NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

ARTS & CULTURE ADVOCACY PROGRAM

Curator's Handbook for Managing Controversy

This handbook offers curators practical guidance for handling the complex negotiations—within institutions, with trustees, with artists, and with stakeholders in the community—involved in creating potentially-controversial exhibitions. Information was collected through interviews with curators and museum directors and through a series of curatorial workshops.

Before You Plan an Exhibition

Strengthen your position by acquiring a thorough knowledge of institutional culture and social context, and by developing alliances and support within your hosting institution and in the field as a whole.

Know the Institutional Culture

Every cultural institution is different, founded by specific people for specific reasons, with a unique background, economic structure and cultural and political history. Know an institution's history when deciding to work with them. You will fare better in an environment that supports your priorities and is receptive to your social and political commitments.

Questions to ask about the history of the institution:

- What is the institutional mandate?
- Who were the power players in the past?
- Who are the power players now?
- Are there any governance rules? Are they based on precedent and the lore of the institution? Or are the rules constitutional?

Since museums are slow to change, patience is important. If your goals could seem radical to your institution, take your time and make a plan to introduce people into your way of thinking.

Research the Social, Political and Economic Context

Curators should have a thorough familiarity with the local social, political and economic context in which an institution operates, including an awareness of key political actors and social tensions. Curators and museum directors tend to be highly mobile, nationally and internationally, which can sometimes hinder their understanding of an institution's local environment.

Travelling a show to different regions, both nationally and internationally, can change its political context.

Recommendations:

- Conduct thorough research into local politics and special interest groups, especially if you are stepping into a position in a new or unfamiliar geographical location.
- Be aware of local situations and cultural norms when traveling a show to different regions, or internationally.
- Do not assume that the museum is a completely neutral ground. Be aware of the ways in which it is implicated in larger social problems.

Form Alliances

Developing allies is different from career networking, but just as important. You will need allies to help you make your case about specific programming, to support your credibility when advocating for controversial work and to prove that other people share your commitments and values. Create a network of support in the field and within the institution.

> TIP: You never know who could be an ally. Sometimes you can appeal to someone with whom you thoroughly disagree on the basis of one shared principle.

When you begin thinking about how to pitch potentially controversial work, informal conversations with colleagues and stakeholders can be very effective in collecting feedback to help hone your wider pitch, and also prepares the ground for their future support.

Recommendations:

- Build a group of trusted people within the institution and also outside it. Imagine yourself in an embattled situation and identify who would support your position.
- Enlist the support of people who can help communicate and advocate publicly for the value of showing difficult or potentially sensitive work. Cultivate relationships with people who are prepared with answers.
- If you work at an alternative or smaller institution, cultivate support within the big institutions; some of them are natural allies. Maintain contact with them.

Preparing for Controversy

Controversy is both desired and feared. It is desired not only for the buzz, but because it aligns with a commitment to challenging cultural norms and assumptions. It is feared because of the many problems it creates. Controversy, of course, is not always predictable (or controllable) and can erupt over a broad range of content. It is always good practice to prepare for potential controversy and have a plan to manage it if it hits. The curator should be equipped to handle any obstacle that arises, knowing the variables and solutions involved. (Please see NCAC's *Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy* for additional information).

Brief checklist

- Do your research. Be prepared to recognize when a work might have capacity to generate potential controversy, early on. Have a convincing reason why you are showing the work. Be aware of your own political agenda in presenting work that has difficult subject matter.
- Learn as much as possible about the work, develop messages and be ready to answer questions from anyone, anywhere, anytime.

- Prepare everybody, from guards to trustees, to be comfortable talking about the controversial aspects of a show. Promote transparency and conversation with the entire team, involving everybody in preparing for the possibilities.

- Seek input from colleagues – both within your institution and in the field at large – early in the planning of a potentially controversial exhibition. Seek counsel from people you respect or admire and ask for their strategies for success. This will help you develop the most effective position and language.

- Line up knowledgeable and credible outside sources that can speak up for the show. This is especially important for exhibitions addressing issues of importance to local minority groups.

- Consider your framework when there is difficult content. Work with your education department to contextualize the materials you present. Make sure your installation labels, wall texts and press releases are all on message.

- Consider content advisories or creative installation (like displaying work out of the visual reach of children), but be aware that content advisory labels are prejudicial. If you warn the audience that something *may* be offensive, you are telling them that it *is* offensive. If you decide to use an advisory label, make it purely informational and objective. Refrain from making it a "warning" label. Parents should generally be informed that certain exhibitions may contain things that may not be suitable for their children.

