Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education

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No art museum is immune from the risk of controversy associated with works of art, regardless of the nature of the museum’s collections or exhibitions. Controversy usually arises when individuals who are unaffiliated with a museum judge an exhibited work of art to be egregiously offensive and take action to undermine the museum’s authority to determine the content of its galleries. An artwork is most commonly judged to be offensive if it violates dominant beliefs, values, tastes, and mores of society, especially those pertaining to sex or religion. It is argued that art controversies are partially by-products of audience development aimed at building a larger and more diverse visitor base and a willingness by museums to accept more risks with exhibitions of contemporary art. To illustrate their points, the authors describe circumstances of a controversy that flared when the Museum of International Folk Art exhibited Our Lady, an artwork by Alma López that triggered strong reactions from the Hispanic Catholic community of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Throughout the paper, reference is made to special challenges that museum educators, both staff and volunteer docents, face during a controversy. In the final sections, the authors provide a number of concrete proposals for how museums, and museum educators in particular, can effectively prepare for and respond to controversy.

Let us begin with a fundamental assertion: *Any work of art may be controversial.* As any veteran art museum educator can verify, the reality is that however much people may agree with each other, they still collectively hold an infinite variety of opinions, values, and perceptions. Nowhere is this more evident than in responses to works of art. No artwork is so mundane or so innocuous as to be exempt from stirring the fires of indignation; no artwork is so laudable as to be immune from critical scrutiny and condemnation. Most of the time people can tolerate differences of opinion concerning art, but from time to time those differences can become almost unbearable. When works of art for one reason or another perturb people in the extreme, such that lines are drawn and defensive and offensive actions are taken by opposing sides, it is a case of controversial art. Fortunately extreme cases are relatively rare, but when they do occur they can rock artistic careers, shake up entire museums, and cause the artworld to quake.
For museum educators it is like living on a fault line; when an earthquake hits they are near the epicenter because it is their responsibility to address questions of interpretation and value raised by the public concerning artworks exhibited in their museums. Like anyone living on a fault line, it is advisable to prepare for the possibility of earthquakes and to have a plan of response if one occurs.

Controversial art is not altogether a bad thing. Impassioned dialog fuels the exploration and examination of ideas that make a difference in the way people think about, value, and live with art. Thoughtful and challenging dialogs are vital for sustaining meaningful relationships within the artworld and between the artworld and other segments of society. Unfortunately, when art becomes controversial, the dialog can cease to be constructive. People on either side of an issue can react fervidly or contemptuously and, as often as not, unpredictably.

For museum administrators, trustees, curators, and educators the stress does not end when the controversy does. This eyewitness account by curatorial administrator Lonnie Bunch (1995), who was referring to the spate of museum controversies that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, applies as much today as when it was written: “The recent controversy over museum exhibits has left many in the profession uncertain, angry, and fearful. They wonder whether this criticism is a momentary storm or the dawning of an Ice Age of conservative change and control” (p. 34). Bunch asserted that museums would be making a mistake if they attempted to tip-toe around the continuing threat of controversy instead of facing it head on: “Much of the current controversy and debate revolves around profound issues and central questions that will shape and inform the direction, role, and importance of museums for many years to come” (p. 34). In art museums, those issues and questions revolve around what may or may not be exhibited, conditions under which art may be exhibited, and the scope of educational programs associated with exhibitions.

American museums are in many ways dependent on public opinion, and this dependence applies to more than funding. The people who step through a museum’s doors provide the opportunity for the museum to realize its mission of education and service. Museums are trusted institutions of society, to whom the public looks for answers and enlightenment. Controversial art represents a perceived breach in that trust by those who feel offended, and it is in the museum’s best interest to vigorously pursue a resolution of the dispute. Everyone who works at the museum is a stakeholder, and in a sense, every member of society is too, for when a museum is under fire its abilities to represent the artworld and fully and effectively serve the community are at risk.

On the following pages the nature of controversial art will be examined, particularly as it affects museum educators. It is argued that art controversy is in part a by-product of art museums’ reaching out for larger and more diverse audiences, as well as an inclination by curators to take more risks with exhibitions. Art is most commonly judged to be controversial by an audience if it violates accepted beliefs, values, and mores of society, especially those pertaining to sex or religion. Each of these elements contributed to a controversy that flared up when the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) exhibited Our Lady, a digital photo-collage print by Alma López. How this artwork became the center of controversy, and the museum’s response to the crisis, makes for an interesting and enlightening story. In the final sections of this paper, strategies are proposed that address ways museums can prepare for and respond to controversy.

DIVERSITY AND EXHIBITION RISK FACTORS FOR CONTROVERSY

It seems clear that museums are more at risk than ever before of inadvertently stirring up troubles for themselves. As one museum executive pointed out when talking about controversy, “It’s
not a matter of if it’s going to happen to you; it’s a matter of when” (cited in Platt, 1990, p. 40). Ironically, good intentions can net both positive and negative consequences. Good intentions have motivated audience development at museums, as well as the willingness to exhibit cutting-edge and nonmainstream art. But has there been a price to pay?

“Paying” for Audience Development

For quite some time, art museums have been earnestly working to open their doors to a broader audience, to count among their visitors a more diverse mix of citizens that are truly representative of the communities they serve. As outlined in a policy statement adopted by the American Association of Museums (AAM, 1992):

Museums have the potential to be enriched and enlivened by the nation’s diversity. As public institutions in a democratic society, museums must achieve greater inclusiveness. Trustees, staff, and volunteers must acknowledge and respect our nation’s diversity in race, ethnic origin, age, gender, economic status, and education, and they should attempt to reflect that pluralism in every aspect of museums’ operations and programs. (p. 8)

It takes a long time and a lot of effort to shed a reputation of elitism and attract new audiences while not disenfranchising established patrons. Extensive advertising, blockbuster exhibitions, and an expansion of family and target-audience programming have successfully lured visitors through the unfamiliar portals of their regional art museums. Opportunities abound for museum educators to enrich the lives of individuals of all ages and walks of life, and museums have set about to build audiences that will sustain them into the future. Yet larger and more diverse audiences multiply the possibility of controversy. Although reaching wider audiences is a worthwhile goal, acceptance of an increased risk of controversy is a price museums must pay. This is not to suggest that museums should cease trying to reach broader audiences, but rather that museums should concurrently plan and initiate measures to address controversy.

In its Strategic Plan 1998–2000 for preparing to enter the 21st century, the American Association of Museums (AAM) identified increased audience diversity as one of the key “challenges and opportunities” facing museums:

Continuing demographic change and the growth of a borderless global environment is changing the context in which museums work. Museums will need to become more responsive to the resulting diversity in every aspect of their governance, staffing, and program and audience development. (www.aam-us.org/news.cfm?mode=LIST&id=4, 1997)

New audiences carry with them new perceptions, biases, and predispositions. Newer visitors lack the advantage of having followed the evolutionary history of exhibitions at a museum, whereas frequent visitors are less likely to be unduly shocked by contemporary artworks if they have followed trends through years of exhibitions. Novice visitors for whom “art” means a print reproduction of the Mona Lisa are far more likely to be stricken by the variety of modern and contemporary art, or any form of art unfamiliar to them. Although many will certainly respond timidly with a simple “I just don’t get it,” and chalk it up to either their own lack of knowledge or the crazy state of the world today, others are inclined to take offence and lay the blame for their incensement on the artist, the artwork, and the museum (or more precisely the museum staff) that had the audacity to exhibit such things. If art museums are being brazen with their exhibitions, they are flaunting their audaciousness before an ever larger and more diverse audience. The good news is that although there is an increased risk of controversy, larger and more diverse numbers also create a bigger pool of museum supporters, which is crucial for museums to be able to continue exhibiting potentially controversial work. As the AAM
asserted in its report, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (1992), “Museums serve as appropriate places to confirm and validate accepted ideas and can be forums for presenting and testing alternative ideas and addressing controversy” (p. 12).

