CONTEMPORARY ART MAGAZINE
WWW.OBIEG.PL

A new meaning of actuality – an interview with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

I would like you to present the main idea of the Museum and the goal of having it in Warsaw.

The goal of having this Museum in Warsaw is to present a thousand years of Jewish history in the very place where it happened. Understandably, this history has been overshadowed by the Shoah and the void that it has left. By presenting the civilization that Jews created in the very place where they created it, the Museum of the History of Polish will convey the enormity of *what* was lost. Poland is the ultimate site of the Shoah. This is the place where the Germans built *all* of the death camps. This is the place where most of Europe's Jews perished. Standing on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto facing the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will honor those who died by remembering how they lived.

The history of Polish Jews is an integral part of the history of Poland, a message of special importance to children growing up in Poland today. Most of them have never met a Jewish person but live in places where Jews were once a vibrant presence. They are experiencing a truly unique period in Polish history: never before has Poland been as homogeneous as it is today. Central to their understanding of Poland's historical diversity is the story of Polish Jews, the rich civilization they created, and the spectrum of Polish-Jewish relations.

The museum will also be important for the lively, though small, Jewish community in Poland, whose story the museum will tell and whose involvement in the making of the museum is of critical importance. Jews from abroad, whose visits to Poland focus almost exclusively on the Shoah and anti-Semitism, will hopefully begin their visit with the museum, broaden their historical perspective, and engage with the extraordinary civilization that Jews created here—as well as with Poland today.

The museum, the first public-private partnership of its type in Poland and joint effort of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, the Government of Poland, and the City of Warsaw, will fulfill its educational mission not only through its innovative core exhibition, but also through educational and public programs and facilities, including a resource center, mediateque, auditorium, two cinematheques, rooms for conferences and workshops, and galleries for temporary and traveling exhibitions. The Museum of the History of Polish Jews will be a major new cultural center on the Warsaw landscape, an important meeting place for exploring the rich legacy and complex history of Polish Jews, and an open forum for addressing difficult questions and fostering mutual respect.

What is the role of permanent exhibition in accomplishing that?

The museum is creating a multimedia narrative exhibition about a millennium of Jewish presence in Pol-

ish lands and the rich Jewish civilization that Jews created here. That long historical perspective is essential to the idea of an open-ended past, an idea to which the museum is deeply committed. The museum wants to create what I call a "trusted zone," a place where visitors will trust the museum to be accurate and fair so that when it presents a difficult subject, they will be more willing to explore and discuss it. Contemporary debates have been missing the long and deep historical context the museum will provide.

The permanent exhibition is being developed collaboratively by a team established by Jerzy Halbersztadt, the museum's director. The team consists of distinguished academics from Poland, Israel, and the United States, a world-class design company Event Communications, and professional curators, archivists, scholars, and researchers in Poland and abroad. While the historical content of the museum will meet the highest scholarly standards, the permanent exhibition is not a school, it is not an archive, it is not a library, and it is not a display of objects in vitrines. The permanent exhibition will be a completely different experience. I think of it as a theater of history, as history in the first person, history told through the sources, rather than synthesized and narrated by an anonymous historian. We will open up the Statute of Kalisz, the privilegium or charter that was a founding document for Jewish communal autonomy, point by point; we will draw on rabbinical responsa and Jewish communal record books; on wills and inventories; on letters, travelogues, memoirs, and autobiographies; on literature and the press, art and music, theater and film. Making strategic use of multimedia, we can layer content and encourage visitors to explore the sources and not only to look at them, read a label, or listen to an audio guide. This approach makes for a very different type of visitor experience, a more flexible and exploratory one. Those interested in a particular subject will be able to pursue it in depth, while others can browse and still get the main idea.

Are you going to provide any master narrative or overarching narrative in the sense that this is a history that either was going in some direction or is going in some direction, or is it going to be a number of different stories weaved like a figure in the carpet?

The museum is working with an international team of excellent historians, and they are very sensitive to historiographic issues and bring a critical approach to the history the museum will present. First, we avoid teleology, the idea that history drives towards an inevitable end. We don't want visitors to make an easy inference from chronology to causality. Historical explanation is considerably more complicated. With the pitfalls of teleology in mind, we avoid foreshadowing what came later. Instead, we try to keep our visitors inside the period and encourage them to see through the eyes of those who lived at the time, while making them aware of larger trends, of macrohistorical phenomena and processes, but without foreshadowing. By following the itineraries of various individuals and histories of various communities, visitors will discover the variety of paths taken and what people at the time knew and thought. Visitors will see and feel how history was actually lived.

