

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Strategies to Manage Censorship Issues and Controversies in Museums**

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Museums are poised to educate, engage and entertain patrons, as well as challenge and influence society more now than at any other time throughout the modern history of the museum industry. With thousands of museums throughout the United States attracting hundreds of millions of visitors annually, controversial exhibits and issues of censorship continue to challenge museum industry leaders. Concern surrounding this subject exists in all artistic and cultural endeavors. Topics range from race and religion to war and sexuality, and have occurred in history, science and art museums. This study looks at the best management options available to museum directors confronted by controversy and affected by censorship issues. While each situation differs based on topic, locale and sociopolitical climate, I provide a guide that any organization may use as a starting point to address concerns. I also consider how museums may wish to deal with their audience, including the general public, and the media, as well as special interest groups, and community leaders and political appointees with a variety of agendas. Other areas of analysis I address in this study encompass managing reactions from a variety of sources, including outrage that may result during incidents involving controversial exhibits.

Previous studies have analyzed and broken down some of the more recent exhibits that sparked controversy. Some have sought to uncover which exhibition topics ought to be presented, while others have developed recommendations for executing controversial exhibits and how to handle responses to an exhibit once the controversy occurs. I focus

on current ways museums are managing such challenges and ideas for devising a plan for better management of these issues in the future, while focusing on innovative trends in the industry.

I begin researching this subject by asking two broad questions: 1) What are the attributes necessary to endure a censorship controversy and maintain a viable exhibition? 2) Is it necessary that an exhibition add to the population's better understanding of a topic, its social and cultural knowledge or the museum's legacy? I use three organizations and four controversial exhibits, providing case studies of the museum's actions in response to the public, media and special interest groups' reactions to the exhibits.

The objective of my thesis is to develop recommendations to serve as a template or prototype for managing censorship relating to controversial museum exhibitions. My focus is on how the museum initially handles a given controversial situation. I study whether preplanning for and using a proactive approach to the incident would make a difference. I also seek to answer how museums might manage issues more effectively in the future. Additionally, I look at the basic business aspects of managing such incidences and issues relevant to the administrative leadership perspective.

I conduct a literature search and perform a heuristic, comparative case study. I summarize the data collected and compare and contrast the different organization's programs. The emphasis is on helping organizations steer exhibit topics towards a positive, informed learning opportunity, without yielding to censorship demands or resorting to self-censorship. I show how a museum might benefit from better communication when planning exhibits with controversial subject matter. I note the

difficulty in balancing the needs of the museum, its public, and its board members when dealing with divisive subject matter.

Although one museum in particular did a better overall job of managing their particular crisis, no organization had all the answers. This organization had a basic approach that could be seen as a general standard with achievable outcomes.

In compiling the museums' responses to confronting censorship and concerns arising from controversial exhibits, I highlight the benefit of using an objective approach towards addressing unforeseen issues as they arise. I develop conclusions and recommendations, taking the best actions from each organization, compare and contrast the different organization's programs, draw comparisons to each, and illustrate the similarities and differences. This helps me formulate the best possible approach to achieving a proactive, dynamic and enduring plan. Ultimately, I develop a universal action plan and procedure in the Plan, Do, Check, Act format. As a bonus I include detailed instruction on managing outrage if/when it occurs.

**MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Strategies to Manage Censorship Issues and Controversies in Museums**

by

**Kyle D. San Giovanni, M.P.H., M.A.**

**A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Montclair State University**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**For the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**August 2013**

**College of Arts**

**Department of Museum Management**

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**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**For the Degree of Master of Arts in Museum Management**

**In the College of the Arts**

**by**

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**Montclair, New Jersey**

**2013**

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

*“They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him.”<sup>2</sup>*

The topic of my research is controversies in art museums, and how best to manage them to avoid censorship. Concern surrounding this topic exists in all artistic and cultural endeavors, such as book banning in the literary arts, protests at theater openings, and rating systems for the music, film and television industries. Each industry affected by censorship handles it differently. Some acquiesce. Others remain defiant. Although I focus primarily on art museums, the techniques outlined here are applicable to any museum, as well as in the multidisciplinary fields of visual, literary, and performing arts. However, while examples abound from the various art industries, I focus my qualitative research on practical applications towards better management of such issues in museums.

My motivation for researching censorship controversies in art museums was to delve more deeply into the juxtaposition between cultural and educational presentation, and the practice of organizational leadership. Within the context of my thesis, I believe there is a need for a more proactive and innovative approach to managing controversies that arise from mounting challenging museum exhibits. This approach requires understanding, not arrogance, and the courage to refrain from bending to any political pressure that may arise. This approach is sure to gain notice from the museum industry’s

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<sup>1</sup> Annette Lamb, Eduscapes, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> President John F. Kennedy: Remarks at Amherst College, October 26, 1963.

dealings with such issues as well as to have its share of detractors who may find ammunition to fuel their point of view.

Dubin in his landmark book “Arresting Images” boils down censorship in the arts to several issues: volatile topics, use of public space by those of differing backgrounds, and fragmented communities challenging the established cultures. Attempts at striking a delicate balance between upholding a common culture and attaining greater diversity persist. There are other motives that drive the decision to censor art and cultural exhibitions. These include the public’s misunderstanding/misconstruing of art; special interest groups pushing a particular political agenda or social perspective; and organizations that lack the courage of their convictions. Organizations in the latter group may resort to self-censorship in order to avoid exacerbating a potential problem. I became curious about the root cause(s) of such apprehension and detestation. With my research, I uncover ways to navigate these inevitable battles, so as to maintain the integrity of the artist and their work, and the institution’s reputation, while educating the public and standing up to establishment pressures.

I reveal strategies to more successfully manage censorship and controversies in art museums. This includes approaches to planning, communication and following through to help ensure positive outcomes, while avoiding drastic backtracking, making radical alterations, or outright cancelling a given exhibit. The research here is augmented by my management experience and the approach to quality management known as Plan Do Check Act (PDCA). Additionally, I explore ways to manage outrage, which may emerge from time to time to confront even the best of artistic intentions.



## 2.0 BACKGROUND INFORMING RESEARCH

Before detailing my work, I present a few definitions pertinent to the topic. First is a definition of art and of museums. A description of censorship and intellectual freedom follows. Finally, I state the meaning of controversy and aesthetics.

To this day, a single definition of art remains elusive. Philosopher Arthur Danto provides a straightforward contemporary definition that will suffice. His definition is as follows: “something is a work of art if and only if (i) it has a subject (ii) about which it projects some attitude or point of view (has a style) (iii) by means of rhetorical ellipsis (usually metaphorical) which ellipsis engages audience participation in filling in what is missing, and (v) where the work in question and the interpretations thereof require an art historical context.”<sup>3</sup> Some have difficulty with the last statement, but I think an art historical context is crucial in establishing a reference point and timeline. In the field of both art and science, new ideas build on previous ideas. This inevitably pushes the field forward.

