

## EXHIBITING CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS

Moderator: Neil Harris, Preston and Sterling Morton Professor of History, University of Chicago

Speakers: Elizabeth Broun, Director, National Museum of American Art  
Cary Carson, Vice-President for Research, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation  
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Professor of Performance Studies, New York University  
Edward Linenthal, Professor of Religion and American Culture, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh  
Harold Skramstad, President, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village

### SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY NEIL HARRIS

Neil Harris began by declaring that controversies faced by a number of museums recently "can neither be produced on demand nor invariably predicted." A controversial exhibition, he continued, "is not necessarily a policy choice. It is frequently a status produced by reactions rather than initiatives." Furthermore, he asserted, "controversy as such should neither be a criterion [for] producing an exhibit [nor a] bar against it. There are better reasons to show an exhibition or not, and these should occupy us here."

Are heated disputes about exhibitions a long-standing phenomenon or a new one? Harris noted that a recent book on American-history museums gave no attention whatsoever to controversy. Nonetheless, he observed, it is not a newcomer in the museum world. However, three factors distinguish present controversies from those of the past: 1) Until the last quarter century, museums were largely insulated from the public debate engendered by controversial exhibitions; 2) when controversy arose, it centered not upon exhibition subjects but rather on objects; and 3) the exhibitions and the disputes they aroused were about art, not art history.

Museums "have long been absorbed by didacticism," Harris continued. "Displays always imply the taking of position. Gathering collections and making exhibitions requires judgments, presumes priorities, demands expertise, and expresses values of various times." Unlike other public institutions, such as libraries, which "were dictionaries expected to reflect inclusiveness," museums have traditionally been exclusive, by their very nature. And only in the last two decades "have museum directors and curators been forced to defend again and again not merely their actual exhibitions but the very principles which legitimize them."

Until the last twenty-five years, attacks upon museums came primarily from artists and art critics, and "more rarely, by moralizers of one sort or another," Harris said. Such complaints arose when museum policy appeared to favor traditional canons over contemporary work, and vice versa. As early as 1913, the Art Institute of Chicago aroused public ire by hosting the Armory Show. Following the government involvement in the arts that began with the New Deal, politicians joined the disputes, generally focusing on four issues: Was the art decent? Was it authentic? Was it comprehensible? Was it patriotic? A group of paintings by artists such as Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe, presented abroad by the State Department for exhibition in the late forties, was widely denounced as "lunatic junk." During the cold war, any exhibition that included work by artists linked with communism—among them Pablo Picasso—was suspect.

These controversies stemmed from assumptions that an object's entry into an exhibition within a museum gave it "credentials." Collection-driven museums, whose acquisitions reflected donor values, did not have to consider controversy and its avoidance. However, no longer is the critical

issue simply the authenticity of the objects on display, but rather "the quality or representation of the experience."

This sea change in the museum world began in the sixties. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 exhibition "Harlem on My Mind" exemplifies the new role museums and museum exhibitions began to play in American life, as well as the resulting controversies. The criticisms of "Harlem on My Mind" continue to be heard today. Such exhibitions, we are told, are "fine in principle but belong somewhere else—not in this museum, not in any museum, but instead in a book or a university course."

"Harlem on My Mind" took place during a period of "aggressive redefinition" in the museum world. Storage expanded, special exhibitions and blockbuster shows proliferated, and new activities such as domestic study tours were organized. "By entering the market in force with more visible programs underwritten by the new National Endowment for the Arts, museums were now making connections that had previously been defined more obscurely," Harris commented. As Harold Rosenberg observed, museums became "increasingly inclusive and avant garde." Coupled with an erosion of confidence in existing canons, this left museums vulnerable in the seventies and eighties. A widespread "loss of expertise" meant that "anyone could become a significant critic of the museum, not merely artists and professionals."

These trends have characterized history museums as well. Therefore, the task of the museum world is to "define more clearly and self-consciously its actions and goals, its relation to truth-seeking, and to learn more about how exhibitions function as sources of opinion," Harris said. "It is also, among other things, to determine whether there are aspects of the exhibition form which suggest that some subjects are better treated in another medium."

