



Introduction

- I investigated three case studies of artists' exhibitions that generated controversy.
- The works confronted homophobia, racism, capital punishment and cultural appropriation.
- All faced either protests, social media criticism and civil unrest. In some cases, outcries resulted in the exhibition being cancelled.
- I examine the controversy in light of the complicated issues museums as organizations face and to see, in hindsight, what might be "best practices" when dealing with crises.

Methods

- Literature Analysis
- Semi-structured Interviews
- Researching Archival Materials

Literature Cited

- Cascone, S. (2017, May 31). After Outcry From the Dakota Nation, the Walker Art Center May Dismantle a 'Traumatizing' Gallows Sculpture by Sam Durant. Artnet News.
- Davis-Marks, I. (2020, September 29). Understanding the Controversy Over Postponed Exhibition Featuring KKK Imagery. Smithsonian Magazine.
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Art as an Agency for Social Awareness

Jacquelyn Klein-Brown, Master of Arts Candidate

Human Dimensions of Organizations, The University of Texas at Austin

Key Dilemmas & Challenges for Museums

- Museum staff may not be adequately educated on sensitive issues before they arise.
- Museums often look at exhibitions short term without considering their effect on long term financial and operating strategies.
- Museum leadership and staff fail to formulate a collective view when dealing with the media or the public to avoid inaccurate or misleading information.
- In dealing with social media, museums are often not discerning in presenting basic facts about the exhibition and the artist.
- One museum's decision to cancel an exhibition may adversely affect other institutions.
- Museums may not always be aware of every interest group who could have strong opinions.
- The decision to cancel an exhibition may affect the credibility of a museum as it may fail to address an important issue.
- Museums must be prepared to deal with demonstrations or other attacks.

Emerging Best Practices

- Pre-plan and follow up with discussions of the show's concept for the public and stakeholders, highlighting its message. Prepare the public by communicating with groups who may have an interest or could be affected.
- Establish relationships with individuals and community leaders, including local government, schools, universities, faith groups and pertinent nonprofits.
- To undertake and manage exhibition financing, museums should assure sponsors are not in a position to appear to endorse or retract from contentious issues or have decision making power.
- Programming should be organized to contextualize the work, educate and engage the community.
- Be educated about your audience and fully informed of current events in the community and the world which may have an effect on an exhibition.
- Prepare all museum staff in advance with a dialogue to address difficult questions.



Conclusions

Museum exhibitions can be effective tools for artists to address issues, often before the public is either aware or willing to confront them.

At the same time, museums depend on funders and the public's support. It is a challenging dilemma to be a bold organization without adversely affecting relationships and reputations.

Current best practices focus on well-planned communication and community outreach before opening a controversial exhibition, with the goal being to foster community engagement and trust.

Acknowledgments: A special thanks of gratitude to my advisor Dr. Mary Rose for her wisdom, guidance, encouragement and support. To my second reader, Dr. Davida Charney, Dr. Evan Stein, Dr. Amy Ware, and the entire HDO team, thank you for providing me the opportunity of a lifetime. My deepest gratitude to Veronica Roberts, Vincent Valdez, Matthew Brown and Jessica Witkin, who inspired me to research this subject.

**For Further Information,
Contact Me:**
 Jacquelynkleinbrown@g
 mail.com



The University of Texas at Austin
 College of Liberal Arts