The *International Council of Museums (ICOM)* defines a museum as “A non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.”<sup>4</sup> One reason museums exist is that the public and those running such organizations deem it significant and substantial to the betterment of society. Museums represent a country’s highest ideals, delivered through a strong educational component. They also work to highlight the very best of a given subject, while presenting the product

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Adajian, *The Definition of Art*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Julien Anfruns. Museum Definition, International Council of Museums (ICOM), 2007.

in an engrossing and entertaining way. This does not mean that everyone will like or value what they experience.

The *American Library Association* defines intellectual freedom as "the freedom to express one's beliefs or ideas through any mode of communication and the right of unrestricted access to all information and ideas regardless of the medium of communication used".<sup>5</sup> Any number of dictionaries describes censorship as "The suppression or proscription of speech or writing that is deemed obscene, indecent, or unduly controversial."<sup>6</sup> According to the *Academic American Encyclopedia*, censorship is a suppression of information, ideas, or artistic expression.<sup>7</sup>

Let me briefly explore this further. No group is immune to the trappings of censorship, from government to private religious organizations. Censorship may impact artists directly, causing them to alter their view or approach to creating artwork. Controversies may arise during the planning or marketing phase of an exhibition, once the exhibition opens or at any time during an exhibition. Someone who has not even seen the "offending" artwork may express opposition. Ultimately, whether publicity is positive or negative, it may increase interest, decrease funding or make a spectacle out of a particular event. While the path to censorship is varied, the oft-proclaimed intended result is to control information for the betterment of society. At times, it may have a national security angle to it. Censorship's motivation is frequently fear-based, and its claim of morality is typically based in control. This limits the diversity of artistic perspective available to the public.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Annette Lamb. Eduscapes, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Farlex, Inc. The Free Dictionary. 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Academic American Encyclopedia from Prodigy on-line. 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Sara Harrison, *Censorship and Controversy in Contemporary Art*, 2002.

In closing out this short presentation of definitions pertinent to my study, I reflect on the definitions for aesthetics and controversy, and the relationship they share.

Aesthetics, in the area of art, is the branch of philosophy dealing with beauty and taste. Controversy is a prolonged public dispute, debate, or contention; a dispute concerning a matter of opinion. While there may be an ideal form of beauty, there exists plenty of room for debate. At times, it seems that this divergence forms the basis of many disagreements regarding art.

These definitions provide a sense of the topic's nature and complexity. On the one hand, museums are in the business of educating, that is to say, opening minds. Yet they are compelled to consider subject matter and presentation style while deciding on an appropriate topic that adds to the organization's mission. However, it is typically not the intent of a museum to provoke controversy. As Neil Harris said, "... they can neither be produced on demand nor invariably be predicted."<sup>9</sup> Historically, dispensing knowledge has been a challenging endeavor. Often, new information and insight are met with resistance from the authorities as well as the indoctrinated. Presenting art or cultural exhibits, along with bringing new information and different perspectives to the public, has the capacity to generate a wide range of emotions. Some audience members may be thrilled, while others may feel uncomfortable. Others may come away being downright offended. The bottom line is that open, democratic societies should welcome debate over issues of disagreement, not attempt to quell it. Such actions lead to mindless obedience to

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<sup>9</sup> Neil Harris, *Museums and Controversy: Some Introductory Reflections*, pg 1102, 1995.

rigid decree, destroying the creative spirit. It takes courage to fight “the battle”. In the end, if culture is advanced, then society is well served.

### **3.0 GOAL AND OBJECTIVE**

The goal of this study is to identify the elements that go into managing controversial topics related to museum exhibitions and potential censorship issues that may arise. My objective is to create a set of criteria that may serve in the development of an action or work plan, and establish a model to PDCA.<sup>10</sup> With this approach, I hope to ensure that any museum organization can better anticipate debate and successfully navigate through potential issues that may arise during the entire process of conceptualizing, presenting and culminating art shows dealing with controversial subject matter. The problem is of interest because museums are likely to struggle with the issue of censorship and related controversies, whether they intend to provoke a reaction or they unwittingly experience a hostile response. Therefore, museums need a positive, proactive way to stand up for their actions and communicate better with their public. This approach may aid in circumventing any misguided criticism or misinterpretation of a work(s) in a given exhibition or artist represented by the museum.

Controversy occurs in museums throughout the country, even in sophisticated cultural centers, yet arts organizations are finding it difficult to manage controversial subject matter in a way that allows them to maintain relevance without exerting a greater effort to defend a particularly challenging point of view. There are legitimate reasons for deciding to present challenging, even difficult subject matter. Such actions expand the boundaries of art and culture, informing the public in enticing ways. For better or for worse, challenging exhibits have a way of complicating the operational process.

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<sup>10</sup> Mind Tools LTD. *Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA): Implementing new ideas in a controlled way*. 2012.

However, the extra work brought about by producing demanding exhibits may be a windfall, if managed deftly. A compounding factor is that enticing and challenging subject matter may create interest, thereby helping to enhance or sustain interest in museums. Another consideration is that controversial topics bring attention to an organization. It is no secret that tantalizing shows attract visitors. That is not to say that it should be the main reason for choosing an exhibit, but it can play a role in deciding on the content of a given show. Regardless of how the exhibition is produced or why scrutiny is brought to bear on a given museum, the organization needs to be in a position to benefit from the situation.

At stake are public and private dollars for presenting art works, and survival in times of political opposition to arts funding or a drastic downturn in the economy. While American museums receive almost twice as many visitors annually than all major league sporting events and theme parks combined, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM - formerly the American Association of Museums) has documented a downturn in attendance at arts functions in recent years, and museums top that list.<sup>11</sup> While the overall economy has not helped, some of this is due to the difficulty cultural institutions have had adjusting to the demographic change that continues to reshape the American population. The difficulty in sustaining any museum has an economic basis, especially over the last decade, where arts and cultural organizations have cut programs, staffs and budgets for the sake of survival. However, contemporary art has become more sociologically and politically based during the last several decades.<sup>12</sup> This has given a voice to, and emboldened, previously marginalized groups. At the same time, the status quo has been

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<sup>11</sup> American Association of Museums. 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Steve C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions*, 1992.

challenged. Highlighting the inequities between those of different socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds has awakened a sleeping giant. The result is that these various groups often find themselves pitted against one another.

Many practitioners, critics and scholars have written about art and cultural controversies that led to censorship in museums over the decades. However, these organizations seem destined to repeat the mistakes made in the past unless a strategic approach is adopted to confront and manage this issue proactively. Within this study, I uncover a way to highlight the strategic management aspect of presenting intelligent, challenging exhibitions, while creating impactful educational programs and providing insightful entertainment. The museum industry is a close knit group. Highlighting museums with programs that have achieved success with these issues and have documented their actions overcoming such challenges will benefit all organizations. The study's conclusions are based in part on knowledge gained over the last decade from writers, researchers and practitioners. The recommendations are based on analysis and commentary of censorship and related controversies, and may help inform the administration, management and decision makers of museums. Understanding about the successful programs that other organizations have used to overcome challenges associated with mounting controversial exhibits may help museums to thrive, grow, and reach their full potential.