"What distinguishes the exhibition from other systems of communication, and does it suggest a need of museums to examine their treatment of subjects that are complex and contested?" Harris asked, identifying several major factors: 1) The "inherently collaborative" nature of exhibition authorship; 2) the "display mode" of the exhibition, which is more authoritarian than that of a book because "it is often impossible to know the range of choices from which the objects in an exhibition are selected"; 3) exhibition financing, which places sponsors in the position of appearing to lend or withdraw endorsement from specific subjects; 4) the heterogeneity of museum audiences compared to college students or book and magazine readers; and 5) the diversity of the museum world itself. "Different museums are as different from one another as they are from universities and libraries," Harris noted, "or as universities and libraries are different from resort hotels and amusement parks."

Harris concluded by asserting that "we need to consider most fundamentally the changing status of museums and museum exhibitions in the life of our culture. We have both an institutional inheritance and an institutional future. We can and should be responsible for both."

## **SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY CARY CARSON**

While Cary Carson agreed that an important function of history museums is to collect, to chronicle, and to celebrate, he maintained that the professionals who staff them increasingly believe their responsibility is also "to criticize and to comment. We want these institutions to be forums," he explained. "Historians in museums are getting visitors ready for change. They show them their unmade choices in historical perspective." Controversy is intrinsic to this role and should, in fact, be a criterion for an exhibition.

## **SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY EDWARD LINENTHAL**

"I agree with Cary," Edward Linenthal stated, citing his experience with some of the most hotly contested historic sites and exhibitions in the country. Little Big Horn in Montana, which changed "from shrine to historic site" and incorporated native American perspectives into the interpretive process, exemplifies a successful response to the call for "public places of engagement where diverse groups of Americans can make their voices heard." By contrast, the inclusion of Admiral Husband E. Kimmel's 1942 comment that the Japanese bombing was "a brilliantly executed military maneuver" in an interpretive exhibition at Pearl Harbor was regarded by some as "defiling" and "a process of desecration." Every step in the planning of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was "hotly contested," Linenthal recalled. "Everything was seen as a razor's-edge issue, because doing it wrong meant that you were desecrating the memory of survivors." However, these disagreements did not become public in the planning process as happened with the *Enola Gay* exhibition.

"Unless we want history museums to present only therapeutic exhibitions, history designed to make us feel good, we should view these museums as demilitarized zones where we can engage and struggle with complex stories."

## **SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY HAROLD SKRAMSTAD**

Harold Skramstad agreed that history museums have begun to help visitors "make connections with things that have not been connected before." However, he observed, "at the same time, we are expecting some immunity from the consequences of that." For Skramstad, the "cultural-value disconnect" thus created revolves around the issues of authority and authorship. Museums have taken their internal value structure from the academic community, whose members are immune from the consequences of holding unpopular ideas. Yet authorship in many museums is far more institutional in nature.

"As we move through this process of change, we are going to have to share with our publics that we are moving away from a kind of antiquarian temple to a forum," Skramstad asserted. "A forum has different rules, and we need to help people both inside and outside museums understand what those new rules are."

## **SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT**

Museums have a "delicate act to perform between being a temple, a forum, and a tribunal; particularly when dealing with wars and very contentious historical subjects, the issue of tribunal does come up," Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett declared. The nature of the controversies that arise in each setting "are of a really different order," she continued, and "to some degree, the new style of museum practice is ill-equipped to deal with any of them." Exhibits with an emphasis on curatorial interpretation and a strong driving narrative—created by "often unidentified curatorial teams"—are quite different from more traditional formats that presented visitors "with a lot of objects, loosely arranged by period or category or area," and allowed them to "basically wander through a version of open storage." The new immersive exhibitions are similarly open. Strongly narrative exhibitions, on the other hand, tend to produce "a new authoritative account." They are not forums.

## SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY ELIZABETH BROUN

"I am not quite as willing as the rest of my colleagues to give up entirely on the role of the museum as a temple or a place of commemoration," Elizabeth Broun remarked, perhaps because each year she observes the pilgrimages of American families and high-school students to the monuments and museums on the Washington mall. However, "if all we did was just present the received wisdom of the ages again and again, we would inevitably become quite irrelevant," she admitted. "We need to understand the boundaries of our missions, and the strategic direction will be defined on that boundary." Moreover, she emphasized, that boundary "exists in response to a broader social impulse—what is going on in the universe around us." It is "never absolute."

In fact, it must be examined regularly and newly understood. "What are the audiences' expectations when they come to see what you are doing?" Broun asked. "You should understand how your audience will personally connect. They will not have a response unless there is a personal connection."

## SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSION

"I could not agree more," Harold Skramstad replied to Broun. "Our categories are not the categories of our users. They come with a full plate of knowledge, experience, and expectations." Despite criticism of the "celebratory stance" of history museums, he continued, "I would assert that, in some fundamental way, by their existence, museums are celebratory."

Cary Carson interjected that he advocated the addition of a new function, not the abandonment of an old one. "The critical and the celebratory are two sides of an experience that we should provide." Elizabeth Broun rejoined that "although I basically agree with what you have said, I do feel that these are fundamentally incompatible objectives, and how to achieve both of them at the same time is a dilemma that we have not resolved."

Edward Linenthal remarked that some visitors to the USS *Arizona* memorial at Pearl Harbor come not as tourists but "because this is a personal grave site. The clash between the commemorative and the historical" functions of the memorial is resolved by a spatial separation of functions. The same tensions between commemoration and dispassionate history shaped the development of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The commemorative voices of survivors prevailed in discussions over whether or not, for example, to exhibit the hair of women who had been imprisoned at Auschwitz.

In planning the *Enola Gay* exhibit, Linenthal continued, two narratives emerged, "each with a different historical voice and each with a different commemorative message." One historical voice was that of veterans and others. Their message was "Remember what we did, remember what we sacrificed." The other voice spoke about the bomb as "the prelude to the ongoing legacy of the nuclear age." Its message was "Never again." While both were appropriate, the clash between them was inevitable.

"You have to help people figure this out," declared Skramstad. "Sometimes we assume that people will read this stuff in our exhibitions and that they can sort this out." The acknowledgment "that this kind of exhibition experience is different" from a traditional one can be helpful, he contended. Noting the diversity of institutions is tremendous, he cautioned that "what works for

one institution is not going to work for another.” Therefore, he argued against trying “to find some general rules” for museums as a whole.

**Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett** maintained that “the moment one chooses an anniversary as the opportunity for addressing issues around a historical event, one has already weighed in to the commemorative moment that shapes the way these issues get addressed. Furthermore, “the moment that one uses as a centerpiece of such an anniversary exhibition an object that has the quality of an icon, a relic, or an overriding symbol, then you have an uphill battle. The consensual, celebratory, and commemorative impulse that is built right into the marking of anniversaries is not conducive to critical re-examination of historical events and understandings.” For her, this dilemma raises a fundamental question: “What are the limits of what can and cannot be said” in an exhibition?

“Not everything can be done in an exhibition,” **Neil Harris** agreed. **Linenthal** concurred, stressing that “museums must also be very sensitive to what happens when you begin to interrogate the sacred narratives of a culture.” While he believes it “can be done respectfully and with integrity,” one must ensure that “people who are invested in those sacred narratives have some sense of ownership of what, in fact, you are doing.”

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: When does prompting controversy as a criterion for exhibits cross the line and become a provocation? Should museums provoke the public to anger and outrage? If so, don't museums have an obligation to be absolutely accurate and present the defense of the provocation at the same time the provocation is presented?

A: (Carson) I do not think anger is the object. What we are acknowledging is that there is already anger. There are already differences of opinion, and we are trying to bring that discourse into the museum and see it in historical perspective. Ideally, people come with very strong opinions and leave with a better sense of the complexity of the issue.

The trust the public holds in its great museums is our most valuable currency. That comes from the traditional role. We have collected the real things, not slippery words, but authentic artifacts. They authenticate this kind of history lesson.

A: (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) The preoccupation with original artifacts is a relatively recent development in museum practice. American museums in the late nineteenth century were often largely museums of copies. It was felt that you may learn more and take a more deliberately educative approach to the exhibition looking at plaster casts.

Q: (Harris, for Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) Would you care to comment on the advantages or disadvantages of a historian writing text about a subject, as opposed to starting with the object?

A: (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum makes ample use of photography, video, and animated stills. The display of objects becomes almost a vestigial practice confined to a few rooms. Objects limit what can be said because they themselves are limited in number and nature. The space consumed by a single object like the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* needs to be assessed in terms of what it can say by itself.

A: (Broun) I guess I am the traditionalist of the day. I still think that when people pack the kids in the car and drive across the country, they come to see the *Wright Flyer* and not necessarily the disciplinary narrative about the development of space flight that can be done without the *Wright Flyer*. There is a touchstone quality, a kind of eminence or aura, as Walter Benjamin called it, that gives these objects a special place in our museum apart from the narrative we put around them.

