

## **Museum Studies Network**

### **MSN Conversation #3:**

## **Making the Future Museum We Want: Museum Studies in Conversation with Museums**

**Wednesday, October 28, 2-3:15 pm ET**

### **Topic: Censorship and Self-Censorship**

**Facilitated by Janet Marstine, Ceciél Brouwer, and Heidi Lung**

**Session organized by Jennifer Kingsley, Chelsea Haines, and Juilee Decker, Museum Studies Network**

This document narrates the results of a conversation about the role of censorship and self-censorship in museum practice and the necessity to prepare students to encounter and navigate these. The conversation took place across three break-out sessions: this narrative surfaces common themes of the sessions and key take-aways. Specific examples participants shared from their experiences in the classroom and in the museum have been included where relevant.

### **Definitions**

**Censorship** is the suppression of ideas by any entity that has the power to do so – whether the state or private entities

**Self-Censorship** is the suppression of ideas by an individual during the creative process or an institution during the exhibition development process. It can be more difficult to identify as it often blends into the work process.

### **Self-Censorship in Practice**

Practitioners face a host of pressures to self-censor from both the political left and the political right. Museum studies curricula ought to build skills for negotiating how these pressures manifest internally—as self-censorship. To that end, the traditional dialectic of freedom of speech versus censorship is an inadequate model. Self-censorship is limitless and harder to detect than censorship. Self-censorship can be more dangerous than censorship, yet sometimes it is an ethical good.

Negotiating the pressure to self-censor intentionally is key to making decisions based on a process of ethical deliberation. Otherwise, decisions stem from risk aversion—the attempt to lower the uncertainty of the outcome. Marstine proposes the concept of “craftsmanship” to understand how practitioners might negotiate self-censorship. This concept presents the ethical navigation of censoring pressure as a skill to be nurtured and honed and acknowledges practitioner agency. Self-censorship is not merely the diminishing of voices.

### **Teaching About Self-Censorship**

Case studies are a great way of engaging difficult material. Case studies allow us to unpack complexity of censorship, and allow us to critically interrogate factors that influence our decision-making processes. The downside to this approach is that the cases can be overly specific, not applicable to broader contexts. The challenge lies both in selecting the case study and in helping students apply their learning from one case study to other situations.

**Case Study:** *Philip Guston Now* (organized by the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.); Tate Modern, London; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston)

- Significant press coverage exists of the decision to delay the exhibition
- A joint statement by the directors of the museums organizing the exhibit announces the decision to delay. It can be found on the NGA website.
- Co-signed letter from artists and intellectuals calling out the decision as censorship. Published in the *Brooklyn Rail* on September 30, 2020.

Canadian born American artist Philip Guston (1913-1980) produced work influenced by abstract expressionism that also includes figurative elements. In the 60s and 70s he created paintings that featured imagery of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in complex ways. His work references the horrors of white supremacy at the time. Guston was self-critical, often imagined himself in his paintings, and questioned his own positionality as a Jewish man.

In 2015, four museums collaborated to develop a retrospective of his work. In October 2020 the museums' directors announced they would postpone the exhibition until 2024 due to concern over presenting the subject matter of Guston's work at this time. A statement from the directors cited the current racial justice movement and their feeling that it was necessary to bring additional perspectives and voices. In November 2020, the show organizers announced the show would open in 2022.

*Strategies for using this case study:*

Start with the artistic work, centering the artist and their intent and building out the context at the moment of the work's making. A next step could be to consider the work's changing meaning through time and as part of different historical moments and social contexts, as well as the present moment and potential impact on different museum audiences. The goal is to have students consider:

- if, how and why this example represents self-censorship; and Is this a case of curatorial self-censorship or museum leadership censoring the exhibit over the objections of curators?
- what mistakes the museums made, if any, and what are the challenges of showing exhibitions with a social justice theme in encyclopedic art museums such as the four involved here; consider the mission of the museums planning to exhibit the work and the agendas of their decision makers.

*Use related case studies from the past:*

- Example 1: A participant shared that they have students read the case of white artist Ahearn's censored public sculpture for a black and Hispanic neighborhood of the Bronx, and then do their own research on cases of controversial art, which they present to the class. Students then have a dozen cases to collectively study and compare. They discuss what were the contemporary issues and politics and how the various cases were resolved. They consider strategies and whether any of them worked or might be applicable.[\*]
- Example 2: *Sensation* Exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art. The *Sensation* case brings in multiple types of censorship – allowing students to identify and distinguish between them. There are also many different stakeholders to discuss, as well as risks and fears including the fear of offending funders. Giuliani threatened to defund the museum, and teachers can walk students through how to deal with that. The case also helps students think about institutional positionality, how museum professionals represent their

organization, and how they advocate for their organization. To that end sharing examples from one's own practice or local institution as a parallel to national controversies can be helpful to give students a more nuts and bolts perspective.

**Draw out in conversations with students what risk looks like in curatorial practice.**

A participant shared that they once curated an exhibition on tourist art in the context of a museum that wanted to be an art museum, and so there was a lot of pushback from staff and board. The participant didn't fully appreciate the risks, and had to navigate that. This brought up a distinction between hard censorship and soft censorship. Censorship uses fear and the power to take away jobs and funding. Soft censorship is about what we're afraid of.