#### **4.0 THE MUSEUM INDUSTRY'S APPROACH**

With this study, I illuminate a) strategies for managing controversial exhibitions in museums, b) the social and cultural impact that challenging museum exhibits exert on society, and c) the struggle museums confront when forging ahead with controversial

topics. These guiding principles need to be enacted while holding censorship at bay and working to maintain a feasible, lasting organization. Engaging exhibitions, tantalizing subject matter, and great works define museums. Visionaries, solid leadership, and old-fashioned toil will help an organization compete with the museum of tomorrow. Mostly however, the topic of managing the museum of the future comes down to accountability to the public. Understanding the public's desires and giving them what they want, sprinkled with what they need (i.e., need to know), will do more to solidify a museum's place in the mind of its patrons than anything else it does.

In order to address this issue of engaging the public, the museum industry must continually look at itself critically. Understanding demographic and changing tastes are a few of the ways museums may change for the better. In order for museums to move forward and continue growing stronger, they must reinvent themselves for new generations by incorporating contemporary subject matter into their exhibitions. This keeps shows fresh, patrons engaged and young audiences interested in attending. Throughout its history, addressing the socio-cultural identity of the genre, museums have captured the attention, imagination, and identity of the country and individuals. This underlying theme of connecting with the audience will enable longevity.

The tourist industry stands to gain from a healthy museum industry, as do tourists themselves, since museums are an educational and entertaining attraction. A thriving and engaging museum industry positively adds to the experience of visiting a metropolitan area. Museums contribute to the tourist experience and are a bonus for local businesses including hotels, restaurants, theaters, and other arts venues. Deciding to exhibit challenging subject matter may make it difficult to secure funding in certain

circumstances. However, addressing controversial subject matter and managing issues of censorship proactively could entice potential backers and government officials as well as local businesses to sustain investment, or consider investing in and collaborating with museums. If done from an experienced, highly trained and well informed perspective, this can occur even if an organization pursues challenging or controversial subject matter. Developing a positive way to address this issue has the potential to affect industries in a number of cities across the United States vying for tourist dollars.

Museums remain a substantial draw to visitors and residents alike. Devising a plan to work with the public and other organizations prior to controversies erupting will go a long way toward sustaining a museum's place in the community.

## **5.0 A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONTROVERSY IN THE ART WORLD**

Although there have been controversies throughout the history of art, the contemporary era began in the early 1900's with the advent of the modern art movement. Initially, artists themselves called attention to museums for lacking an inclusive sensibility when choosing which artist they would represent.<sup>13</sup> Increasingly, museums focused on the type of art displayed and whether it was decent, authentic, comprehensible, uplifting, and patriotic.<sup>14</sup> Picasso disturbed the public by incorporating primitive sensibilities into his painting. Cubism resulted from this technique, which Picasso and his contemporary Georges Braque developed. The Dada movement in 1915 followed Cubism. Throughout Europe, this movement became known as degenerate art. Marcel Duchamp was a polarizing figure in the United States during that time. His ready-

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<sup>13</sup> Neil Harris, *Museums and Controversy: Some Introductory Reflection*, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



mades fostered the “but is it art?” response that persists to this day.<sup>15</sup> Surrealism grew out of Dada via André Breton in Europe and Salvador Dali in the US. These artists meant for this style to challenge and disturb.<sup>16</sup> Abstract Expressionism evolved next, led by Jackson Pollack, and Andy Warhol followed with the Pop art movement in the 1960s. Objections to these movements were more collection driven, focusing on a work or works of a given artist. More recently, controversies tend to be by topic especially in science and history museums. To date, artists continue to create thought-provoking and confrontational works. It is fascinating to note that just like their more famous forbearers, current artists scrutinized and disparaged for their art will likely become part of the mainstream in years to come.

My approach to researching my thesis topic begins with a literature search consisting of books, published studies and journal articles from writers about censorship, including successful cases and cases that have met with unfortunate consequences. In addition, I read about the future of museums and trends in management, education, and audience building, keeping in mind the dual interest of creating interesting and educational exhibits while avoiding pitfalls of censorship that may disrupt a museum’s mission.

Next, I formulate a concise account of museums that have proactively dealt with the issue, to build support for the management ideas that work. Other topics I consider include funding, legal, demographic, social, cultural and environmental concerns reported in the literature as being important in shaping a museum’s approach to handling

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<sup>15</sup> Sara Harrison, *Censorship and Controversy in Contemporary Art*, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Sara Harrison, *Censorship and Controversy in Contemporary Art*, 2002.

ensorship controversies. These subtopics help to formulate an ideal plan to help museums proactively confront the problem.

## **6.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Throughout the past decade or so, the American economy, along with society and culture, continues to change. This has had an effect on museums in the way they plan and present exhibits. From a sociological perspective, shows that spark controversy remain significant in the minds of the museums presenting new exhibits (e.g., the impact of the Enola Gay exhibit on the Smithsonian). At times, the outcomes of these controversies bolster those in opposition and influence attendance. Patrons considering attending may change their opinion on whether to go or not, while others may decide to go only because of the media hype. This complex amalgam of competing interests continues to have relevance and speaks to contemporary audiences through the actions of museums as well as the media and opponents of challenging shows. To explore this development, I use specific incidents of censorship-tinged controversy from the case studies as my primary form of data collection and analysis. This technique allows me to explore unbiased information based on the situation as it occurs, as covered by the media and as revealed since the time of the incident.

My approach to researching this thesis topic consists of conducting a heuristic, comparative case study using a maximum of four occurrences in museums throughout the United States. Heuristic case studies elucidate new meaning to the topic.<sup>17</sup> In a case study format, they flesh out a framework that serves as a starting point for in-depth discussion and debate.

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<sup>17</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. 2009.

I use the following cases: Smithsonian – “The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II” (Enola Gay exhibit), 1995; Brooklyn Museum of Art – “Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection”, 1999; Smithsonian – “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture”, 2010; Cultural Center of the Philippines – “Kulo” (boil), 2011.

To begin exploring how museums function, I conduct a web search. I find the following articles related to censorship and controversy at arts museums: “Censorship and Controversy in Contemporary Art” by Sara Harrison; “Museums and Controversy: Some Introductory Reflections” by Neil Harris; “Arousing Sensation: A Case Study of Controversy Surrounding Art and the Erotic” by Sylvie Gilbert; ACLU Briefing Paper Number 14 Artistic Freedom; and “Artistic freedom and democratic rights under attack in New York” by the editorial board of the wsws.org. The scholars writing these articles identify problems inherent to exhibiting controversial subject matter.

I examine three theses documenting the struggles associated with changing an exhibit once it opened, due to backlash from special interest groups in opposition to a given exhibition. They are as follows: “Museums and Controversy: You can’t have one without the other” by Bryanna O’Mara; “Reverberating disputes: Public art, controversy, and memory” by Kathryn Maria Freise; and “The American flag as art and controversy: A case study of the 1989 Chicago ‘Flag-On-The-Floor’ controversy” by Juchuan Wang. I also identify a research paper by Linda Ferguson titled “Pushing Buttons: Controversial topics in museums” which explores subject matter that museums consider controversial to exhibit. The related survey known as “Contested Sites” explores the role of museums,

as viewed by stakeholders, staff and visitors, as well as those who do not visit museums, when dealing with controversial topics.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, I reference three books that document the historical controversies and threats to free expression. This book list includes: “Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture” by Michael Kammen; “Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions” by Steven C. Dubin; and “Censoring Culture: Contemporary Threats to Free Expression” by Robert Atkins and Svetlana Mintcheva.