Second, a master narrative runs contrary to our commitment to presenting an open-ended past. For this among other reasons, we neither begin nor end the history of Polish Jews with the Holocaust. The postwar period is a very important part of our story. In fact, the museum is itself part of the postwar story and will be included in the exhibition narrative. Nor will the postwar period mark the end of the story. We don't want to close the book in 2011 just before the museum opens. We want to keep the story open, extend it beyond the borders of Poland to all the places where Polish Jews settled, and carry it forward into the future.

Third, we are committed to the principle of many voices, rather than a single voice telling a single story. We will make the sources do the telling. We want to avoid a synthetic third-person historical voice as a main way through this history. We prefer a diversity of first-person accounts from the period, while insuring that collective experience and macrohistorical processes are communicated.

Fourth, we try to avoid an apologetic narrative: we do not want to create a "hall of fame" or rest our case on the "contributions" of Jews to Polish society and the world. Of course we will present incredible people and marvelous accomplishments, but first and foremost as they illuminate the larger history we present. This is a serious history museum and serious history is not celebratory. Serious as this history is, we will present it in a lively way and engage visitors in meaningful dialog and thoughtful debate.

If you were to compare this museum in progress to three other museums I can think of i.e. Jewish Museum in New York, Museum of Jewish Heritage in NYC, and Jewish Museum in Berlin...

Thank you for that question! I have curated exhibitions for The Jewish Museum in New York since the 1970's. The first exhibition that I curated for them was *Image before my eyes: a photographic history of Jewish life in Poland, 1864-1939*, together with Lucjan Dobroszycki, followed by *Fabric of Jewish life*, which featured their textile collection. I'm currently working with them on an exhibition that will open in May 2009, *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust.* So I know them really well.

The Jewish Museum represents the classic form of a Jewish museum. It began more than a century ago with collections of Judaica, and it has become a Jewish art museum that speaks to a broad public. Associated with the Jewish Theological Seminary, The Jewish Museum has historically been a quintessentially Jewish museum in the sense that it was created by Jews, largely but not exclusively for Jews, and focused on the Jewish experience.

It was in the 1960's, when The Jewish Museum mounted bold exhibitions of modern and contemporary art, that the seeds of what they are today, a Jewish art museum, were sown. They situate themselves in relation to the other great art institutions on "museum mile," the stretch of Fifth Avenue where the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Guggenheim Museum are to be found, and they distinguish themselves from the Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, which is a history museum. At the same time, The Jewish Museum does create historical exhibitions, to mention only those dealing with Dreyfus, Kafka, Sarah Bernhardt, and Court Jews. Their curatorial signature is to use art in the service of history and history in the service of art.

Virtually all Jewish museums in the United States, like The Jewish Museum in New York, want to reach a wider audience; none of them wants to be parochial or narrow in their mission and message. The Jewish Museum in New York has been very successful in attracting a more diverse public.

The Museum of Jewish Heritage...

The heart and soul of The Museum of Jewish Heritage is the Holocaust. Everything is built around that beating heart. The Holocaust part of their permanent exhibition, which is extremely well done, sits between what happened before and what happened after. The first floor deals with the first four decades of the twentieth century, and the third floor presents the period since the Holocaust in Israel and the United States—but, significantly, not Europe.

The Jewish Museum in Berlin...

The Jewish Museum in Berlin has the most spectacular building. Personally, I think it's a phenomenal building. I know it's a controversial building, an extremely difficult building in which to install an exhibition, but it is a great asset, an experience in its own right. In contrast with The Jewish Museum in Berlin, the planning of our building, which will also be a stunning architectural statement, followed the development of our program. We began by developing our core exhibition and only later organized an international competition for selecting an architect. Incidentally, Rainer Mahlamäki just received the International Architecture Award for his design of our building from the international jury of the Museum of Architecture and Design in Chicago in cooperation

with the European Center for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies**.** The Jewish Museum in Berlin tells the story of German Jews, an obvious difference, as is the context in which the Berlin museum operates, and their approach.

And your museum...

First, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews is telling a story about a Jewish community that was once not only the largest in the world, but also the center of the Jewish world. If we take a maximalist approach, most of the Jews in the world can trace their ancestry back to the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which includes present-day Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, and parts of Russia, Estonia, Slovakia, Romania, and Moldavia. That cannot be said for any other museum dedicated to the history of Jews in any country, be it Germany, France, Great Britain, Spain, or Italy. That so many of our visitors will be able to find themselves in our story will make a big difference in the way they relate to what the museum presents. Our Polish visitors—the museum expects them to make up more than 50% of our audience—will discover the significance of Jewish presence and the integral place of Jews in Polish history, including the history of their own towns and cities.

Second, we do not start from a collection of objects. The other three Jewish museums either had a collection or they formed a collection, and objects are central to the way they tell their story, which they do in interesting ways. I have a love for object-based museums, no question about it, but for several reasons, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will not depend primarily on original objects. It doesn't have the kinds of collections it would need to support the kind of story that it wants to tell in the way that it wants to tell it. Even if the museum had a great collection, it would not limit itself to original objects. It will use every means and method possible—including original objects—to convey the larger story and to provide rich opportunities for exploration.

The word 'explore' is really important here because the museum has in mind a much more active visitor; it is not about walking through this history and seeing it, though there will be plenty to see, but rather the museum wants to open this history up through various media. So we think of the museum as working in four dimensions, the fourth dimension being time. There is even a fifth dimension: media. By using interactive media the museum can deepen the content so that visitors who are so inclined will find enough to sustain them if they want to take the time to explore a topic in depth. We like to think that a visitor could spend an entire day in one gallery or a whole visit with one exhibit and not exhaust what is there. Our narrative strategies and interpretive approach are also different.

Some of the strategies of seduction that you mentioned remind me of the Imperial War Museum, such as Trench Experience, Air Raids of London...

The museum is not doing that. Absolutely not. We're taking our inspiration more from contemporary art and performance than from commercial entertainment. Those trench experiences are more like motion simulation rides or attractions on a tour of the Universal Studios back lot. They are more like the special effects in movies than what we are after. We are not interested in making a literal recreation of anything, whether a period room or a war experience. We are interested in designing evocative environments that create a mood and dispose the visitor to explore a subject and reflect on it. We are interested in deconstructing settings so as to reveal something essential about them that a literal recreation would not. We would like the museum to have a very contemporary feel and to be welcoming to people who might never go to a contemporary art museum or performance, but who would be open to the surprise and challenge and critical reflection that we associate with contemporary art museums. That's one source of our inspiration.

Aren't you afraid that for many people, especially in Poland, it's going to feel like a digital simulacrum?

Absolutely not. No more than the multimedia installations of a Bill Viola, Christian Boltanski, Janet Cardiff, Nam June Paik, Anne Hamilton, and pioneering Polish video and multi-media artists. Would you characterize Zofia Lipecka's brilliant video installation "Jedwabne's Aftermath" at Zachęta a **"**digital simulation"? The idea that a museum that does not depend primarily on "actual" objects is somehow a "virtual" museum is a misperception. Historically, museums evolved as institutions that preserved material evidence of the past and safeguarded treasures. Today, museums are civic institutions that fulfill their educational mission through exhibitions and programs that draw on a wide variety of sources, display techniques, and media. The key issues for us are *historical integrity* and *what constitutes an "actual" object* or, put another way, "digital simulacrum" is an example of what I would call the materiality fallacy.

First, *historical integrity*. Some of the best museums whose subjects are related to ours—the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem—use facsimiles, copies, castings, and models. The original document or artifact may no longer exist or it may be too fragile to exhibit or it may be impossible to remove it from its current location or it is only through a scale model or reconstruction that a totality can be grasped all at once. The "authenticity" of what is shown rests on the historical integrity of what is shown—like a notarized copy in a court of law—rather than on the literal materiality of the object, and on transparency in the way that original materials are mediated. That said, original objects are important, they use them and so will we—strategically.

The museum begins with the curatorial principle of responsibility to the nature of the source as an historical artifact and to transparent mediation. We want to confront our visitors with primary sources, rather than extract information and embed that information in an anonymous third-person historical synthesis. Using interactive media, we are able to bring our visitors into contact with a much greater range of sources than they could ever encounter as original objects, even at museums with the richest collections. We want to sensitize our visitors to the nature of the source as a source, to make what we call the back story transparent, and to treat the story of the source as part of the main story. Whether the back story is about Julia Pirotte and the photographs she took in the aftermath of the Kielce pogrom or about Julien Bryan and his photographs of the 1939 siege of Warsaw or about Nathan Rapoport, the creator of the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, we want our visitors to understand that all sources have been authored and to make the authorship of the source part of the story and not simply a technical detail on a label.