- Contact art service organizations. The Arts & Culture Advocacy Program at the National Coalition Against Censorship offers step-by-step confidential support to museum professionals and curators preparing potentially controversial exhibitions. ACAP can also connect you to others who have negotiated similar situations.

Working with Internal Stakeholders, Artists and the Community

Preparing for controversy demands working with a wide variety of stakeholders, from those within the institution to artists and community groups. An exhibition requires collaboration, which depends on building strong relationships.

Internal Stakeholders

Internal stakeholders include everyone from volunteers to boards of trustees. A curator who takes the time to understand the work of the education, legal, publicity and other departments, and how controversies affect them, will be best prepared to protect and represent an exhibition. When dealing with internal stakeholders, be as clear as possible about potential controversies so that the institution knows what it's getting into. Be equally clear as to the value and vision of the work you are doing.

Recommendations:

- Rally internal support. If you feel strongly about exploring difficult topics, lay the groundwork internally in advance by engaging others in your vision and values.
- Use your knowledge and passion for an exhibition to educate, persuade and convince stakeholders.
- Reach out to (diverse) staff and board members who may be able anticipate questions and concerns.
- Work to diversify funding sources. Don't rely on one financial backer, particularly with regard to museum exhibitions. The more diversified your backers are, the more independent you will be.

Education Department

Framing, wall labels and advisory signs are essential to managing the potential controversy over difficult subject matter. Conflict can sometimes arise between curatorial and education departments over the language used in labels. The curator needs to take the lead in writing exhibition materials. But the education department can be very helpful in ensuring that the final text is accessible to the institution's audience. Simplifying label text doesn't necessarily mean the watering down of ideas. An inclusive tone and accessible language invites people to join you on the journey through the ideas behind an exhibition; an authoritarian tone and use of jargon excludes those not involved in the field.

Board of Trustees

Curators are organizers; they are also experts. While you are expected to manage staff who report to you and organize colleagues, you also have to manage upwards. Take the time to share your expertise with your trustees and directors. Be a teacher on subjects that are unfamiliar to them.

Focus on getting the most crucial people to understand your plans. Identify who is most likely to support your ideas, as well as who has the most influence with other board members. Develop those alliances *before* presenting ideas to the wider board.

Trustees fear problems that cannot be solved by the people who create them, so be prepared with solutions to potential problems. If a curator can identify a problem and its solution, and patiently work with trustees before a controversy arises, seemingly impossible tasks will become manageable. Curators need to draw upon their personal authority as experts in their field, and to remember that not everyone is such an expert. Speak in clear language to the people you need to persuade.

Curators must also set boundaries. It is important to convey to the trustee: “No, I do not take dictation.” Initiating and creating exhibitions is the job of the curator, not that of the trustee; a line must be drawn in a conciliatory manner. When you yield, you compromise your position.

PR and Marketing

PR and marketing departments in large institutions can provide valuable input, contacts and strategies for public and media engagement. But they do not bear ultimate responsibility for a mishandled controversy. You must ultimately dictate how you engage with the public and maintain control over messages that are publicly attached to your name. Create collaborative relationships with PR and marketing staff. Your goals are likely aligned more closely than you think. Seek their guidance and support, but do not allow your name to be attached to a message you cannot stand behind.

Visitor Services, Guards and Volunteers

Guards, visitor services staff and volunteer docents are the first points of contact for the public. Guards need to have the option to be trained as educators who protect work and also are prepared to answer questions about it, including responding to complaints—or, another good option is to create a system in which guards direct questions and concerns to a “feedback area” of an exhibition, where comments can be periodically reviewed internally by curatorial and education staff. All staff who engage with the public, and will serve as the institution’s face to many visitors, should be prepared with messaging about

potentially controversial work and be able to direct complaints to the appropriate place. They should be trained to encourage the public to share their concerns with the institution. These are the people who set the immediate tone of interaction between the institution and the public.

Legal Counsel

Find a professional consultant or lawyer who knows the legal implications of the work, and can offer you informal guidance early on and through the process.

> Tip: Lawyers are risk avoiders: they are taught to minimize a client's risk and are professionally cautious. While it is important to understand legal risks, final exhibition decisions should be made by the curator and museum director, not by lawyers.

It is essential to choose the right lawyers and/or legal scholars. In the case of a controversy and any ensuing legal action, your lawyer must be able to take a creative approach, because conventional legal understanding of art often does not extend to unconventional art forms or new genres.