I review the history of controversial museum exhibits throughout the United States. I note the topic and outcome as well as if a compromise is reached and whether censorship results, self imposed or otherwise. I dissect the four cases I select to examine the techniques these organizations employ to manage their specific controversial exhibit. I study how well their approach works. If they did not do well, I try to ascertain why. The goal is to excavate ideas about how to manage controversial subject matter through preplanning and better communication, without resorting to censorship. With these case studies, I explore broad themes of censorship and controversy hoping to uncover a variety of experiences and viewpoints on the relevant topics. These topics include thoughts on the types of exhibitions that seem to draw the most controversy, what kind of exhibitions produce positive reviews, and which ones receive the most criticism. A starting point for examining the case studies comes from a set of queries I frame to extract deep understanding of the myriad scenarios (See Exhibit 1 - Exploratory Guidelines, page 48).

I also have the distinct honor of interviewing one of the artists who confronts controversy and censorship first hand. Artist Mideo M. Cruz is thrust into the world of art controversy due to his installation “Poleteismo” in the show “Kulo” at the Cultural

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<sup>18</sup> Linda Ferguson, *Pushing Buttons: Controversial topics in museums*, 2006.

Center of the Philippines (CCP) in 2011. We discuss the stresses of dealing with the situation from his perspective. Mr. Cruz notes that this particular work had been shown previously beginning in 2005, and did not elicit controversy then. Topics we discuss include thoughts on the types of exhibitions that seem to draw the most attention and what kinds of exhibitions are most likely to be viewed as controversial. I ask him to describe his plans for future shows, issues or topics that concern him, and whether he anticipates changing his approach to creating his art. He did not. I also inquire whether he believes he is reaching his audience on a visceral as well as an emotional level. He did.

From my study, I develop a set of conclusions and recommendations comparing my findings among the case studies I explore. This segment explores some key areas of museum management as they relate to the planning, communication, informing/-engaging/challenging the public, public relations, marketing, damage control, decision-making, and taking action versus reacting. Additionally, I formulated a list of items for museums to follow when confronting concern over censorship due to a given controversial exhibition. This takes the form of a “Top Ten List (Of Things to Consider)” (Refer to Exhibit 2, page 49). I compile suggestions from other related research, formulate recommendations in the PDCA management philosophy and explore managing outrage as a result of exhibiting a show with controversial subject matter.

## **7.0 RESULTS**

The four case studies are used to examine exhibitions that result in museums’ controversial situations due to a show’s content. I do not summarize these shows in depth. I use them as a point of departure to address better management of the occurrence. The emphasis is on each situation overall and whether the museum is able to keep the

focus on the exhibit. I then analyze who is critical of the exhibit and who is defending the show. In looking at the outcome, I summarize what is lost in the process and whether the organizations avoid censorship or succumbed to it. In the end, I point out solutions stemming from each situation and try to draw on what transpires in the aftermath. What follows is that examination of the four cases, starting with the Smithsonian's two exhibits ("Enola Gay" 1995 and "Hide/Seek" 2010), followed by the Brooklyn Museum of Art's 1999 "Sensation" exhibit, and ending with the Cultural Center of the Philippines exhibit "Kulo" (boil) from 2011.

### **7.1 It Is All About the Show**

The Smithsonian dealt with two high profile cases over the past two decades – Enola Gay in 1995 and Hide/Seek in 2010. By most accounts, it seems that they continue to react to circumstances instead of acting to manage the controversies. In the first incident, the museum creates a new exhibit in response to political and special interest group objections. In the other case, the museum again gives in to pressure from external groups and removed the piece of art in the exhibit that is considered offensive. The Smithsonian operates in a highly politicized arena, and obviously considers it is in the best interest of the organization to acquiesce to their accusers.

The Smithsonian does not gain much positive backing during either situation. Politicians in both cases and special interest groups, including veterans in the case of Enola Gay and religious organizations, including the Catholic Church, in the case of Hide/Seek exerts enough pressure to have the Smithsonian change the exhibits. The National Air and Space Museum stands up for itself to aid in their fight to prevent an overhaul of the exhibit. However, the political pressure is too much for the museum to

bear. Eventually, the Enola Gay exhibit is completely revamped. Regarding the exhibit Hide/Seek, the People for the American Way came to the Smithsonian's side in the fight to prevent changes to the exhibit. Subsequently, the offending painting in the Hide/Seek exhibit is removed from the show by the museum.

Neither action ends the controversy or criticism though, as historians take offense to the cleaning up of the Enola Gay exhibition. Art critics and others in the museum industry voice their opposition to the Smithsonian removing a piece from the Hide/Seek show to quell opposition. In the end, the Smithsonian succumbs to censorship in both situations. Lost in the encounters confronting the Smithsonian over the years, is a chance to present alternative viewpoints, preserve artistic freedom of expression and infuse a modicum of reason into the process.

As a result of the Enola Gay controversy, the Smithsonian decides to “publicize the effort and work going into the exhibit; seek feedback early on in the process; strive for balance; be bold; consider the scope of the exhibition; include other voices during the planning process; think about presentation and sensitivities; and team up with a third party to show more controversial sides of the topic in a different format, maybe online through different groups.”<sup>19</sup> Following the Hide/Seek controversy, the Smithsonian concludes that “going forward they would lay out the exhibit so that more generally suitable art is more accessible and controversial or challenging art is displayed more discreetly.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1999, the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA) reacts strongly in defense of accusations from political and religious groups against one particular painting in the

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<sup>19</sup> Lubar, “Exhibiting Memories,” 26.

<sup>20</sup> O'Mara, *Museums and Controversy*, 49.

exhibit “Sensations”. BMA did not change the exhibit. In fact, BMA confronts the dissenters and fights a legal battle against them. Their stance is in support of an artist’s free speech and provides information about the artist’s motivation and explains his technique of using elephant dung, a common art medium in Zimbabwe, in the condemned piece of work. In other cases where exhibits are left intact, it is with the hopes that the controversy will not become unwieldy or will die down over time, e.g., Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly in this situation, local politicians, specifically the then Mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani, and certain Catholic groups condemn the artist and one of his paintings, in particular “The Holy Virgin Mary”. The BMA leadership fights hard for the artist’s right to free speech, while the opposition works to remove funding for art that is “not deemed appropriate for all.” Additionally, one protester damaged the painting, which is subsequently restored. In the end, the U.S. District Court sides with BMA and the exhibition is left intact and enjoys a successful run. This ruling was directed against myopic politicians and special interest groups wishing to co-opt a given subject to benefit their viewpoint to the detriment of the general public. Throughout the ordeal, the BMA seems ready and willing to lose funding rather than give in to external pressures and calls for censorship.