For museum educators the challenge is twofold: to interpret controversies for a curious and sometimes hostile public, and to be effective teachers for an audience as diverse as the population itself. Seonaid McArthur, while Chairing the Committee on Education (EdCom) of the American Association of Museums, noted “the complexity of engaging a diverse audience in vital and meaningful learning experiences” and stressed interdepartmental teamwork; the application of new technologies; active public advocacy; and rigorous planning, implementation, and assessment of museum education to meet these challenges (2002).

### Proliferation of Edgy Exhibitions

Art museums do seem more willing than ever before to accept risks in their exhibition planning, opening their galleries to boundary-breaking artwork and revisionist and postmodern notions of art. Folk art, outsider art, performance art artifacts, popular art, functional art, ecoartists’ environmental projects, electronic media arts, kitsch—the sky’s the limit on what might constitute valid content for art museum exhibitions today. The number of perplexed museum visitors has grown exponentially as a result.

The fact is that there are more museum venues exhibiting more edgy artworks than at any time in history. The artworld once depended primarily on private galleries to exhibit the work of emerging artists and nonconformist extremes in art, and galleries continue to provide such venues. Yet today’s art audiences are just as likely to encounter alternative art on a visit to their local art museum. Traditional and encyclopedic art museums have joined with much newer contemporary art centers, such as the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) of Cincinnati; the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles; the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio; the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago; and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, in offering visitors access to recent, thought-provoking, and emotion-evoking works by experimental artists. Yet more established art museums are taking a risk that visitors may be turned off. “A museum that seemed to be a bastion of tradition, a safe haven, a protector and preserver of the past, suddenly becomes a proponent of the new and the radical,” observed museum director Franklin Robinson (1995), adding that museums should not shy away from exhibiting current art: “If we say that such art should not be seen in museums, we are saying that the museum is not a place to debate the central issues of our time, that these institutions are not relevant to society today” (p. 43).

Risks associated with exhibiting “edgy art” became all too evident when in the fall of 1999 the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA), a museum with an encyclopedic collection, prepared to open its exhibition, *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*. Risks associated with this exhibition could not have escaped the notice of the BMA’s director and staff, for a similar version of *Sensation* had earlier generated controversy when exhibited at the Royal Academy of London (Becker, 2001). In fact, the BMA’s marketing seemed determined to capitalize on the show’s reputation in order to attract larger, younger, and more diverse audiences (Becker, pp. 16–17).

Did [BMA Director] Lehman go too far? Did he compromise his institution and overly sensationalize Sensation? The preshow publicity and the signage at the show warned that the exhibition “may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety.” The show was presented as if it were some drug with possible side effects or an amusement park ride to be entered at one’s own risk. But the only one who suffered all these symptoms was probably Lehman himself. (Becker, p. 17)
Even before the exhibition opened in Brooklyn, the mayor of New York publicly denounced the exhibition, attempted to cut off public funding to the BMA, and sought to revoke its lease because the “Sensation exhibition included paintings that the mayor thought were ‘sick’ and ‘disgusting’ and offensive to people with deeply held religious views” (Strauss, 2001, p. 44). Legal battles and public debates raged for months before the controversy faded, the BMA’s funding and lease intact (Rothfield, 2001). There were a host of correlative circumstances that acted to ignite and fuel the fires of controversy at the BMA, not least being political and economic motivations, and media frenzy.

But for each BMA Sensation there are many other instances of museums exhibiting potentially controversial art without suffering such consequences. For example, the encyclopedic Saint Louis Art Museum hosted a major contemporary art exhibition titled Wonderland during the summer of 2000. Curated by Rochelle Steiner, Wonderland featured large indoor and outdoor installations and site-specific works by international artists. Among the several highlights were an urban survivalist farm with live chickens and a vegetable crop prepared by Atelier van Lieshout, Pipillotti Rist’s twin video projections of a lovely young woman gleefully smashing out windows of automobiles parked along an urban street juxtaposed with breezy images of wildflower fields, and an audio-tour by Janet Cardiff that led visitors outside and along an earthen path through woods adjoining the museum. Nearby museum galleries exhibited pieces from the museum’s permanent collection, including Impressionist paintings; Egyptian mummies; Early Renaissance altarpieces; landscapes by artists of the Hudson River School; Asian bronzes; Pre-Columbian ceramics; and other artworks representing various styles, cultures, and time periods. Many visitors who came to see the mummies and Monet also had a startling introduction via Wonderland to some of the most progressive artwork on the world scene at the time. Visitors were challenged to expand their concept of art and confront a variety of global issues. In this case, although there was some concern expressed by adult visitors about Rist’s video setting a poor example of behavior for impressionable younger visitors, overall Wonderland was well attended and well received.

The success of Wonderland is an indication that a significant market is ready for and interested in a wide variety of sometimes challenging works of contemporary art. Indeed, there are signs of growth nationwide among institutions exhibiting contemporary art. The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis can boast that it is 1 of the 10 most visited art museums in the United States (www.walker.art.org, 2002). The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, with its long history of collecting and exhibiting the work of living artists, is poised to construct a major new wing. The new wing itself announces to the world the risk-taking character of the institution. Designed by innovative architect Frank Gehry, the polished surfaces and multilayered facade of the new wing will create a startling and thought-provoking stylistic counterpoint to the Corcoran’s existing Beaux Arts building (www.corcoran.org, 2002). The Walker is also planning a major building addition, and both the CAC in Cincinnati and the Contemporary Art Museum of Saint Louis are in the process of constructing larger new museum buildings.

Because so many museums with more traditional collections are enthusiastically embracing the diverse media and messages of contemporary art, it is important for those (and all) art institutions to be aware of the variety of situations that can spark controversy. Familiarity with recent cases of controversy, and an understanding of some of the reasons why visitors have difficulty comprehending art works, can help museums anticipate and effectively manage controversy should it arise. Museum staff and members of the public who are entrenched in the artworld may not be aware of the difficulty most visitors experience when trying to decipher the dizzying array of materials and messages of contemporary art. Nor, for that matter, do they always recognize or fully appreciate the immense challenge this presents for museum educators. In the best circumstances, museums can use controversy as an opportunity to expand and deepen visitor learning in the museum.
WHAT MAKES ART CONTROVERSIAL?

Controversy is certainly nothing new to the artworld—It has been commonplace throughout its history. Many of the works we herald as artistic masterpieces were considered by contemporary audiences to be controversial: Some of the figures in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* were painted over after his death because they were perceived as touching one another in perverse ways; Manet’s *Olympia* required around-the-clock guards at the 1865 Salon des Refusés; Rodin’s sculpture *The Kiss* was considered too graphic for public display at the 1886 World’s Fair and placed behind a curtain; Dada exhibitions in Germany in the 1920s were forcibly shut down by police. Many museum visitors today would not bat an eye at a painting like *Olympia* and would agree that nudity, violence, sexuality, and political themes have a legitimate place within the world of art. Nevertheless, novices and even seasoned museum visitors sometimes “draw the line when such themes could be construed as pornographic, tasteless, or blasphemous” (Tapley, 2002, p. 51). Just where the public may draw that line is difficult to predict.

So what constitutes controversial art today? The Oxford Dictionary describes controversy as a “prolonged argument or dispute.” By its very definition, “controversy” spells trouble, but it is a fuzzy term—A “prolonged argument or dispute” can take many forms and can be sparked by a variety of situations. Art controversies can occur within the context of a museum, commercial galleries, community art centers, university galleries, school art exhibitions, and public art projects. Within the realm of the art museum, controversy can ignite among staff and departments, or can be initiated by the public. No matter what its source, controversy can tax museum resources and staff, place reputations at risk, and threaten future funding.

Controversies on the Inside

Controversies that arise within the museum can create rifts between staff or departments and can undermine the smooth operation of the institution. Issues of authenticity and quality, and how well acquisitions fit into the museum’s collection, can be the focus of controversy, especially when acquisition funds are limited. Arguments over expenditures and budgets can create tension within or between departments, impeding the ability of the museum to operate as a cohesive whole.