Artists

Curators are brokers between the community, the institution, and the artist. Few artists are prepared for dealing with organizational bureaucracy, so many artists rely on the curator to negotiate for them.

It is the curator's responsibility to make the case for the integrity of the project. A curator should be familiar with the practice of every artist in the show, counsel artists to stand their ground in the face of challenges and make artists feel supported in defending their work.

A curator acts as an editor, which means taking the side of the artist and the art. It does not, however, mean that you accept everything an artist gives you. Artists may not always be fully attuned to the implications and possible resonances of their work in different exhibitionary or regional or temporal contexts. Understand their motivations and personal connection/story behind the making of the work. Always be objective and transparent.

An editor's authority lies in their powers of discernment and judgment. In the case of a commissioned work, you must honor any contract, but you don't necessarily have to exhibit the work. (Note: There can

be a fine line between curatorial judgment and censorship, so curators must be careful in how they use their authority to cancel commitments.)

> TIP: Artists' and curators' interests and goals do not always align. The artist-as-friend is not a professional relationship. The art is your focus, and you could lose a friendship with an artist by protecting their art from themselves.

Audiences and Communities

The greatest variable in an art exhibition is the community it reaches. Art institutions do not want to speak to a culturally monolithic audience. They want a diverse viewership that will leave an exhibition with a variety of impressions and experiences, and they recognize the need to program for different audiences. Putting this to practice, though, is not easy. Curators are not experts in people's lives or experiences. Creating true conversations when dealing with sensitive subjects is thus as necessary as it is difficult.

Challenges

How do you invite people to engage with structures that they may not already be a part of? How do you reach beyond the expected self-selecting audience?

What does the notion of a "safe space" mean and whom does it serve? How can you resolve potential conflicts between safe space and creative freedom?

It's widely assumed that art functions differently in the culture than the rest of the entertainment industrial complex, that it could and even should make people uncomfortable, if only briefly, before they return to their comfort zones and usual routines. Is that assumption obsolete for modern institutions?

Recommendations:

- Learn to listen. Understand the limitations of your audience, but don't underestimate its sophistication. Have reasonable expectations in leading an audience to places that they don't want to go or wouldn't imagine going. We tend to make assumptions about how people will react, but you need to listen to the people who may be opposing you. Listen to people before putting an exhibition into the funding cycle. Not so as to change your curatorial vision, but to hear concerns and address issues before the exhibition is on view.

- Be proactive. Know your community; know your audience. Talk to as many people as possible outside of the institutional framework. Reach out to the community you think may have a problem with the exhibition and ask questions. Learn to listen to community members and respond to their concerns. Be humble and do not be defensive. Anticipate reactions and figure out how to address questions. Successful projects are built through personal relationships and conversations with all sorts of people. It's helpful to hear things that can be uncomfortable. Bring people with you rather than allow them to drag you into conflicts.

- Get people involved early. Your exhibition should not take people in the community by surprise, particularly those who are likely to be most affected by the work. For example, if the exhibition engages in the stories of a particular community, be sure to engage that community early on, even if you do not anticipate a negative reaction. Consider documenting those conversations.

- Think of yourself as an ambassador, a diplomat for unfamiliar or difficult material. Even the most challenging material can be presented and framed in a way that disarms misgivings or even hostility. The goal isn't to get people to like everything; rather, you want to get them to approach an exhibition or work with as much of an open mind as possible.

- Put together a committee or task force to reach out to the community and to make sure that if controversy erupts, the museum is prepared to respond.

- Be transparent with the public; clarity leads to trust. Having a trusting relationship with your audience allows an institution to take risks. Advocate with community stakeholders and utilize your network of community advisers.

- Have advocates in place outside (as well as inside). Consider creating an advisory group, even an informal one, composed of people in the community who support you and from whom you can get advice on controversial matters.

- Hold programs that encourage audiences to gather. Create an environment that can serve as a platform where people will engage artworks and discuss the issues relevant to them.

- If you can't defend it, don't exhibit it. And if you can, then you should. Create an exhibition that makes sense for the audience you have.

After Controversy Hits

- Do not yield or apologize. Stand behind the work you have selected. People who are offended say so loudly, frequently and in large numbers. The fact that they can marshal support for a campaign is a political problem; the appropriate political response is not to yield.

- Be willing to talk to the opposition. Those who feel heard are more willing to listen.

- Gather claims and grievances to respond to them directly. Draft a statement that addresses the pertinent issues. Counter misunderstanding by clarifying your position and being transparent.