A: (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) They can also interfere with our ability to tell the story we want to tell. They can actually be an impediment.

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A: (Carson) But they do carry a power. An example is "Mining the Museum," Fred Wilson's exhibit at the Maryland Historical Society. The collections were used to examine the presence of blacks. One case, labeled "Maryland Metal Work," was filled with rococo-revival table silver and a pair of shackles. Everyone assumed they were slave shackles, but they weren't. They were prisoner shackles, not even from the period. Fred Wilson is a performance artist, not a historian. He used the shackles as props and they did their work. I believed they were slave shackles, and now that I know they are not, I have a sense that a trust was betrayed.

A: (Linenthal) Artifacts can gum up the works and create controversy. At Pearl Harbor, the proposal to display the first Japanese mini-submarine captured during the attack, as well as a Japanese airman's uniform, met with vociferous criticism. Sometimes, even their presence does not guarantee they will come to life. The display of the V-2 in a section on civilian space technology at the National Air and Space Museum failed to capture the importance of this artifact until new interpretive labels were put up.

Q: Controversy now not merely happens but is deliberately provoked by museum staff who want to agitate for their own superior social and political views, yet they are bureaucratically remote and inaccessible to the views of ordinary citizens whose values the cosmopolitan staffs deride and even ridicule. What can museums do to ensure that lay perspectives can be heard effectively and given respect?

A: (Skramstad) It is a very legitimate point of view. We are struggling with maintaining the integrity of our cultural production while honoring the fact that the reason we create these experiences is to give value to people's lives.

A: (Broun) Not every good idea belongs in a public exhibition. Once you determine to do an exhibition, there are ways to bring the general public into the planning process. What cannot be institutionalized in a process is a fundamental sense of respect for other people's experiences.

A: (Harris) It is a complex balancing act.

A: (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) Debate is what we are after. Controversy, to the degree that it is provocation and leads to anger, is not what we are after. We are after healthy debate, inquiry, critical thought, and producing an informed citizenry that is capable of independent judgment.

Q: (Broun) Isn't that a bit of a loaded conversation, in that all the powers and strategies rest with the disciplinary experts?

A: (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) I think there is something inherently problematic about institutional authorship. We do not know where the buck stops. We do not know whose position it is. We do not know how it has been taken. I do not think this diffuseness of authorship assists the exhibition.

The Museum of the American Indian is trying an extremely interesting experiment in museum practice. In many instances, there is more than one label for an object, with the labels actually signed. There is also an exhibition with twenty-three curators, each identified and making their own selection commentary. There is something extremely refreshing about the preciseness with which the authors have been specified.

Q: (Harris) In what can be called a chilling atmosphere, are the museums facing or buckling under pressures to cancel exhibitions?

A: (Carson) I do not think there is any question about it. Not only are exhibitions being canceled, but exhibitions that are considered potentially controversial are not being developed. More than that, at least some panelists for the National Endowment for the Humanities are turning down exhibitions that may in fact be very good because they do not want their names associated with them if they become controversial.

A: (Linenthal) The *Enola Gay* controversy is immensely troubling. It was easier to talk about the controversies over the decision to drop the bomb in 1946 than it is in 1995. That should give us some pause. I think we are moving into a very, very dangerous period.

Q: (For Linenthal) Your suggestion earlier that museums may need to include an explanation of the making of an exhibit in the exhibition itself is perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the invasion of the postmodern into museums. Are there other ways to accommodate the fact that an exhibition is an interpretive act?

A: (Linenthal) I have never been called postmodern before! An example of what I meant occurred at Little Big Horn. In 1986, American Indian movement activists, concerned about the lack of progress on an Indian memorial, dug up the grass around the Custer monument and put down a plaque about the Indians. The Park Service left the plaque for a few days and then put it in the museum with an extensive label about the history of discussions about an Indian memorial.

A: (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) Are we talking about a postmodern invasion or healthy self-examination? Museums are examining who they are, their histories, their operations, and the kind of experience they can offer. We are operating within an institution that has a long and venerable history but whose context has changed radically. Perhaps bringing the museum process into the exhibition is a postmodern invasion, but I think it is also healthy self-examination. I applaud it.

A: (Harris) I think the sense of the museum as dynamic, living, changing, and self-reflective is a good note on which to end. Thank you all.