Among the most recent sources of controversy within museums are conservation issues. Some media employed by contemporary artists are difficult if not impossible to conserve, which creates questions regarding the validity of spending large portions of already limited acquisition funds on works that may not stand the test of time. Video and other digital media present a particular problem, as the technology on which their presentation depends may one day become obsolete. Works that require special accommodations that may tax strapped budgets may also create controversy within the museum. Marc Quinn’s *Self* (1991, private collection), for example, is a cast of the artist’s head created from Quinn’s own frozen blood. The work is housed in a refrigerated unit that must be in constant operation, and one power failure could compromise the artwork and the investment. Works like Quinn’s are often displayed in temporary exhibitions or relegated to private collections due to the additional costs of preserving such pieces. Whether to conserve a work of art that was intended by the artist to decay over time is another cause for debate within the museum—Should the museum honor the intentions of the artist or preserve their investment?

One of the most pressing problems facing museums today concerns the acquisition of works with questionable origins. Works that were confiscated from private collectors and museums by the Nazis, art that was removed from its country of origin (such as work from Ancient Greece and Egypt), and works tied to particular cultures and religious groups (such
as American Indian artifacts) are at the center of hot debates concerning issues of rightful ownership and repatriation. These are particularly sensitive issues for museums to consider: Who is the “rightful owner” of such works and how is ownership determined? Once brought to the attention of the general public, such debates can quickly become front-page news and affect the public’s perception of the integrity of the museum.

This Is Art?

Although internal controversies can have a profound impact on the efficiency of museum operations, it is public controversy sparked by a specific work of art or exhibition that museums dread. Artworks can be perceived by museum visitors as controversial for many reasons, ranging from the content or message the works convey to the media, styles, or forms in which they were created.

Contemporary art is particularly difficult for some viewers to understand because its content and appearance often differ from what many museum visitors are familiar with. Many contemporary works look different from traditional works of art, and some viewers may question the meaning and artistic validity of works that are created from nontraditional materials. Contemporary artists have created works from a wide range of materials, from blood to trash to ordinary objects from everyday life, and it is often difficult for viewers to understand why these works are considered “art.” Installation pieces and works that are displayed in unusual ways (other than on the wall or a pedestal), performance pieces, and works that blur the boundaries between “art” and “reality” (such as Ann Hamilton’s *Seed Bed*, an installation at the inaugural exhibition of the Wexner Center that literally presented the life cycle of moths) can be fodder for controversy because they break from our society’s traditional concepts of art.

Works of art that are not deemed aesthetically pleasing by visitors are also ripe for controversy. Art has long been equated with beauty, but many of today’s artists are addressing “ugly” issues and are often more concerned with conveying a message than with creating beautiful aesthetic objects. Works created collaboratively or appropriated from other artists or the mass media can also spark controversy. Works such as these challenge conceptions of artistic genius based on creativity and originality and may be dismissed by some viewers as invalid. Although these issues do not often spark large-scale controversy with potentially serious consequences, they are the types of issues often faced by museum educators in the galleries.

Confrontational Art

There is no paucity of “hot-button” issues in contemporary society, including those pertaining to sexism, racism, ageism, social class divisions, the environment, foreign policy, and more. Many issues attract keen interest from a broad cross-section of society. But controversy is often sparked by artworks that are perceived by a particular segment of the population as derogatory to their beliefs. The BMA’s *Sensation* exhibition featured several works that were perceived as controversial, most notably Chris Ofili’s mixed-media artwork, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, that was composed in part of cutouts from pornographic magazines and lumps of elephant dung. Ofili’s work was attacked by various Christian groups who viewed the painting as blasphemous (see Rothfield, 2001). The *Sensation* incident illustrates the potential for serious consequences resulting from controversial art. Publicly funded museums are at special risk because they draw on taxpayer dollars, so they must be particularly aware of the possible repercussions of displaying works that have a high potential to offend. But art museums have to carefully balance the fear of potential consequences with the drive to fulfill their mission statements and provide the public with the opportunity to view, and learn from, art that may be controversial.
Works that are viewed as ethically or morally offensive or as promoting cruelty also come under fire by the viewing public. Some of the work of British artist Damien Hirst, for example, features animals suspended in glass cases of formaldehyde. Hirst creates works that are purposely provocative, but many viewers have difficulty overcoming the confrontational and often gruesome aspects of the work. Gunther von Hagens’s plasticized human corpses have also come under fire recently. Although Von Hagens claims that his work is not any different from the cadavers used in medical schools or from the displays in natural history museums, and that the pieces give viewers new respect for the human body, some people see his work as macabre and believe that he has crossed a line by treating the human body as if it were “something as pliable as sculptors’ clay” (Andrews, 2001, p. 1). Despite many objections from religious and activist groups, people have waited up to 3 hours to see Von Hagens’s work throughout Europe and Japan. This illustrates a positive aspect of controversy—it often gets people through the door and gets them thinking about not only the ideas presented by the artist but also the larger role of art and museums in society.

Sexually Charged Artworks

Sexually explicit works or works that present forms of sexuality on the fringes of the mainstream often elicit controversy from viewers, even those who are otherwise strong supporters of the artworld and of freedom of expression. Few in the art museum world need to be reminded of the heated debate surrounding Robert Mapplethorpe’s X-Portfolio or the enormous impact it had on federal funding of the arts (see Lankford, 1992b). Museums faced with the choice of whether or not to display works with graphic sexual content invariably flash back to the Mapplethorpe storm, especially if the museum operates using public funds, no matter how small the percentage of the museum’s total budget. Past controversies and their ramifications can affect the decisions of museum staff and boards for many years after the initial flames have been extinguished, and can ultimately result in a kind of self-censorship.

Some museums, however, have faced the potential for controversy head on and exhibited graphic works, albeit with some protective measures in place. The William Benton Museum at the University of Connecticut, for example, exhibited several pieces that had the potential to be construed as pornographic in a 2000 exhibition entitled Genealogies, Miscegenations, Missed Generations. This small university museum was able to carry out a successful, well-received exhibition without controversy by issuing preemptive warnings and carefully working out the mission of the Benton (Starger, 2000, p. 16). Erin Valentino, the exhibition’s curator, and Sal Scalora, the Benton’s new director, separated two works from the main exhibition space, including Nadine Robinson’s 322 Ways to Breed Mulattos for BET Music Videos, Miss America Beauty Pageants, Army Generals, and NBA Player’s Girlfriends, which featured explicit sex acts between mixed-race couples. The museum posted warning signs and a guard at the entrance to Robinson’s installation and did not allow anyone under the age of 18 to enter the space. Although the artist believed that having her work segregated from the rest of the show undermined the exhibition’s focus on difference (Starger, 2000, p. 18), the museum was able to avoid controversy by warning viewers of the work’s potential to offend and essentially giving them the choice to look or not to look.

A well-informed public is less likely to create a ruckus over art with questionable subject matter when they feel as if the institution is sensitive to their needs and perspectives. The Benton’s success is testament to the possibility of balancing sensitivity toward the viewing public with support for freedom of expression and acknowledgment of differences in perception. As Scalora asserted, “A museum is a special place... I believe that a museum’s function is to try to come up with the best solution so that many kinds of statements can be heard” (cited in Starger, 2000, p. 18).
Whether a statement made by an artist becomes a source of controversy depends on a multitude of factors distinct from the work of art itself. The content of the exhibition or collection in which the work is displayed, the reputation of the museum, and the physical setting that houses the work can all serve as mitigating or exacerbating forces in the unfolding of controversy. In addition, the social and ethnic makeup of a museum’s audience can play a large role in the formation and resolution of controversy. As the saga of *Our Lady* at the Museum of International Folk art illustrates, larger societal issues influence the nature of controversy and the way that it plays out.