At the time of the controversy, BMA is already communicating its intentions to museum-goers by posting warning signs regarding the challenging nature of the exhibit. It is the belief of senior officials at the museum that this action “only increases the

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<sup>21</sup> O’Mara, *Museums and Controversy*, 35



exposure as it brought media less inclined to review an art exhibit and as a result those less knowledgeable entities brought less than the requisite critical eye to the process.”<sup>22</sup>

The Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) finds itself in a difficult situation when they mount a show (Kulo) with a previously exhibited installation by artist Mideo Cruz, a Filipino artist. The CCP starts out defending the artist, but yields under political pressure. Equal pressure is exerted by the country’s overwhelming Catholic majority. This is an extreme case, in which the artist is persecuted to such an extent and receives death threats as a result. By the end of the incident, the museum’s director resigns.

Philippines President Benigno Aquino III becomes involved in the controversial exhibit. Eventually, he asks the board of the CCP to be careful in their future exhibits. The CCP closes down the exhibit due to a heated debate between freedom of expression and respecting religious sensibilities.<sup>23</sup> The Philippines central government eventually rules that even though they are not for censorship, freedom of expression is not absolute. They go further and order that the museum must consider the belief of the people because the CCP is funded by the people’s money and since the museum is in service of the people, when you insult the beliefs of most of the people, the people are not being properly served. The government’s premise is that art is supposed to be ennobling and stoking conflict is not an ennobling activity.

Artist Mideo Cruz personally defends his work, the installation "Poleteismo" at the CCP. Mr. Cruz says his work is about the worship of relics and how idolatry evolves through history and modern culture.<sup>24</sup> He also discusses how this particular artwork has been exhibited since 2002 in other venues, without any controversy surrounding the

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<sup>22</sup> Kimmelman, *In the End, the 'Sensation' is more in the Money*.

<sup>23</sup> Legaspi, *Aquino urges CCP to be 'more careful' in future exhibits*.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Mideo M. Cruz, March 26, 2013

show. Additionally, Karen Ocampo-Flores, head of the CCP Visual Arts Division personally approves the proposal to exhibit on the basis of an evaluation of the artists' proposal and their background qualifications. Ms. Ocampo-Flores goes on to "explain[ed] the CCP's policy for mounting any show. She states that the show "Kulo" including "Poleteismo" "was in keeping with previous practice to evaluate merits of art works on the basis of established parameters."<sup>25</sup> Eventually, as opposing sides clash on the issues of freedom of expression and religious sensibilities, the political and societal pressure is too much, and censorship is inevitable as the CCP removes the artwork.

This decision directly affects the artist, who along with the CCP board endures threats to their security, vandalism of the museum, and hate mail. However, the museum-goers ultimately lose, until such time that a freer, less constrained approach is taken to allow for greater artistic expression. After the exhibit is vandalized, Ms. Flores writes in her Facebook note "This is Not a Church?" that "Exhibit was borne out of "discourses of the pen and the sword, education and revolution that continue to implicate Filipino artists and thinkers."<sup>26</sup> The CCP has always maintained that freedom of expression extends to all; not just to artists but to those who wish to speak up for their religious and spiritual beliefs within proper means and venues..." "It's not a debate about art, it's not a debate about religion: it's about imposing their power on the CCP..."<sup>27</sup>

One possible solution that comes out of this experience is a change in CCP policy. The Board members agree "to nurture freedom of artistic expression, while recognizing the responsibilities that go with it."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lapeña and Edep, *CCP closes down gallery with controversial 'Kulo' exhibit*, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Karen Ocampo-Flores Facebook Page posted 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Legaspi, *Aquino urges CCP to be 'more careful' in future exhibits*, 2011.

## 7.2 Venture Forth into the Wilderness

These cases represent a change in climate for museums and artists toward the conservative. Museums in the U.S. and other countries such as England have experienced many confrontations involving censorship issues and controversial exhibitions and have even won some of the battles. The rest of the world may be encouraged due to these victories over freedom of expression. Earlier this year, Philippines Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales dismisses the complaints against artist Mideo Cruz and ten officials of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). According to a statement from the Office of the Ombudsman released Monday, March 4, 2013 "The Office ruled that "Poleteismo" does not fall under 'obscene' exhibitions."<sup>29</sup> Not only that, but the Ombudsman's Office also states that "the work had serious artist[ic] merit". Still, if this trend toward the conservative continues, many other cultural and arts organizations may be confronted with similar situations. However, the real work continues for all museums. The main question is to determine how museums will exhibit challenging, educational and entertaining subjects while preparing to handle the next controversy.

Following the Hide/Seek controversy, Richard Kurin, Under Secretary for History, Art, and Culture at the Smithsonian said one of the lessons was "we have to be adept at communication."<sup>30</sup> Kurin also says exhibition planners need to anticipate controversy. Regarding the same controversial exhibit, Lee Rosenbaum (aka CULTUREGRRL) confers "I think what we really have to do is move on from this regrettable episode and have the blueprint for how we go forward—that this is a one-off and is not going to happen this way again. In the interim, there's an educating moment,

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<sup>29</sup> Lago, *Not obscene: Ombudsman clears 'Poleteismo' artist and CCP officials of charges*, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Trescott, *'Hide/Seek': Smithsonian officials look back at what went wrong*, 2011.

where the Smithsonian—which probably should have done this from the get-go—has to communicate with the legislative leaders who are having this misunderstanding and explain to them how an art museum needs to operate. It’s too late to take them through the show, but that should have happened, and an attempt [should be made] to persuade—to educate—the people who are the [exhibition's] critics.”<sup>31</sup>

## **8.0 DISCUSSION**

### **8.1 Controversy**

Controversy can spring up from just about any situation. In some cases a museum may anticipate it. In other situations, it may catch an organization by surprise. Generally speaking, controversy means receiving negative attention from the public, media, special interest groups, or federal, state and local government. In the art world, controversies come in many varieties. Some controversies stem from how a museum manages their collection, while other issues develop based on a specific exhibition, a certain artist or an individual piece of art. Therefore, an organization must be prepared and maintain flexibility to deal with controversy in a range of ways. This will require forming a comprehensive program through planning, training, implementation, and evaluation. Because this is a phenomenon familiar to many art and cultural organizations, there is ample opportunity to learn from each other’s experiences.

### **8.2 Considerations**

When organizations are caught up in a potential controversy, they need to engage in a different mode of management. The organization needs to consider several key issues.

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<sup>31</sup> Rosenbaum, *Surprising Revelation at “Hide/Seek” Conference*, 2011.

The first goal should be to keep the focus on the show, the art, the artist, or the topic and not allow the controversy to overshadow the artistic vision being presented. This will require working toward an understanding of why the objection surfaced in the first place. Only then can the organization form a thorough and focused response to an incident. All effort needs to go towards maintaining the focus on action as opposed to reaction.

Next, it is important to guide the discussion, and not let the controversy steer it. Maintaining control of the issue is the key to success when dealing with controversy. Otherwise, the message may become distorted and wind up advancing the purpose of those bringing their objections against the museum.

A third item that makes managing a controversial issue difficult is finding and maintaining a balance between the needs of the organization, including its mission and vision, versus the political, cultural, religious and social agendas that result in, or lie below the surface of, many controversial issues. A related consideration is how to deal with the new found attention. It is said that no publicity is bad publicity. So the question becomes, should an organization use the hype to promote the show? There is nothing wrong with capitalizing on the situation as long as it is done in a way that is in keeping with the values of the organization and has the respect of the art world. However, manufacturing controversy to promote an exhibition is not recommended and can backfire if it is discovered that the organization's intent was to bring such focus onto the situation in an ignoble way.

