

Arts Controversies

EXAMINATION & SPECULATION ON THE NATURE OF CONTROVERSY

Arts organization controversy is sadly becoming an integral part of any institutional experience. Planning for it has been overlooked, much to the detriment of the institution's livelihood, the careers of its professionals, and the rapport and communication between it and its community. This is a proposal to investigate the particular conditions that create the environments suitable for controversy to occur; to examine the areas in which these arise; and lastly, to develop and propose solutions toward their prevention and their management. Ultimately an advocate for continuity planning, this work will develop a preparedness manual and resource list that will benefit arts professionals in their awareness and their actions.

This will be extremely interesting and enlightening research; there is a constant stream of background and supporting material in the form of one shocking and lurid newspaper report after another, which indicates that museums are not pristine nor isolated places one might imagine them to be. This dispels any myths that these art institutions are the sacred temples of culture, where the air never moves due to the terrifically constructed environments and the scholarship that surrounds them. Since these institutions are increasingly surrounded by and embroiled in one controversy or another, it begs the question why there is so little thought as to how to categorize, then avoid and/or handle the negative situations that can arise.

Currently, controversy seems inescapable. Art is a fascinating human tool, communication, and product. It elicits incredibly strong reactions, and it should be no surprise to any museum staff or museum member why or when these reactions do occur. The question "Why is the Museum surrounded by such commotion?" ultimately begets the next, "Why are not more organizations prepared for these reactions?" Sadly, there are not many museums with the mindset that contingency or "continuity" plans are needed or necessary, and, arts organization professionals do not have the tools or the skill sets to handle controversy.

Yet, even just a quick overview of the recent uproars suggests that there is a definite increase in the frequency and destructive nature of the current outcroppings of controversy. It is not unusual for an arts organization to lose funding, to get involved in lengthy and expensive litigation, be pressured to fire or replace key personnel, receive death threats and other terrorization of violence and aggression.

TYPES OF ARTS ORGANIZATION CONTROVERSY

The world the arts center or museum moves in generally tends to be in a cloud of non-profit visionary bliss, nothing but really great intentions and a self-satisfied contentment with their place in the state of the world. Until a controversy occurs, and generally the first sentiment felt is disbelief. After all, with such good intentions, visions and lofty mission statements, how is it possible that something could go wrong and somebody not approve?

Well indeed things do go wrong and things fall apart. It is extraordinarily bad planning to not consider it and to create some type of contingency plan to handle it. The best way to prepare for anything is to first know and understand that controversy does arise; the second is to know and understand what kinds there are and where they tend to develop.

According to Table 1, the types of controversy that can arise are separated into four groups: Administrative, Ethical, Exhibitory, and Collection Issues. Following under these categories are some general distinctions of specific types of controversies that occurred the most frequently within the time span of this research project:

Table 1: CONTROVERSY TYPES

ADMINISTRATIVE	ETHICAL	EXHIBITORY	COLLECTION ISSUES
Labor Relations	Finance	Obscenity	Provenance
Stewardship	Efficacy	Display	Authenticity
Constituency	Responsibility	Sensitivity	Repatriation

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A primary aspect to understand about controversy is the distinction between whether it is Internal or External. Internal controversy is often overlooked. Most controversy begins with the internal level through either choice or neglect. But these issues quickly

become external and this is where the most serious damage to the arts organization's health can take place.

The internal and the external distinction will ultimately determine what and where behaviors and events emanate from and then how to approach the problem and the management technique that an arts professional can implement. Guidelines can be developed that can be applied to a variety of scenarios (or role-playing) to flesh out specific responses and tactics; these taking the form primarily of protocol creation and knowledge dissemination and to the particular duties that can be outlined, much like a fire drill specifies contact personnel and procedure.

The types of controversies will be discussed in detail in order to familiarize the art professional to the nature of the industries' controversies. However, this does not limit the variety of and complexity of what can and will occur. The table cannot encapsulate the total and multifaceted nature of controversy; it is merely a simplified description of the most basic areas to open the discussion and the discovery of what areas museums are susceptible.

Ultimately, I speak to the relevance and the necessity of preparing museums, arts galleries, and other cultural institutions for the possibility of controversy and making available resources and assistance to the people who work within them. The increasing prevalence of such organizational controversy is telling; we are in an age of divisiveness and art has become a convenient lightning rod for social unrest and discontent.

I believe this work will benefit museums and arts organizations everywhere, but more importantly it will assist the arts professionals (already beleaguered with internal strife and administrative woes) from the bewildering onslaughts that an uncontained and destructive controversy can visit upon them professionally as well as personally.

It is my aspiration to create a contingency plan, manual, and list of resources that can be used by museum personnel that creates awareness, prepares, and assists before, during, and after controversy occurs within an arts organization, much like the disaster preparedness manuals already published by the Smithsonian.