**OUR LADY**

One of the most interesting cases of controversial art in recent history began with the February 2001 opening of “Cyber-Arte: Where Tradition Meets Technology” at the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, one of four museums operated by the Museum of New Mexico. The work at the center of the controversy was *Our Lady*, a digital photo-collage print created by Alma López, an artist based in Los Angeles. *Our Lady* is reminiscent of widespread imagery of the Virgin of Guadalupe, an icon strongly linked to Hispanic Catholicism. The image features a muscular contemporary Hispanic woman “with attitude” in the role of the Virgin (Keller, 2001, p. 30). She stands in contrapposto, one knee cocked and her hands on her hips. Unlike traditional images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, her head is not covered and she engages the viewer—she is self-assured and her gaze is somewhat confrontational. Only a grouping of flowers pasted over her breasts and pelvis covers her body, and her open cloak is covered with images from an Aztec relief sculpture of the moon goddess/warrior Coyolxauhqui. The putti that holds with outstretched arms the crescent on which the Virgin stands is a bust of a contemporary woman—with short hair, bare breasts, and pierced nipples—who hovers in front of the wings of a butterfly. The figures are surrounded by garlands of roses reminiscent of sentimental antique lithographs and superimposed patterns suggestive of tacky wallpaper and faded red velvet. Taken as a whole, the image makes reference not only to notions of Hispanic Catholicism but also to social stereotypes regarding Hispanic women and culture.

Over 11,000 brochures featuring *Our Lady* were mailed by MOIFA as exhibition announcements in September of 2000, and the museum received six complaints based on the image in the brochure before mid-March, 2001. Although they were able to successfully address these complaints, the museum correctly interpreted their arrival as a sign of possible controversy to come (A. Gomez, personal communication, November 22, 2002). Thomas H. Wilson, director of the New Mexico Museum, had been aware of the potential for controversy presented by this work but was confident that the exhibit had been developed according to existing museum policies and procedures. Nevertheless, curator Tey Marianna Nunn carefully prepared MOIFA’s 60-some docents to discuss *Our Lady* in the context of art history, images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the depiction of women and nudity in art; the intention was not just to prepare the docents to educate the public but also to prepare them to respond to issues that might arise in the gallery (A. Gomez, personal communication). The opening of the exhibition and panel discussion on February 25 featuring López, Nunn, and the three other artists featured in the exhibit attracted over 400 attendees, but was without incident. Wilson and MOIFA employees were taken by surprise when the Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish presented him and MOIFA Director Joyce Ice with a four-page letter. State Cultural Affairs Officer J. Edson Way (through whom Wilson reports to the governor of New Mexico) and Linda Hutchison, Way’s deputy, also received copies of the Parish’s complaints. The letter, which contained several citations referring to canon law, asked Way to “remove the sacrilege art” and “all Catholic sacred
images and icons from the museum” and “return” them to the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. It also demanded the return of “tainted” money earned by the museum through public admissions. Further, the letter requested the resignation of Wilson and Ice due to actions perceived by the parish to be culturally insensitive (cited in Keller, 2001, p. 31). In addition to the letter, the church had issued a news release, and reporters and protesters were already outside the front doors of the museum.

The letter from Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish and initial demonstrations were just the beginning of a slew of protests, letters (including over 24,000 preprinted postcards mailed from locations across the country), e-mails, phone calls, and media-hyped public meetings that would consume Wilson and MOIFA’s staff for the next several weeks. An interactive component of the exhibition set up by the museum, consisting of an “altar” with a computer monitor displaying a screen saver and space around the computer to leave “offerings,” had been erected to reflect the overarching themes of the exhibition as a whole. This had to be dismantled and replaced with a notebook for comments when local artists opposing the exhibition of Our Lady began bringing large objects such as tires, bags of trash, and dead fish into the gallery space (A. Gomez, personal communication). The media was present when a group of 125 protesters gathered at the museum a week later, and reporters soon made the conflict front-page news. Word spread very quickly due to local television coverage as well as coverage by CNN, the BBC, the Associated Press, international art publications, the Mexican media, and many major newspapers around the country. Web sites appeared on the Internet expressing contrasting opinions of the artwork, the artist, and the controversy. The issue soon caught the attention of the New Mexico government. Although the Republican governor supported the right of MOIFA to exhibit the work, seven Democratic members of the state House signed a petition to persuade the museum—with vague threats to decline pending funding requests—to remove the work.1 Suits were filed against Nunn, Ice, and Wilson for not having public hearings before the opening of the exhibition.2 The Archbishop of Santa Fe, the Catholic League of Religious and Civil Rights, the American Association of Museums, the American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico, and the National Coalition Against Censorship joined local organizations and individuals in what was quickly becoming a battle of epic proportions, spurred on primarily by people who had never set foot into the exhibition space (A. Gomez, personal communication).

In an effort to resolve the conflict and allow the expression of public opinion, the museum’s board of regents invited comment and participation at its next meeting, scheduled for April 4. On April 3, Wilson released to the public a statement addressed to the board that reflected the museum’s belief that the work should remain on view and provide an impetus for the review and possible revision of museum policy:

In creating this exhibition and selecting this particular image, the Museum of International Folk Art followed standard procedures and guidelines... I nv i e wo ft h epresent situation, current procedures, albeit evolved over ninety years, may not be enough. We are currently developing policy and guidelines in regard to sensitive materials in our collection and exhibitions. Such review of sensitive materials might well involve the participation of interested communities. (Cited in Keller, 2001, pp. 32–33)

Sparked by Wilson’s public statement and media announcements regarding the opportunity for public involvement in the decision-making process, over 600 people showed up for the regent’s meeting. Only 300 or so were admitted into the building because of space limitations.

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1 According to Gomez, there was no indication of funding cuts as of mid-November 2002.
2 A state district court judge ruled that Nunn was not at fault for not requesting public input before the opening of the exhibition.
and safety concerns, leaving an angry crowd of between 300 and 400 people to wait outside. Aurelia Gomez, MOIFA’s Education Director, characterized this first public hearing as the most stressful part of the controversy because the museum staff felt physically threatened by the opposition, resulting in the premature adjournment of the meeting (A. Gomez, personal communication). López flew to Santa Fe from Los Angeles to read a prepared statement, but was unable to do so before the meeting was abruptly ended. While waiting for security escorts, López and curator Tey Marianna Nunn were accosted by several men. As Nunn recalls, “We were suddenly surrounded by eight or ten men saying ‘crucify her’ and calling us fea [ugly] as we left. I was very shocked and upset that what I consider my culture would do this to me.” López was also traumatized by the encounter, as she had already received e-mailed threats to her safety. Nunn viewed the situation as a defeat: “We were effectively silenced since they ended the meeting before we could present our statements” (cited in Keller, 2001, p. 33).

In order to appease the throngs of people who wished to make comments and participate in the regent’s decision, an open forum (lasting eight hours) was held at the 1,200-seat convention center in Santa Fe. Over 600 people attended over the course of the day, including four generations of Guadalupana/os, members of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, MOIFA staff and trustees from the Museum of New Mexico system and other museums, artists and art professionals, activists, and representatives of many other segments of the population. Many of MOIFA’s do- cents, who had been on the front lines since the beginning of the controversy, also attended the open forum and paid for a local advertisement in support of the museum (A. Gomez, personal communication). Members of the New Mexico state government were also present, including the first lady, the secretary of state, and the speaker of the house. The professionally managed meeting was more peaceful than the previous, but many attendees were upset that the cultural affairs director of Santa Fe, who acted as the meeting’s facilitator, allowed the deacon of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish to make an opening statement lasting 11 minutes, whereas museum supporters were not given comparable time to speak. Many supporters felt that the proceedings were unbalanced in favor of the fundamentalist groups, who had, as Gomez observed, “packed the house” (A. Gomez, personal communication).