This way of presenting history adds layers to the material we present and lets us work with the multiple temporalities of an object or document. Take, for example, the doors of the Gniezno cathedral: a century separates the story of St. Adalbert (and relationship of Jews to the church and the King) that is told on the doors from the period during which the doors were made, and *both* stories (and their relationship to one another) are relevant to the history that we want to present. This is not a matter of a longer text panel, but rather about opening up a source and using multimedia to layer information and provide multiple points of entry and guided access to the source. In this way, we can add depth while creating a platform for lateral connections to related topics and materials.

Second, *the materiality* fallacy: what constitutes an "original" or "actual" or "authentic" object. Take, for example, the 18th-century wooden synagogue of Gwoździec that we will feature in the 18th-century gallery. We intend to reconstruct the timber-framed roof and polychrome ceiling of this spectacular synagogue. Now we could go to a theater prop maker, give him the dimensions and some pictures, and say to him "Make it!" The result would look pretty much like the original, but it would be a theatrical prop. That is not what we want to do. What we want to do goes to the

heart of the issue of actual and virtual. We want to work with a studio in Massachusetts, whose motto is "learn by building." These beautiful 18th-century wooden synagogues no longer exist; the Germans burned to the ground those still standing in 1939. We can however *recover the knowledge of how to build them* by actually building one. What is actual about that artifact resides therefore not in the original 18th-century wood, not in the original painted interior, but in the *knowledge that we recovered for how to build it*. It's a completely different concept of the object. This approach is related to a completely different tradition of thinking about what constitutes an object.

The best example I can think of is the Jingu Shrine in Ise, Japan. This is a shrine that is 800 years old and never older than 20 years because for 800 years they have been tearing it down every 20 years in order to rebuild it. The only way to maintain the embodied knowledge of how to build it is to build it, and to make it necessary to build it, they tear it down and then must build it again. *The value is in maintaining the knowledge of how to build it, not in preserving the original materials.* The result is not a replica or simulation of the Jingu shrine; it *is* the Jingu shrine. This is a completely different way of defining what is "actual" about such an object.

Let us move to the realm of art now. What role is art going to play within the museum and I mean the actual art objects?

Art plays an important role in the museum in a variety of ways. Some of the museum's most treasured sources are themselves works of art, whether medieval illuminated manuscripts, the Gniezno doors, the wooden synagogue, or paintings. We may make them the focal point of an exhibit or we may take inspiration from them for creating a scenic environment. For example, the inspiration for the exhibit presenting the partitioning of Poland is a French engraving entitled "The Royal Cake": it shows the three heads of state tearing up a map of Poland, each taking a piece. While we may or may not show the original engraving—for conservation reasons, paper cannot be left on display for an extended period of time—the image will appear and visitors will see how it inspires a total environment in which they will be able to explore what happened to Jews when they suddenly found themselves in the Russian, Prussian, and Hapsburg Austrian Empires.

The story of art and artists is also a very important part of the history the museum presents, starting in the 19th-century with such artists as Maurycy Gottlieb, who exemplifies the role of the arts in Jewish encounters with modernity. Some works of art are especially useful for conveying a historical event from the perspective of the period, to mention only Aleksander Lesser's "The Funeral of the Five Victims of the Demonstration in Warsaw in 1861." We would like to show the original painting and may very well be able to, but that alone would not suffice because there is such a great story embedded in that painting. We would not want visitors to look at it, say "Wow, beautiful painting!", read a label, and leave it at that. Rather, we want to mobilize the aesthetic and emotional power of the original painting to engage visitors in the history that it represents and of which it is part—and that is where interactive media can play such a vital and *complementary* role. In a word, when we can show the original work and it strengthens the story, we will do so, keeping in mind that original paintings, textiles, and paper present conservation issues and cannot remain on display for many years.

Finally, when visitors exit from the gallery dealing with the postwar years, they will find themselves in a circulation space in which we will open the narrative up to the story of Polish Jews in the many places around the world where they settled. We want to keep that installation current with what is happening today. We want to create a very participatory space and to collaborate with contemporary artists who engage a wide public in creating content through what is variously known as conversational art, social software, and locative media. Our priority is the ongoing involvement of a wide public not only within the walls of the museum and but also far beyond those walls. We want to incorporate their voices.

How is the museum going to be integrated into the fabric of the city? Is there a program of outreach to the neighboring people?