Another essential key to managing controversies is in understanding the power struggle. An organization needs to do their due diligence in order to prepare and respond

accordingly. In other words, delve deeply into the interaction between all forces in opposition to the art. Only when a full evaluation is done can an organization form an action plan to counteract the opposition.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the ultimate goal is to avoid censorship. An organization should work to reject any attempts at censorship from all external sources. Museums must be prepared to live by their vision as an organization, especially their decision to mount a particular show or support a given artist. Equally important is to resist the urge to practice self-censorship. This does not mean that decisions should not be made to direct, alter or refocus a show. It just means that any decision the organization makes regarding a show, artist or individual work, should be made and carried out so that the organizations' integrity remains intact and their actions reside within the boundaries established by the art world.

## **9.0 CONCLUSIONS**

### **9.1 Overview**

As we have observed, there is a distinct difference between aesthetic and societal controversy. To an extent, most controversies museums confront are about other issues beside the art. This is an important distinction and all the more reason for museums to highlight the art and keep the discussion about the art and not about other issues. This is important for museums because they are most unequivocally not about rewriting history. Rather, they typically wish to highlight a new or different angle about the subject matter through a given exhibit.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ed. Howells, et al, *Outrage: Art, Controversy, and Society*, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Ed. Howells, "Outrage: Art, Controversy, and Society". Funk, *The End of Modern Art Controversies and the Many Controversies over Art*, 20.

Aesthetic concerns have been around since the beginning of art itself. More recently, other influences have brought attention to art for other reasons outside the realm of the art world. The public, which is not thoroughly engaged with the art world, may never even hear about most works of art if not for controversies. Enhanced public involvement may manifest itself due to the media reporting on a particular piece of art or artist, or the decision by an arts organization to acquire specific works or divest itself of parts of a collection. In many cases, when a controversy erupts over a piece of art, it is not due to the initial introduction of that particular work. Typically, works of art in a given exhibit do not change from venue to venue. This is true in the case of “Sensation” and “Kulo”. Yet the reaction changed, which as Howells notes is a social phenomenon not an aesthetic one.<sup>34</sup> This sort of thing takes place in all of the arts from literature to fine arts, and the performing arts to the music industry.

Reasons for this include search for notoriety, the media bringing it to the attention of the public, and using art for political purposes.<sup>35</sup> This social phenomenon has evolved over the years to where the media drives the process, along with special interest groups vying for their piece of the action. In some cases, this ultimately may lead to the political action of decreasing funding to arts organizations.<sup>36</sup>

In order to circumvent negative reaction over a given show, institutions should listen to and acknowledge different points of view, during the planning stages of the exhibit, so that they may represent a diverse take on the topic. However, to maintain integrity and legitimacy, museums ultimately must defer to the professionals in their own field. After all, these content experts will be held responsible for a balanced accounting of

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<sup>34</sup> Ed. Howells, *Outrage: Art, Controversy, and Society*. 97.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

a show in the event of a controversy and, by necessity and intent, would be the best to lead the discussion. This would help the situation by narrowing the focus and credibility of politics or religion, etc., and reduce the media's zeal for a story.<sup>37</sup>

Because of ever-changing shifts in standards, arts organizations need to focus on what is causing the uproar. Clearly, it is not mainly the aesthetics of the art that is causing the problem and it is not usually those who frequent art exhibits who cause uproars. Rather, it is the political, cultural and religious leanings of the public. The problem is that if arts organizations do not consistently take up the fight and ultimately win the battles, freedom of expression is at stake. Arts organizations need to find a way to engage the public, special interest groups, politicians and the media in ways that prepare them for the art. This should not only result in lessening the severity of attacks, but also the frequency with which such attacks are made.

## **9.2 Integrity**

Museums matter and the topics they present may highlight a well understood subject, thereby encouraging patrons to delve deeper, uncover fresh meaning and perhaps reveal new concerns. At other times, an exhibit may revisit a topic that was understood under a different set of circumstances and is being brought under a new or contemporary set of values by virtue of the exhibition. In other situations, a museum may find itself on the cutting edge of an issue, and the goal purely is educating the public. Whatever the case, the organization's focus should be to present the issue without trying to be controversial. In that way, the museum can avoid calls for censorship. The most positive actions a museum can take regarding past, present and future controversies are to

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<sup>37</sup> Dubin, *Arresting Images*, 294.



promote the museum as a place to explore a range of topics and gather different points of view on a variety of topics.

There is a need for museums to incorporate what has been learned over the recent years about dealing with controversies, into policies and practices. Only then will museums begin to address problems as they arise. When writing such documents, the museum should make it clear that the organization is open to alternative points of view. On the other hand, museums must also make it known that they remain prepared to exercise their freedom. Ultimately ensuring that they make the final choices, on what is said and done, based on mission/vision and professional standards.<sup>38</sup>

Moving forward, organizations must always work to keep the exhibit at the forefront of all actions taken. Museums should consider incorporating different points of view without the exhibit's focus being compromised. Museums need to maintain the institutions integrity, while considering the subject matter and stakeholders concerns without watering down the significance of the exhibit. While presenting a fully realized vision of the exhibit, organizations must be careful not to allow personal opinions of developers, presenters, and staff to blatantly come through. Museums should welcome diverse opinions from the various communities with the understanding that their opinions matter but are advisory in practice. This approach also is suggested by AAM (American Alliance of Museums). At all cost, avoid providing misinformation. Invite members of the press. Finally, provide opportunities for information to be disseminated through preprinted handouts, well trained guides, and signage.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Boyd, *Museums as Centers of Controversy*, 200.

<sup>39</sup> O'Mara, *Museums and Controversy*, 68.

### 9.3 Communication

Successfully communicating to the patron, public and media is crucial.

Transparency helps in that a level of trust is gained and a familiarity is born of the effort.

When communicating to any set of constituents, bear in mind the following categories

(which I champion, and adopt and tailor based in part on Linda Ferguson's 2006 article, Pushing Buttons):

#### Philosophy

1. Present information on the museum's collection. This is necessary for those outside the organization to understanding the museum's mission and vision.
2. Explain the museums process of planning an exhibition. This approach will educate those outside the organization on the way that the organization goes about choosing and researching a topic.
3. Showcase the museum's history, by discussing past exhibits, how they relate to a current topic, and what exhibits are in the foreseeable future.

#### Designing

1. During the design phase of a project, engage groups for their advice not approval. Make it known to the groups whose advice you seek of their role in the process, thereby avoiding any misunderstanding when the exhibition opens.
2. Anticipate reactions and prepare a contingency/crisis plan to address issues when/if they arise (see page 35 herein).
3. Preview the exhibition for feedback if you think something in the show may benefit from prior press and to gauge the topic's receptiveness when it opens.

## Exhibition

1. Identify progression of information on an exhibit topic, giving special emphases to previous versus new knowledge. This will help viewers relate better to a given exhibition.
2. Use signage to notify visitors of content. Designate special areas to view controversial pieces.
3. Train staff to answer questions and handle difficult situations. Create a feedback mechanism to collect data from patrons and allow them to express their thoughts to the museum's leadership.
4. Employ public programs to engage visitors to explore topics more deeply.