Although Our Lady remained on exhibit until October 2001, when the exhibition was closed early in what MOIFA director Joyce Ice called “a spirit of reconciliation” (cited in Keller, 2001, p. 35). The conflict that arose in Santa Fe is demonstrative of the all-consuming, media-saturated controversies that can arise from a single work of art. As Ice explained, “This focus on one piece of art in one small exhibit takes on its own energy, almost like a whirlwind that pulls things into it. It’s become a metaphor for issues of difference and diversity; the economic divide in Santa Fe, the sense of art being for the elite and not the common people” (cited in Keller, 2001, p. 35). Poet, photographer, and former New Mexico State Arts Council director Bernie López keenly described the nature of the controversy:

What’s really going on has nothing to do with art. This region encompasses predominately Catholic areas still associated with their Spanish colonial antecedents. A great deal of land is gone, customs are gone, and the remaining spiritual realm is seen as threatened. Everything else is gone. With all this passionate emotional feeling about a changing way of life, a changing world, art becomes the catalytic factor, the pressure point at which these feelings emerge. (cited in Keller, 2001, p. 33)

Although most cases of controversial art are not based as strongly on a particular culture as is the Our Lady controversy, the series of events surrounding the MOIFA exhibition illustrate the complexities that underlay such incidents. Although MOIFA holds the largest collection of folk art in the world, and contemporary Hispanic art, often with religious themes, is exhibited regularly in the Hispanic Heritage Wing, the museum was in this case seen as the enemy: It
exhibited to the public an image that was perceived as an affront to Hispanic Catholic tradition and beliefs. Such a fierce attack by a segment of the population that was well represented in the museum’s collection was completely unexpected.

Despite the discouraging and stressful series of events that MOIFA endured, from an educational standpoint the experience proved to be what Gomez characterized as “one of the greatest things to have ever happened” at the museum (personal communication). Although this comment may initially be surprising, Gomez was in fact expressing a larger view of the impact this incident had on the community: As a result of extensive publicity about the controversy, people all over town engaged in thoughtful dialogs about art, artists, the nature of artistic expression, the value of images, and the role of art museums in culture and society. Several local schoolteachers used the controversy as an opportunity to discuss the Bill of Rights and freedom of expression with their students (A. Gomez, personal communication).

For a time, art was the hot topic in Santa Fe and beyond—but the museum staff also learned important lessons that will help them handle controversy in the future. The museum staff involved in the saga of Our Lady became aware of the value of careful assessment at each stage of exhibition planning. The support of the museum board is of paramount importance when museum staff and volunteers are under fire. The value of thorough preparation of docents for addressing visitors’ questions was underscored. Perhaps most importantly, the MOIFA staff learned the importance of providing visitors with opportunities to voice their opinions. As Barbara Hagood, Director of Marketing and Public Relations, explained, “we have taken the approach of allowing the person to vent or explain without trying to justify our position concerning the museum’s mission and free expression. People want to be heard, and by listening, we let them know that we welcome a spirited discussion about our differences” (cited in Keller, 2001, p. 35). It is important to allow the public to express their opinions without fear of feeling disregarded or patronized by an “elitist” museum staff.

Although the MOIFA controversy provided many opportunities for discourse and learning for both the public and the museum staff, it was a unique case, as are all cases of controversy. Each case plays out differently, and although lessons learned from one controversy may be applied to the next, it is important for museums to develop broad and flexible policies and procedures that will accommodate a wide variety of situations and aid in the management of unexpected flare-ups. As Wilson discussed the Our Lady controversy with fellow museum professionals around the country, he discovered that anticipating what artworks might ignite controversy is difficult for most museum staff. As Wilson explained:

We are still in the process of learning lessons. It would be irresponsible not to take seriously the sensitivities of people who have objections, so we’re working internally to see how we can meet those sensitivities… One lesson that was underscored is the extreme importance of having well thought out and written polices and procedures that will set guidelines and standards, so you’re relying on time-tested polices. (cited in Keller, 2001, p. 33)

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES
FOR ADDRESSING CONTROVERSY

Although the problems that arise from controversial art are unique to each case and institution, generalizations can be made that allow for the creation of broadly based policies that can serve as a framework to assist museum personnel in preparing for and coping with controversy. The creation of policies is especially important considering that, as often as not, controversy arises unexpectedly. Exhibitions and works of art that are considered fairly benign by curators, museum educators, board members, and others closely associated with the
museum may be considered malignant by some members of the viewing public. Fortunately, policies and procedures that are carefully crafted might be applied to placate the offended when controversies arise and ensure that some controversies be avoided altogether.

In the most general terms, a museum policy is a governing or operating principle. These principles should reflect the museum’s mission. Policies are often philosophically grounded, although there may be economic, political, educational, or other foundations for a policy. Because each case of controversy has unique characteristics and is context specific, museum policies should be broad enough to encompass a range of possibilities and flexible enough to adapt to individual circumstances. Because social and cultural mores evolve as time passes, every museum’s strategic plan should include periodic review and revision of policies pertaining to controversy management. As Cathryn Keller, the former chief communications officer of the Museum of New Mexico sagely noted in her reflections on the Our Lady controversy, “it is unlikely that any institution would be accused of being over-prepared if it addressed, in its strategic and crisis planning, the possibility of dealing with strong public sentiment and organized opposition to an exhibition or program” (2001, p. 35).

A procedure is an articulated plan of action that is designed to fulfill the intent of a policy. Such procedures may include the who, what, when, where, and how of carrying out a policy. For example, it may be (and probably should be) a museum’s policy to record and respond to serious visitor complaints. If a docent receives a complaint about a work of art from a visitor during a tour, a procedure can be followed for reporting the incident that includes providing the docent supervisor with an accurate written description of the nature of the complaint, the immediate response of the docent to the visitor (which may itself have been framed by a policy), and if possible the name and contact information of the person expressing the concern. The docent coordinator may then follow procedures for formally responding to the visitor, record keeping, and reporting the incident to other administrators at the museum.

It is usually a good idea for museum staff and volunteers to be trained in procedures. Training should include not just the mechanics of carrying out a procedure but also education about its purpose. Understanding the purpose of the procedure used in the previous example would assist docents in being able to distinguish between serious complaints that should be reported and everyday, nonthreatening complaints that are unnecessary to report. It is serious business if a visitor claims that a work of art is a profound sacrilege and aggressively demands that it be removed from an exhibition. But a visitor scowling at an Abstract Expressionist painting, claiming that his 6-year-old niece could do as well and voicing the opinion that it is not art and should not be in the museum’s collection is much less significant. Museum educators hear such remarks every day.

In practice, museum policies and procedures act in concert to maintain consistency of purpose and performance across the museum. Policies and procedures should be in place that are applicable to all levels and in every department of the museum, and all staff and volunteers should be well informed about them. Museum educators should collaborate with others across the museum as well as with one another in their education departments to frame policies and procedures that will provide guidance and security for docents and staff educators when working with the public.

What follows are generalized proposals for addressing controversial art. Any of these may be suggestive of policies, procedures, or both. To be useful, educators and other museum personnel must adapt these proposals to their particular institutional and community contexts. The proposals are divided into two sections: Preparing for Controversy and Responding to Controversy, although in practice these categories are not exclusive but mutually informative; that is, preparations reveal their optimum usefulness only when the museum is forced to respond to controversy, and responses reveal strengths and shortcomings of the preparations.
Preparing for Controversy

Museums that have conscientiously prepared for controversy are less likely to experience the need to respond to a controversy that has gotten out of hand. The actions required for preparation help to build positive museum–community relationships that are vital for staving off local discord. Preparations also serve the purpose of raising the awareness of museum staff to common causes and potentials for controversy, thereby increasing the likelihood that these are taken into consideration when plans and decisions are made.

Meet the Mission

One of the most effective defenses against controversy is the ability to demonstrate that exhibitions and programs are consistent with the stated mission of the museum. Reference to the centrality of a museum’s mission is made in the AAM’s Code of Ethics for Museums: “[The governing authority of a museum shall ensure that] the museum’s collections and programs and its physical, human, and financial resources are protected, maintained, and developed in support of the museum’s mission” (AAM, 2000).