- Acknowledge what you do not know. Address the issue directly, rather than issuing general statements about freedom of speech. Make the point that "We are not the enemy."

- Keep individual artists and participants up to date, informed and involved.

- Ask for professional public relations advice, but do not necessarily take it wholesale. (Sometimes the standard advice to "just ignore it, anything you say will be taken out of context" is not the most productive.)

- Practice advocating for your exhibition, be open and available, but don't sound defensive. Don't allow messages to turn personal. Usually, the controversy points to a broader political question; it is not a personal attack.

- Use the opportunity for real dialogue. Organize platforms for debate and conversation; convene panels and public forums and invite all sides to be heard. Forums should be heavily moderated. Smaller meeting groups can help keep the conversation on track. Allow the art to create spaces for necessary conversations.

- Enlist the support of national organizations like the National Coalition Against Censorship, the American Alliance of Museums, the American Association of Museum Directors, the Association of Art Museum Curators and the College Art Association. They can mobilize broad national support and tip the scales of media exposure in your favor. They can also offer expert advice.

Threats of Violence

What is the best way to respond to threats of violence? When threatened, should a museum opt out of opening a show, cancel a show, or remove the offending work? Should the institution disregard threats and potentially put audiences and staff at risk?

Rather than capitulate to threats of violence, immediately enlist people with experience and expertise in such matters. Security departments, police and the FBI can best evaluate the seriousness of violent threats. If a threat is credible and a violent act is indeed possible, plan ahead to coordinate with law enforcement, university governing bodies, and others responsible for protecting safety and security. Your commitment to the art—and principles of free expression—should be treated as seriously as your commitment to the safety of your staff and visitors. The best way to manage this is to involve law enforcement and security professionals.

Social Media

Social media has expanded the reach of art institutions, but it has also created a fertile new breeding ground for controversy. The instantaneous and wide reach of social media quickly breaks disciplinary and social boundaries. As a result, debates that once may have been confined to people familiar with the visual arts can now easily spread to online special interest groups and other unexpected participants from different discursive backgrounds. Social media also blurs the boundaries between personal and professional statements. Statements by individual curators may, as a result, adversely affect an institution.

Distinguishing Personal from Institutional Social Media Accounts

Social media often blur the boundaries between private and professional, between individual and institution. When using your personal account, you may also be held accountable for representing—or misrepresenting—an institutional position. Curators need to be very careful when using personal social media to express personal political positions. A controversial statement by a curator closely identified with an institution could be used to attack that institution.

When using your institutional account, be careful not to conflict with institutional positions. Ensure that those empowered to use institutional accounts are highly familiar with what those positions are.

When Controversy Hits Online

Individuals or groups protesting a show can use social media to rally large numbers of supporters very quickly, making it appear that an institution is facing massive opposition. That may not reflect the true state of affairs, as those signing petitions often do not always research the details of the situation.[1]

Social media does not allow for the kind of control of interpretation that you have within the institution (via layout, wall texts, labels, etc.). De-contextualized components of a show can quickly circulate to fuel activist agendas. Some of these campaigns can be ignored; some need to be addressed.

Recommendations:

- Have a statement ready when you are curating a potentially controversial show, as well as a mini-site, blog or dedicated web presence. Speed and reach are key when responding to Internet controversy.

- Do your research. Identify who is behind the attacks and what their platform is. Are they an individual, or do they represent a group or an organization?

- Determine whether their purpose is to raise the visibility of their own agenda or if they are genuinely responding to your content. (Look at their past history of interacting with institutions.)

- Actively listen to critics. Reach out to the organizers of the criticism or petition, even if you are not going to accede to any of their demands.

- Assume that anything you say can be made public, even if sent as a private message.

- Assure the public that you are considering the complaint.

[1] As an example, many of the hundreds of thousands of supporters of the Change.org petition to remove work involving animals from the Guggenheim's 2017 *Art and China After 1989* show did not realize that the Guggenheim was presenting video documentation of historical performances, not live reenactments.

- Be prepared to say what action you will be taking in response (often that action entails organizing a public event, but it could be more creative) and where you would draw the line (e.g., removing a work).

- Take the controversy offline by organizing a face-to-face event where grievances can be aired and different positions heard.

This handbook is continuously edited and updated.
Please contact NCAC's Arts & Culture Advocacy Program with any suggestions!

If you are facing a challenge around an exhibition, ACAP can offer detailed guidance and support, as well as connect you to peers in the field for advice.
Contact ACAP at *ncac@ncac.org*