### **9.4 Contingency/Crisis Plan**

Sometimes it is difficult to know what will be controversial. In other situations, an organization may prepare for an inevitable onslaught of criticism and find they were correct in their assumption. The organization may then find they underestimated the backlash or over thought the issue. In any situation, it is necessary to adjust to the ebb and flood of the tide of discontent.<sup>40</sup> There is no sense allocating resources to an issue that is resolved more easily than anticipated. Simply address the concerns and move on. On the other hand, an organization must be prepared to address all concerns. The ones most difficult to deal with are those that are not anticipated. This requires contingency and/or crisis planning. (William Byrnes gives some good advice in his 2009 book on Arts

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<sup>40</sup> Referred to as ebb and flow, the correct term is ebb and flood, which originated as an explanation of a pattern or movement, for example to describe the comings and goings during a given period. An incoming tidal flow is known as a flood current or flood tide; an outgoing flow is an ebb current or ebb tide.

Management.)<sup>41</sup> Contingency Planning is defined as setting an alternate course of action depending on different conditions. This approach is mostly effective when implemented based on trigger points, e.g., if ABC happens, do XYZ. Crisis planning is related and becomes necessary when dealing with media, patrons, boards, and the public. A museum may need such a plan and be prepared to implement it when deciding to present a controversial project or program choice.

It is always important to know when to implement a plan. Sometimes a situation that warrants initiating a plan may be disguised as something else. In the event of a crisis, the Contingency Plan shall be employed. Always try to stick to the plan of action. Do not let variables steer the organization off course. After addressing a challenge where a contingency or crisis plan is used, take the time to evaluate what transpired and incorporate what was learned from the situation.

There are a few main ideas to take away from all of this. First, do not allow, or at the very least, minimize the involvement of those outside the art world to dominate the agenda. This needs to be done with a certain level of decorum. Being firm yet flexible within this framework will allow the organization to stay above the fray. Keep things in a positive light. In the event that it becomes necessary, successfully counter all accusations. This is especially true when dealing with the media. Be prepared to work with the media to shape the message. In dealing with the media, it is best not to use sound bites, rather, describe the intentions of the controversial show, artist or art work by explaining what the art is or is not. If done well, the value of the art is maintained, while reaching the intended audience. In summary, the key management issues illustrated throughout this

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<sup>41</sup> Byrnes, *Management and the Arts*, 2009.

thesis are best summarized by Richard Howells, et al, providing deeper understanding of the issues explored herein, in their classic book of case studies.<sup>42</sup>

1. Understanding the power struggle
2. Keeping the focus on the art
3. Skillfully involving the media and controlling their influence
4. Balancing the art worlds needs/interests with the social agendas of politics/culture/religion
5. Using a controversy to promote the art in a positive way
6. Managing external attempts at censorship and avoiding self censorship

## **10.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

I intend for my research to help define what type of museum management approach or approaches may work best for dealing with controversies and the potential for censorship. The other part of this thesis is to develop a guide to creating a procedure on managing controversial issues in an organizational action or work plan in the form of “Plan Do Check Act” or PDCA. An action/work plan is beneficial for identifying problems, solidifying commitment and participation from the interested party, and having a starting point for future reference. In addition, an action/work plan is a sequence of steps or activities employed to ensure a strategy of success. Such a plan has four major elements (1) a written plan of action with a description of available resources, allocated for specific activities; (2) things to be done to get ahead of a situation, including a list of specific tasks and a description of who will do them; (3) a time-line detailing when tasks will be completed, so as to identify and document milestones along the way; and (4)

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<sup>42</sup> Ed. Howells, *Outrage: Art, Controversy, and Society*, 97.

follow-up actions to implement during and after the process.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the action plan outlines contingencies. This section of the plan should include:<sup>44</sup>

1. Written procedures for all possible situations. For each situation include the following basic steps.<sup>45</sup>
  - a. Define objective(s)
  - b. Assess the current situation
  - c. Formulate options
  - d. Identify and choose options
  - e. Implement a decision(s)
  - f. Evaluate outcomes
2. Identify a spokesperson(s)
  - a. Director of organization or head of Public Relations
  - b. Must receive media training [updated annually] and
  - c. Have experience dealing with the media
3. Outline what the spokesperson should and should not say
4. Review the plan annually and update the plan based on situational experiences or changes to policy
5. Responding to negative publicity
  - a. Write a well thought out press release addressing a broader audience
  - b. Respond individually to any patron formally reporting a negative comment
  - c. The organization does not need to respond formally to every comment

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<sup>43</sup> Free Management Library. *Basics of Action Planning (as part of Strategic Planning)*. 2012.

<sup>44</sup> O'Mara, *Museums and Controversy*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> Byrnes, *Management and the Arts*, 145.

With regards to Social Media influence and an organization's approach to managing an issue, all of the above is true, plus organizations should consider the following.<sup>46</sup>

- a. Positive information is shared through social media more than negative information
- b. Social media influences about two-thirds of all consumer decisions
- c. Keep in mind that social media is an amplifier
- d. Social media differs from other forms of media due to:
  - i. Immediacy
  - ii. Impact
  - iii. Reach

Another aspect of the action plan is in addressing what may go wrong, and how to respond and correct problems that may arise.

### **10.1 Plan, Do, Check, Act**

The first thing to do when preparing to approach the issue of managing controversy is to assemble a core group of individuals within the organization. In a small organization, almost all staff may be included in this group. In larger organizations, a well rounded representation from throughout the organization is best.

PLAN: In this first phase, the group's goal is to identify and analyze the problem.<sup>47</sup> The members convene to flesh out ideas and possible solutions by looking for a root cause of the problem. The group may ask themselves the following questions: Is the problem due to poor communication or a lack of information on the part of the

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<sup>46</sup> Reis, *An overview of Social Media, and how to effectively avoid a Social Media crisis*, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> MCS Media, Inc. *The Simply LEAN Pocket Guide*, 39.

museum? Is it due to misunderstanding (a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing) or simply negativity of the patrons? Is a politician or special interest group with an ulterior motive involved? Does it come down to the media's search for the next big story? The steps in this phase are to: form a team, identify the main problem(s), brainstorm interim solutions, collect data, and ask why?<sup>48</sup>

DO: This phase is to initiate implementation of the solution to the main problem.<sup>49</sup> To do this requires the following steps: a willingness to change or adjust the way things are done, and a thorough understanding of the main problem so as to isolate and eliminate the root cause. Additionally the organization should develop a contingency and/or crisis plan and employ it when necessary. The most important action for successful implementation is to make sure everyone knows the plan and follows it. This phase will test the organization's approach to sound, ongoing communication and their ability to offer succinct, valid explanations. In this phase, the organization will also develop and facilitate educational activities related to the main problem. The organization must commit and be ready to respond in-kind when accusations are made against the museum. A balance must be achieved between staying above the fray and not becoming negative, but also not allowing any accusation to go unanswered.