Although museum staff may be cognizant of these relationships, visitors and the general public may be unaware. Due to the tumultuous and complex nature of recent art controversies, it has become advisable for museums to more clearly and openly articulate the essential connection between a museum’s mission and its exhibitions and programs. Statements to that effect could be included in introductory text panels, docent tours, audio-tours, brochures and catalogs, and so forth. In essence, this task becomes part of the educational responsibility of the museum, which is stressed in the AAM’s policy document Excellence and Equity (1992): “The educational role of museums is at the core of their service to the public. This assertion must be clearly stated in every museum’s mission and central to every museum’s activities” (p. 8). Keeping the mission visible is more than an exercise—It serves to inform and remind the public of the purpose of the museum, and it helps to keep the museum’s mission foremost in the minds of curators and educators.

Prepare the Docents

Before Our Lady was available for public viewing, docents at MOIFA were given an intense, comprehensive education about the context and significance of the artwork. This no doubt contributed significantly to their determination and ability to carry on in the face of controversy. Only one docent took a leave of absence during the exhibition, and there were other extenuating circumstances affecting that docent’s decision (A. Gomez, personal communication). Effective docent training builds knowledge that fosters confidence in the galleries. Informed and confident docents and tour guides are more likely to retain their composure when visitors act shocked or offended and are better equipped to respond to visitors’ misinformed interpretations or damming judgments of works of art.

Instilling knowledge about works of art and exhibitions is only part of a docent’s preparation for controversy. Docents should be familiarized with the museum’s policies and procedures that pertain to controversy and be permitted and encouraged to collaborate with museum staff in developing complementary guidelines that are specific to docents’ responsibilities and circumstances. This can help provide docents with an added sense of ownership and empowerment regarding the museum’s preparation for and response to controversies.

It might be a good idea to activate an Internet listserv to encourage docents to describe incidents that have occurred in the galleries and share strategies they used or observed in use that addressed difficult or challenging situations. This would be a form of peer teaching as well as a way for docents to keep abreast of developments should a controversy arise. This could
also be used as a tool for education staff to provide information, reassurance, feedback, and suggestions to volunteer docents.

**Apply Inquiry-Oriented Education**

All museum educators, both staff and volunteers, should possess a repertoire of instructional strategies designed to engage visitors in meaningful learning encounters with works of art. In today’s “meaning-making” museums visitors are not passive learners to which knowledge is transmitted, but active learners engaged in questioning, analyzing, comparing, examining, interpreting, evaluating, and synthesizing (Hein, 1998). The current trend toward participatory learning and interactive exhibits and programs is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners construct knowledge in personal ways but are greatly influenced by social environments, and that new ideas and information must be integrated with prior learning in order to be comprehensible and applicable (Hein & Alexander, 1998). This helps to explain why visitors often have difficulty understanding or appreciating innovative works of contemporary art: An artwork can be so different from visitors’ art historical frame of reference and so removed from their concept of art that they literally do not know what to make of it. For some visitors, the result is a feeling of hopeless puzzlement; for others, it is hostile rejection of an artwork perceived as an affront.

Fortunately, the fields of art and aesthetic education provide models for teaching and learning that are capable of guiding visitors from states of puzzlement to comprehension, and sometimes from hostility to acceptance or at least tolerance. In particular, art criticism can be useful as an approach to grasping the qualities and meanings of a work of art. Relevant aesthetic concepts may be explored to enlarge visitors’ frames of reference, and associated works in art history may be examined to enrich the breadth and depth of visitors’ perceptions. Studying a work of art critically can help visitors sort out their thoughts and feelings regarding a controversial work of art and then form justifiable judgments. As Ralph Smith (2000) stated, “Art criticism...is the refinement of perception and the rendering of qualitative judgments and is born of the human need to perceive clearly and to separate the meritorious from the meretricious” (p. 50).

One of the most effective ways of engaging in criticism with visitors is through dialog. When visitors to a museum encounter a work of art that startles, puzzles, delights, or offends them, it is common for them to want to talk about their experiences of the work. Educators skilled in dialog and inquiry will invite comments and questions from visitors and use these as the basis for engaging them in a participatory analysis and interpretation of the work of art. If the work is at the center of a highly publicized controversy, visitors will probably also want to discuss larger social, institutional, or aesthetic issues related to the controversy. In such cases, aesthetic inquiry delving into the art world and the role and significance of art in society can be meaningful. Dialog is an effective approach to these topics as well (Lankford, 1992a).

In a constructivist museum, visitors should come to expect educators to pose probing questions designed to get visitors to analyze their own opinions and values. For example, “What is it about this work of art that makes you uneasy?” Follow-up questions are usually essential to encourage visitors to peer beneath their initial reactions: “Do you think the artist is trying to make a statement with this artwork, or perhaps get us to think about an issue? Can a work of art that you think is ugly or offensive still be powerful and constructive in its impact and teach us something valuable?” By getting visitors to engage in self-examination of their concepts and biases, and by having several visitors engage in dialog with one another, alternative perspectives may emerge. In fact, the museum educator—who must listen carefully and present varied perspectives in a balanced way—is often the first to perceive things differently!
One great advantage of applying a dialog-and-inquiry approach to education in the galleries is that it invites alternative interpretations and reveals differing perspectives on the significance of works of art. As David Carr (2001) asserts,

Every museum owes its users an opportunity to think beyond the museum, to make judgments of their own. Toward this, every museum should pose and illuminate questions that are inherently difficult to address. Such questions may be taken back to the galleries to provoke new observations or as easily carried into the everyday spaces that follow the museum experience. (pp. 77, 79)

Carr is an advocate for museums that “nourish differences of perception and response,” and he calls for programs that “involve controversy, alternative interpretations, [and] emerging points of view” (2001, p. 29). This can be especially valuable advice in the case of controversial art. Someone may express outrage about a particular work of art, and that opinion may be countered by one or more alternative and perhaps more positive and meaningful interpretations and assessments. Of course, if dialog deteriorates into diatribe and contentious debate, it escalates the controversy and encourages people to dig in to save face, and ultimately no one wins and nothing is gained. It is important for the educator to be the mediator, attempting to be at least tolerant if not accepting of every idea and maintaining a constructive and respectful climate wherein all feel comfortable expressing their views and all are encouraged to consider alternatives (Lankford, 1992a). Referring to all types of museums, Lonnie Bunch (1995) summarized the value of considering multiple perspectives:

Museums must not look to educate visitors to a singular point of view. Rather, the goal is to create an informed public that can analyze, criticize, understand, and manipulate history, culture, art, and science so that it informs their lives and aids them in addressing the issues, problems, and normal dilemmas of life. (p. 59)

Provide Educational Outreach

Perhaps the best guarantee of artistic freedom for current and future generations of artists and museum visitors is a well-educated citizenry, specifically citizens who have had the benefit of comprehensive, sequenced art and aesthetic education throughout their years of schooling. Two outcomes of this would be a decrease in the threat of vehement controversy and a significant increase in thoughtful and constructive dialogs and decisions. It is not usually those who frequent art museums who ignite and fan the flames of controversy; protest and derision often come from those who have never viewed the contested exhibition but are acting on word of mouth. If citizens were educated to be informed and critical thinkers about art they would be far less likely to jump to conclusions, particularly conclusions based on the judgments of others who have a prejudicial agenda.

But to be genuinely prepared to make mature and responsible decisions about art, particularly controversial art, people need to understand and learn to assess the social contexts in which artworks are produced and exhibited. Unlike in the early days of Impressionism when shocked audiences seemed gripped with apoplexy, or decades later when Abstract Expressionism became the brunt of jokes, one seldom hears great and widespread consternation regarding works of art because they are judged to be poorly composed, stylistically bizarre, technically crude, or just plain ugly. These are ultimately concerns tied to individual assessments of visual qualities. Because controversy today is almost invariably borne in a context of social issues, it is useful to learn about the social dynamics by which art is nurtured and sustained, or left vulnerable and besieged.

Museum education outreach is one way to provide such lessons to a broader public. Programs may be offered in schools, community centers, libraries, or other places where people
commonly gather to learn. A good starting point is to consider with students the sorts of social roles that exist in the artworld. Artists, art dealers, art critics, gallery operators, art teachers, art historians, museum curators, art patrons, museum educators, museum visitors, and a host of others interact with each other to achieve goals that have both personal and collective values. Sometimes different segments of society mesh with the artworld, but sometimes they collide; and when that happens controversy can be the result (Lankford, 1992b, p. 249).

For students of high school age and older, the concepts of “freedom of expression” and “artistic freedom” should be examined. The United States Constitution extends rights of freedom of speech to American citizens, and over time this has come to be interpreted as being applicable to a much broader range of expression, including literature and the visual and performing arts. Freedom of expression has been a key defense for those accused of producing or exhibiting exploitative, incendiary, pornographic, sacrilegious, or otherwise offensive art. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of freedom of expression to the artworld and to the status and security of art’s place in society. In order to protect worthwhile artworks that some may find offensive, there must be tolerance for even the trite and sensational, lest art become subject to condemnation and removal at the whim of any social group that may complain. Students, especially those who hope to play significant roles in the world of art, should recognize that freedom of expression is a privilege that must be protected and should not be abused. Decisions that affect art today can have far-reaching and long-lasting effects on culture (Lankford, 1992b, p. 250). If the artworld loses one battle for freedom of expression, society as a whole—not just the artworld—has lost ground. Once a right or privilege is lost, it can be difficult to regain.

To further prepare students who are middle-school-aged and older to reasonably and intelligently address contentious works of art, familiarize them with some of the reasons works of art can be controversial. As has been pointed out, works of art can become controversial because viewers are offended by political, sexual, religious, or other content that varies significantly from the values and mores of members of the community. Understanding the basis of people’s objections can help art advocates better prepare for and respond to controversies.

Museum education outreach programs should aim to prepare present and future audiences to be more accepting of artwork that is unfamiliar. To begin, it is useful to challenge students with work that is, for them, new and different. Although some visitors are eager to encounter something challenging and new, many are uncomfortable because they feel either inadequate in their abilities to interpret the art or assaulted by art forms or themes that are radically different from what they know and prefer. By encouraging students, perhaps through carefully calculated incremental steps, to fairly attend to unfamiliar work and consider the diverse meanings and values of a wide range of art forms, museum educators are providing students with more opportunities for enjoying and appreciating art throughout their lives.

It is useful for students to understand that one work of art may suggest alternative interpretations, and that ultimately there is no absolute interpretation. Liberated from the pressure of coming up with “the correct” interpretation, visitors will probably find themselves less frustrated and intimidated by difficult works of art. Similarly, timid visitors should be reassured that there is no one way that a person is “supposed” to feel or respond when experiencing a work of art.

**Be Vigilant About the Risk of Controversy**

Museums are busy places, and it is easy to forget about preparing for the risk of issues that have not even arisen. Yet, there is ample evidence in the museum world to indicate the wisdom of being prepared. Because controversy affects an entire museum, the most appropriate way to
prepare for it is to draw on perspectives from a cross-section of the museum’s organizational units. A plan to address controversy need not be a stand-alone document but can be incorporated into an existing policy and procedures handbook. Before a plan is approved, all personnel should have an opportunity to review and comment on it. Regular assessment and possible revision should be built into the museum’s long-range strategic plan, and museum staff and volunteers should receive periodic refresher training.

Because education is, or should be, central to a museum’s mission, it is imperative that museum educators play leadership roles in formulating and implementing any plan. All staff should remain vigilant for signs of controversy in the museum or community. Docents and staff educators spend so much time with the general public that they may be able to notice a controversy simmering before it boils over.

As museums set about the process of preparing for possible controversies, it can be useful to learn about policies and procedures that are in place at similar institutions, particularly those museums that have already been confronted with the need to address a controversy. Sharing ideas and information along these lines should be considered a responsibility among museum professionals. Museum controversy has been the subject of AAM conference sessions and should continue to be a regular part of professional development.

**Undertake Visitor Research**

Museums may undertake visitor research and evaluation for any number of reasons: public relations, marketing, programming, and strategic planning, among others. Demographic data about visitors and the community can be helpful when seeking to target new audiences or sustain audience loyalty. When an exhibition or program is still in development, front-end evaluation may be used to gauge audience reception and the effectiveness of the learning encounter before it is installed or utilized in the museum (Diamond, 1999).

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research might yield useful insights into the interests and motivations of visitors to the museum. If those involved in planning exhibitions and programs are well informed about their audience and the community they serve, they can more accurately predict and avoid controversy. Informed museum educators and curators are more sensitive to issues within the community.

**Develop Community Support Networks**

One of the most important steps that a museum can make in preparing for controversy is to build bridges to the local community. Local government officials, administrators of community organizations, and other community leaders should be made to feel that the museum cares about ideas and issues that are of concern to the community. A museum should go out of its way to keep the community informed about its current and upcoming projects, programs, and exhibitions. Input from members of the community should be actively sought before, during, and after staging special exhibitions or programs, and the museum should make it known that the community’s input was carefully considered when making decisions. Most community leaders are quick to discern when their input is a form of tokenism—openly sought but seldom heeded—and this can ultimately work against the museum.

The AAM emphasizes building community relationships in its policy documents and initiatives. For instance, the AAM Board of Directors established a major nationwide task force in 1998 to realize its *Museums and Community Initiative* (2002), whose purpose was “to explore the potential for renewed, dynamic engagement between museums and communities” and to help ensure that museums have the resources they need to enhance and attend to their “civic missions.” The AAM’s *Strategic Agenda* (1997) stresses that “museums are both community institutions and institutions that can build community. They can be places where ideas and
civic values can be discussed and shared.” In the same document, the AAM also promotes community collaborations:

Partnership and collaboration are increasingly important means through which organizations of every kind accomplish their purposes. Museums will need to develop greater facility in forging innovative and mutually advantageous partnerships and collaborative arrangements with other not-for-profit institutions, with business enterprises, and with government at every level.

If controversy strikes, having a positive relationship with community leaders can be invaluable in buttressing the museum’s position. As Geoffrey Platt, Jr., the AAM’s director of government affairs, asserted:

Your museum, if it hasn’t already, will one day come under the public microscope in an unprecedented way. Some exhibition, policy, or event will trigger your museum being called to account, and likely not in an arena of your choice….your greatest allies in coping with an accountability crisis [are] public officials, but only if those persons are “on board” well before they might be needed. (1990, p. 40)

Museum educators should be integral to the processes of building and sustaining positive community ties. Education is almost always a central issue in any community, so a high-profile education program will build good will as well as increase the museum’s audience and improve visitors’ gallery experiences. Museum educators are, after all, in the business of making artworks in the museum as accessible as possible to the public. But aside from building good will and support, museum educators can benefit by connecting with the community. For example, community networks can be very useful in establishing venues for outreach programs and advising how best to develop interests and address the concerns of local citizens. An education advisory board comprised of K-12 and higher education art educators could provide ideas and feedback to help assess and improve museum programs. The AAM Committee on Education endorsed community engagement in its policy document, *Excellence in Practice: Museum Education Standards and Principles* (2002):

(a) Develop and maintain sound relationships with community organizations, schools, cultural institutions, universities, other museums, and the general public, (b) reflect the needs and complexities of a changing society, (c) shape content and interpretation toward relevant issues and create a broad dialogue. (www.edcom.org/about/standards)

Responding to Controversy

Despite efforts to avoid controversy, museums will always face the possibility that some artwork or exhibition will offend a segment of the population. Every day of the year except Mondays and holidays a wide variety of artworks are considered by museum visitors to be offensive. Most of the time, nothing serious comes of it, but then there are instances when controversy erupts. If the museum has thoroughly prepared, it should be able to meet the challenge. Most of the following response proposals consist of an extension and application of previous preparation proposals.