Consider cases where students are more likely to empathize with both positions. A participant shared that their museum had an exhibit of objects from Japanese internment camps and that when Japanese Americans used the term concentration camp for internment camp, Jewish groups found that offensive. As a result, the museum had an important dialogue about language and the power of language, and what it means to different cultural groups.

**Draw connections between how we choose to exhibit controversial material that may offend the administration, trustees can serve as a micro-example of larger, national narratives.**

Students tend to conflate the idea of safe space with feeling comfortable – this can create a challenge when tackling controversial or provocative topics. A “brave space” framework[†] prepares students better to rise to the challenge of genuine dialogue on diversity and social justice issues. It is also applicable to museum spaces.

Student discussion can focus on decision-making to delay the exhibition or not. This may be a pedagogically-useful exercise, as a debate in the classroom can mirror what happens in practice and hone the skills necessary to navigate ethical dilemmas. Does it translate to the professional setting? One participant suggested assigning students specific positionalities – such as artist, donor, trustee—to help students to understand myriad facets of decision-making.

By examining topics such as censorship and self-censorship, we can show our students the power of advocacy and agency, to help them find their own voices, to feel included and heard. Walking through how museum staff and leadership make decisions about exhibits in practice can prepare students to grapple with internal and professional pressure around exhibiting and interpreting materials. It is also useful to give students opportunities to work through institutional structures—perhaps even by examining organizational charts—to show how decisions are made within institutions. When questions surrounding the topics raised in this discussion in the classroom, synchronous voting mechanisms (such as Zoom polling features) can be used to provide anonymity and to remove bias.

**The Responsibility To Self-Censor**

*Do museum professionals have a special responsibility to self-censor in some cases?*

Censorship reads differently in contexts involving historically oppressed communities, such as Native Americans. How do they, as stewards of Native American collections, protect Native Americans?

*Should all stories be shared outside of the community? How, under what circumstances, and for what purposes do you share Native people's stories outside of Native communities?*

### **Trigger Warnings**

Several groups' discussions segued to the topic of trigger warnings and the potential for censorship/self-censorship in the academic classroom.

Academic freedom is important and the classroom offers a forum for grappling with difficult issues. This is essential to learning. Trigger warnings might also constitute a form of self-censorship. A suggestion was made to frame the content as charged work that brings up explosive issues and, as part of the lesson, to discuss how individuals may respond to the work on an individual level – [something an exhibition team should consider as part of their decision-making process].

Advanced content notification can be framed as an equality issue. A suggestion was made to offer access and guidance to material in advance in order to empower all students to develop the skills they need in order to engage in the material.

A participant commented that in defining what content requires advanced content notification it is important to avoid politicizing the material [or causing students to feel singled out or treated unequally on the basis of any seen or unseen part of their identity]. For instance, LGBTQ material does not require advanced content notification. It is also important to know your audience. One participant shared an incident where a Christian fundamentalist in their class was offended at a classmate's negative reaction to the Creation Museum.

The point was also made that it is important for instructors to reflect ahead of time on their own unconscious biases as it may impact their approach to the material and on how best to support students across diverse experiences.

Remote learning adds a further complication. Some instructors shared that they are finding themselves censoring what they show because some of their students reside in countries with different norms and the instructor fears putting them in a difficult position vis a vis their country. Many universities also expect synchronous sessions to be recorded for students who have to participate asynchronously – how does being recorded impact self-censorship?

### **Key Take-Aways**

- Teaching controversies and censorship matters because they rise out of larger socio-economic issues. Studying what is censored and why helps us understand cultures and society better.
- Self-censorship can be an ethical good when the result of a deliberative decision-making process that evaluates the potential for harm. Self-censorship is risk aversion when motivated only by the desire to avoid public controversy.
- Faculty—like museum professionals—often lack training both in inclusive teaching and in having difficult conversations. This poses an obstacle to building sector-wide skills in navigating censorship and self-censorship.

- Both faculty and museum professionals need to shift their emphasis from only applying social justice externally (i.e., outside the classroom or museum, or in public-facing work to also applying a social justice lens internally).

## Resources

Janet Marstine's chapter in *Curating Under Pressure* from Routledge, 2020.

Carleton University's resources about creating an inclusive environment for students when teaching issues around race and politics online:

<https://serc.carleton.edu/advancegeo/resources/virtual.html>.

[\*] Jane Kramer's *Whose art is it?* discusses the censorship of John Ahearn's public sculpture commissioned for an intersection outside a police station in a black and Hispanic neighborhood of the Bronx. The sculpture featured a junkie, a hustler, and a street kid. Ahearn was a white artist and his sculpture sparked a controversy throughout the neighborhood and in New York City over issues of white representations of people of color and the appropriateness of particular images as civic art. Today the sculptures are in a sculpture park in Queens.

[†] *From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces* <https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/from-safe-spaces-to-brave-spaces.pdf>.

This document was posted in February 2021. If you have questions about this document, please contact MSN Programming Chair, Juilee Decker, [jdgsh@rit.edu](mailto:jdgsh@rit.edu).