CHECK: The key to this phase is in evaluating what is done by the museum in response to what transpires.<sup>50</sup> The first step is to figure out what worked and what did not work with regard to actions taken. The next step is to evaluate how well the actions were communicated, and whether the actions achieved the desired outcome. Finally, it is

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<sup>48</sup> Mind Tools LTD, (2012). *Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA)*.

<sup>49</sup> MCS Media, Inc. *The Simply LEAN Pocket Guide*, 81.

<sup>50</sup> MCS Media, Inc. *The Simply LEAN Pocket Guide*, 101.



important to document what was learned from the experience. Issues specific to museums regarding controversial situations may include:

- Is the organization able to quell escalation of the issue?
- Is there any disruption to the show?
- What is the positive feedback about exhibition?
- Does the organization avoid a forced censoring or self-censorship?
- Is the organization able to provide a uniform response while maintaining objectivity?
- Does the outcome support improvements?
- Does the organization achieve the desired outcome?
- What other issues materialize during the process?

ACT: The final phase of PDCA is focused on taking all of the experiences and data and feedback from a given situation and reinforcing or altering the organization's approach to similar situations in the future.<sup>51</sup> Actions must be firmly based on outcome and/or findings. The main steps of the Act phase are to assess results, alter the organization's action plan, as deemed necessary, and share the successes with others, including those within the organization and other museums.

## **10.2 Managing the Outrage**

One other related recommendation is offered in the event that all planning and actions fail and outrage results. What follows is an approach to identifying, understanding and handling outrage. First, the organization needs to define the issue(s) that led to the outrage. Next, all stakeholder issues need to be considered and analyzed. Third, an

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<sup>51</sup> MCS Media, Inc. The Simply LEAN Pocket Guide, 111.

assessment of the outrage is essential. And finally, the organization must implement an approach to managing outrage.<sup>52</sup>

Although in certain instances a contentious issue may seem to take an organization by surprise, there is enough experience throughout the museum industry to predict many potential controversies in arts organizations. When a controversial issue occurs, the organization's desire is to avoid or minimize the damage. The choice then comes down to reacting in an attempt to decrease the negative response when it happens or to actively address the potential for outrage before it occurs. Another aspect of the response is reputation management. Reputation management is a part of the organization's motivation and a necessary step in the due diligence process.<sup>53</sup> Although it may be tempting to ignore the issue, go on the attack or simply give in, risk can be managed better if it is thought of as Risk = Hazard + Outrage.<sup>54</sup>

The basic approach to managing outrage is similar to any number of quality management styles, and compliments PDCA. In summary, managing outrage before it develops includes asking questions, formulating answers, and addressing complaints. When looking to define the issue(s) the organization may ask: Does the problem pertain to the entire show, a particular artist or a specific work? The second step is to determine who might get upset and why. For example, try to figure out: Who has given you problems before; who have you neglected in the past; what is at stake for them; who is most difficult to deal with; and what additional groups may attempt to "ride the coattails" of others. The next step is to devise a check list of organizations representing such groups as government, religion, education, and other special interest groups, including those

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<sup>52</sup> Sandman, *How to Predict and Manage Outrage*, 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

whose focus may include children, women, sexual preference, military/vets, elderly, community, professional and trade groups, etc. in order to prioritize an action plan. The organization needs to work at understanding all stakeholders, and specifically their opinions. The goal is to respond meaningfully to their concerns by considering: What is at stake? Is it desire for power, or is it a passion?<sup>55</sup> Additionally, it is necessary to know what and how much each stakeholder stands to lose.

The main question that requires an answer is: Why does a particular stakeholder oppose you? The organization must keep in mind the overarching goal, which is to overcome the controversy and maintain the reputation of the organization.<sup>56</sup> To resolve any given issue, consider what the stakeholder brings to the equation. If it is power, offer something. If it is a passion, work towards smoothing over the situation. If it is both power and passion, the organization may have to bend, but not give in (i.e., yield to censorship).<sup>57</sup>

When assessing outrage, there are six basic categories of response to consider on the part of the organization. Which response the organization decides to pursue says a lot about their integrity, their dedication to the organization's mission/vision, and their commitment to working for the solution that best serves the museum community. The options for response are: Being *transparent* by providing all negative information; providing a *balanced impression* of negative and positive information; being *completely honest*, but only if asked; *spinning* the information to reduce damage; *misleading* by giving a positive impression without actually lying; and outright *lying*.<sup>58</sup> The best

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<sup>55</sup> Sandman, *How to Predict and Manage Outrage*, 1998.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Sandman, *How to Predict and Manage Outrage*, 1998.

approach is the second option, which allows an organization to honestly provide information while maintaining the organizations integrity by representing both sides of the situation. This approach will give stakeholders a reason to trust that you are being reasonable and honest.

Ultimately, when managing outrage, keep in mind that no one answer works in every situation. Being flexible and open to alternative approaches is paramount. Therefore, always attempt to understand where the difficult characteristics of the given situation originate and be willing to experiment with change to determine the best solution. Remember to prioritize actions and communicate to staff and board, and to keep everyone on track throughout the situation to the resolution. Finally, highlight the organization's intentions and be consistent. When all is said and done, do not forget to communicate the importance of your actions and the benefit of its result.

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## EXHIBIT 1

### EXPLORATORY GUIDELINES

1. Does organization actively seek out challenging subject matter to present to their patrons? If yes, detail in what ways this occurs; if no, delve into why the organization avoids difficult topics.
2. Recall particular incidents in the past when a controversy arose during an exhibition, and describe the salient points of the situation?
3. What are the major challenges to addressing controversy surrounding an exhibition? How does it differ when it occurs prior to the show opening, at the show's opening, during the run of the show?
4. Do the programs by the organization in support of a given exhibition offer informative, engaging, and challenging subject matter to its patrons?
5. Brainstorm and list the various approaches to communicating potentially controversial ideas to the public, including who is targeted and why.
6. How does the organization cope with contemporary topics and issues through their collections and exhibits?
7. Is the organization adept at handling challenges from internal and external groups? How does the organization manage them; how does the organizations approach to managing them differ?
8. Going forward, how will the organization go about planning new exhibitions that contain potentially controversial artwork or subject matter? Does it differ from an organization's more standard approach to mounting other exhibits?
9. What forms the basis of an organization's Public Relations plan in the event that it finds itself faced with a controversial issue with censorship overtones? Moreover, what would/should the organization change about its approach if anything?
10. In the realm of this topic, what does the organization consider the most important attributes a museum needs to succeed?



## EXHIBIT 2

### TOP TEN LIST (OF THINGS TO CONSIDER)

1. Explain The Scope Of The Show
2. Present A Portrait Of The Artist(s)
3. Outline And Describe The Development Of The Show
4. Discuss The Technical Merits Of The Artwork
5. Put The Show, The Artist(s) And The Individual Works Of Art Into Historical Context
6. Discuss The Funding Of The Show
7. Practice Powerful Public Relations Coupled With A Positive Marketing Strategy
8. Meet With Various Critics To Address Objections
9. Use Notices, Signs And Trained Staff To Assist Patrons Throughout A Challenging Exhibit
10. Do Not Give In To Political Pressure To Practice Self-Censorship