**Respond Promptly and Directly**

There is ample evidence that an art controversy will snowball once it appears before the public eye. A quick response directed to the person or group lodging the complaint may satisfy the offended and contain the scope of the controversy. Unfortunately, word of mouth is swift in
some communities; and to make matters worse, sometimes those offended seem more eager to
gain media attention for their cause than to attempt to resolve an issue directly and discreetly
with the museum.

Nevertheless, as MOIFA administrators learned, it is important that people who are offended
by a work of art be reassured that the museum cares about their perceptions and feelings. A
prompt response accompanied by careful listening demonstrates that the museum is sensitive
to serving the community and preserving public trust.

Museum educators may be thrust by circumstance to attend to offended visitors in the
galleries, say, in the course of a tour or other program. It is probably best to politely acknowledge
visitors’ concerns, indicate that you appreciate their perceptions, and promise that personal
attention will be promptly paid to the matter if they are willing to provide contact information.
Avoid assuming a defensive attitude or debating issues with offended visitors in the galleries.

It is advisable that all museum staff and volunteers be consulted when forming the museums’
oficial position with regard to a controversy, and that all museum personnel be thoroughly
familiarized with the position before it is made public. Anyone associated with the museum
might be approached and questioned by a curious or concerned citizen, particularly when
a controversy is widely reported in the media. Presenting a unified and consistent position
regarding the controversy will help to build and sustain the museum’s image and reputation as
an institution grounded in convictions, integrity, and a commitment to reliability in fulfilling
its public service responsibilities.

**Associate the Mission of the Museum With Larger Social Good**

At a time when museums are striving to better attract and serve their communities, it is
distressing to say the least when controversy assumes an “us versus them” character. It is
important to remind both museum personnel and the public that more is at stake than the
reputation of the institution. Also at stake are the museum’s ability to serve a diverse public
and the museum world’s collective responsibility to preserve freedom of expression for all.

In order to serve its community well, a museum must attempt to represent the range of
perceptions, opinions, and values held by members of the local community *and* by others
representing larger contexts of culture and society. Attitudes and beliefs that may be uncommon
within the museum’s immediate community may be expressed in some form by the museum’s
exhibits in order to further educate the public about the diversity of human experience. This
means that conflicts occurring in society from local to global levels might be reflected in
a museum’s exhibitions. Although this may result in controversy, it may be considered a
necessary risk for museums to bear. In his defense of MOIFA during the *Our Lady
controversy*, AAM President and CEO Edward H. Able, Jr., referred to such risks:

> Museums have a responsibility to preserve and enlighten, and often advance new and challenging interpretations of art, history, and science. . . .As publicly accountable institutions, museums owe their communities a high level of transparency about their actions. But the governing authority of the museum must also be the final point of authority for decisions about what the museum will exhibit and, in doing so, it must be willing on occasion to risk disapproval so that the ultimate goal of the museum, the dissemination of knowledge, is fulfilled. (AAM, 2001, p. 4)

Able’s comments also apply to upholding an important democratic principle. When con-
troversy at a museum includes an external demand that one or more works of art on exhibit
be removed, freedom of expression is put on the line (Lankford, 1992b). In order to continue
to explore new ideas and present unique observations and thought-provoking perspectives on
issues, artists must be able to express themselves freely within a social context that allows
and ideally even encourages such expression. Museums that seek to present alternative perspectives and stimulate public dialog about important topics and issues must be able to mount exhibitions that may not conform to values and opinions commonly held in the community. Adult audiences should be able to choose which exhibits to view and study (or avoid) without coercion from museums or external agencies. Visitors and critics must be able to independently determine what they judge to be worthwhile within an exhibit. All of these elements are linked under the conceptual and protective umbrella of freedom of expression.

Attempts by special interest groups to condemn artists and artworks, to coerce museums to limit or censor what they choose to exhibit, or to prescribe what visitors may or may not see are contrary to the spirit of freedom of expression. In efforts to preserve and defend its reputation, exhibitions, and programs from attack, a museum would do well to fold into its rationales and arguments references to serving the larger public good. This would situate a museum more securely within the context of a broad family of museums and link individual mission statements with widely held collective purposes. Further, to reiterate an assertion presented in the preparation for controversy section: Education is key to preserving freedom of expression, and education is a common purpose of most museums today.

**Call on Community and Museum Allies for Support**

Community leaders, museum advisory boards, and other museums and institutions can provide valuable support to a museum under fire: for example, by utilizing influence or authority to help protect the museum’s resources, assisting with community education programs and public forums, and offering legal or managerial advice. Community leaders might be able to provide insights into the root causes or issues motivating complaints by members of their constituency, and advisory boards may be able to facilitate constructive communications or otherwise intervene between the offended parties and the museum. Supportive statements issued to the public and press by respected citizens and community leaders can significantly improve the museum’s position in the public eye as well as bolster the museum’s internal morale. Similarly, when other museums in the community and across the nation publicly advocate the museum’s position, it affirms the principles that have guided the museum’s decisions.

**Utilize the Controversy as an Opportunity to Expand and Enrich Education**

Many people, including some who may never have visited the museum, will want to learn more about the controversy, hear various sides of the issues, and see for themselves the work in question. Community interest, visitor numbers, and the diversity of visitors may significantly increase during a controversy. Requests to add or modify tours and programs may be expected. For museum educators it will be the best of times and the worst of times. Workloads may increase, but so will demand, respect, and appreciation for high-quality education. Educators might consider adding a symposium to other scheduled programs and invite outside scholars to discuss the artworks and issues at hand. Adding additional educational material to brochures, text panels, and tours might be possible. Believe it or not, this might also be a good time to recruit new docents. Not everyone in the community is against the museum during a controversy; many will side with the museum and feel motivated to demonstrate their support through volunteer service. Although earnest and eager in their wish to serve, new volunteers should still receive complete and thorough training prior to instructing the public. For those unwilling or unable to undertake docent training, there are usually other ways that volunteers could be of service to a museum education department. Increased volunteerism has obvious long-term benefits that will outlive the controversy.
Document the Controversy

Once the controversy has died down, museum personnel might understandably be inclined to put the whole matter behind them. But far more beneficial to the museum would be a careful review of the sequence of events, an analysis of community motivations and of the impact of actions taken, and an assessment of how the museum handled the incident. Taking the time to reflect on and document the controversy can pay off should similar issues arise again. Lessons learned from a controversy can be applied to revision of museum policies and procedures and can inform and strengthen a museum’s ability to avoid, prepare for, and respond to controversy in the future.

CONCLUSION

Controversial art is a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it spurs society to think seriously about the meaning and value of art; on the other hand, it causes rifts between social factions and the art world. When controversy rears its head at any museum, art museums everywhere shudder in consternation. Yet by conscientiously developing policies, procedures, and educational programs and strategies to prepare for and respond to controversy, art museums may be able to avoid controversy altogether or minimize its negative impact.

One could rightly argue that many of the proposals presented in this paper are descriptive of good museum education practice regardless of whether or not controversial art is in the picture. Except there are two significant differences: First, when museum educators are aware of and sensitive to the causes, risks, and impact of controversy, they can add relevant nuances to the content and delivery of their public programs, and as any seasoned educator can tell you, details matter. Second, if museum educators are cognizant of ideas, issues, policies, and procedures associated with controversy, then should controversy arise they will know what to do.

Avoiding controversy should not be taken to the extreme of functioning as a sort of institutional in-house censorship. Art has always been and continues to be a powerful means of expression, and ideas and values expressed are not always pretty and untroubled. No matter what steps are taken, some people will find certain works of art objectionable. A major strength and purpose of any art museum is its commitment to presenting diverse points of view and not shy away from issue-laden and thought-provoking art. In fulfilling this mission, art museums contribute to the great dialog that is the exercise of freedom of expression.

REFERENCES