The museum has been very active, even before it opens, in doing the kind of outreach that defines its philosophy and ambition, not only locally in the neighborhood and in Warsaw more generally, but also nationally, and internationally. First, "My Muranow" is a project that engages people who live in the neighborhood now or who lived there in the past, both children and older generations. The site of the museum is after all not only where the Warsaw Ghetto once stood but also where the former Jewish neighborhood was located. Although our mandate is much broader than Warsaw, we are also a site-specific museum that stands literally on the rubble of what was destroyed. All the more important are the memories of what was once there—before, during, and after the war—as it was experienced by those who lived in that area and who may still be living there today. So much was destroyed and the area is so transformed that there are very few material traces of what used to be there. We also want the museum be a good neighbor and to form a positive relationship with those who live in the neighborhood. The museum intends to serve the immediate local community, for example, with a mediatheque intended for youth, which the museum expects to be most heavily used by those living nearby.

Second, within the city of Warsaw, the museum will be a major cultural landmark. Even as the museum is being built it has a presence on the site in the form of the Ohel, a temporary artistic installation, information center, meeting place, and venue for concerts and other events. The Ohel, which was nominated for a Wdechy 2007 "Place of the Year" award, has been developed and is programmed by Agnieszka Rudzinska, the museum's Deputy Director of Communications and Public Relations.

Together with other Warsaw landmarks, the museum will form part of a cultural precinct and itinerary in the city. So, rather than flying through Warsaw to get to Krakow and Auschwitz, we hope visitors will think, "Oh my goodness, I better allow some time in Warsaw because I must see the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the Warsaw Rising Museum and …." This kind of response has been dubbed the "Bilbao effect," the idea that a major cultural project can draw visitors to a city they might otherwise skip. Together these landmark attractions will form a critical mass of "must see" places. The cumulative effect and synergy will help all of them.

Third, on a national front, one of the museum's outreach projects connects the museum to thousands of places in Poland where Jews once lived and engages those who live there today with the Jewish past of their towns. The museum is linking these places to one another and eventually to Jews abroad whose families once lived in those towns. The museum will provide online access to their collected materials and documentation.

Last but not least, the museum is international in its outreach: not only will it draw international visitors, but also it is using communication technologies to extend its reach and provide access to those living anywhere in the world. The museum wants to be a meeting place, both face-to-face and online. It wants to engage its public in providing content, memorabilia, and documentation. It wants them to be able to relate their towns, families, and personal histories to the larger story we tell.

Speaking now specifically about the museum's Jewish visitors. They may not be the museum's largest potential audience, but they are very important to us. The museum expects about 20% of its visitors to be Jews from abroad. It is important to note that they are diverse: Israelis, Holocaust survivors, children of Holocaust survivors, European Jews, Jewish youth from Israel, Jewish youth from North America, Jews whose can trace their families back to Poland and those who cannot. We have to understand them and their sensitivities. They come here for various reasons: some of them are motivated by a genealogical quest and visit archives as well as the towns or cities from which

their families came. The majority of organized groups and especially young people come for the Holocaust and only the Holocaust. The museum has a very important role to play in changing their itinerary—we would like them to start their journey with the Museum of the History of Polish Jews—and broadening their historical perspective to a millennium of Jewish history here. The museum also has to understand other visitors: those from Germany, France, Russia, and the former Soviet Union, as well as from the rest of Europe and the world

And what about the possible impact on Polish-Jewish or Jewish-Polish relationships? This is something that everybody is asking about.

I agree that everyone is asking this question and the museum takes it very seriously. Basically, the museum hears everyone's worst case scenario. Polish colleagues worry that an honest history of Polish Jews will reinforce the perception of Poland as an anti-Semitic country, while Jewish visitors are afraid that we'll present a rosy picture. The museum will do neither. Rather, the museum wants to create what I call a "trusted zone," a responsible presentation of a rich and complex history. The museum will deal with difficult moments, but in relation to the *spectrum* of Polish-Jewish relationships, the high points and the low ones. Striking the right balance in a historically responsible way is our goal. We would like to think that by creating a trusted zone, the museum could provide a rich and deep historical context for reflection around difficult questions and dialogue among the diverse visitors that will come to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is Professor of Performance Studies in the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Her most recent books include *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times* (with Jonathan Karp), *Art from Start to Finish* (with Howard Becker and Robert Faulkner), and *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust* (with Mayer Kirshenblatt), which has won several awards. She currently leads the Core Exhibition Development Team of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which is being created on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto.