums were founded are different from where museums find themselves today and the futures they can imagine for themselves. As disciplines and pedagogies change, museums change. They must reflect not only on their past, but also on their *relationship* to their past, because in addition to historicizing all that has been entrusted to their care, museums also historicize themselves. At the same time, museums are responding to new kinds of evidence, new ways of creating knowledge, and new pedagogies. Whereas systematic collections of plants and animals were once the mainstay of biology, scientists today require laboratories and data of another kind. Therefore, although collections of objects have long been a defining feature of museums, many museums, particularly new ones, are challenging the idea that museums of the future should be determined by that founding principle, particularly since museums today invest more in exhibition than research. The exhibition value of objects generally takes precedence over their research value, which is consistent with thematic, conceptual, and narrative approaches to exhibition and scenographic and theatrical approaches to installation. These developments show how museums are reconnecting with their historical roots in world's fairs and international expositions. Installation leads, with or without objects.

— ISABELLE VINSON: **What is the place of the market in digital culture?**

— BRUNO S. FREY: In the future the market should play a more important role in all sorts of culture including 'digital culture' because it allows more flexibility and benefits those who are more active and innovative. But the arts should certainly not be given over completely to the market. While the market is a very efficient and highly successful institution its functioning depends on specific conditions. It does not work at all, or at least less well, if there are external effects. In the case of the arts and culture such external effects are important. Examples are the 'option effect' where people value the possibility of attending or visiting a cultural activity though they do not actually use such opportunity. In this case the cultural supplier does not get any revenue: it cannot tap in monetary form the value it creates. In that case the market does not work. Another example of the market not functioning well refers to the 'educational effect': the art and culture supplied benefits the general population including persons not attending and paying for the cultural activity. One of the major contributions of what is called 'the Economics

of Art' is to identify empirically where such externalities exist and what their size is. It follows that the limits of the use of markets in arts and culture must be determined by a constitutional contract. In the case of digital culture, research may show whether external effects are weak or not, and in which case the use of the market should indeed be strong in that area. All this means that it may be beneficial to use the market in those areas of art and culture where such external effects are small. However, care must be taken not to use the market where externalities are strong.

— **BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT:** In my opinion, digital objects are not so different from tangible objects, in so far as digital objects are collected, studied, displayed, and interpreted. These operations make digital objects into something new, something different from what they once were, because these operations change our relationship to these digital objects. It is the nature of the knowing and the value we accord objects of all kinds that make them what they are.