CURATING UNDER PRESSURE

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON NEGOTIATING CONFLICT AND UPHOLDING INTEGRITY

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MUSEUM MEANINGS

INTRODUCTION

The familiar old binary of freedom versus suppression – of unfettered speech versus censorship – has receded into what now appears to be a simpler past. Our informational environment is changing faster than we can make sense of it. The euphoria of an open, non-hierarchical flow of ideas has yielded to a nightmare of corporate surveillance, harassment and ethnic and racial hatred. Many of those formerly committed to free speech seek the solution in more government regulation and extensive private platform self-regulation. Authoritarian states, while continuing to pursue the traditional tactics of persecuting or eliminating critics and creating ambiguous regulations so as to create anxiety and encourage self-censorship, are also developing new means to discredit emergent civic discourse by drowning it out and questioning its veracity. Governments in democratic states increasingly endorse such tactics. Multinational corporations, whose financial might makes them a key player in culture (and elsewhere), use their power to advance ideologies, as well as to protect their brands. Among the left in democratic countries, support for free speech principles is waning. Protests over cultural appropriation (the use of ideas and practices traditionally associated with marginalized cultures by those belonging to the dominant culture) and calls for deplatforming controversial speakers have racked cultural institutions and higher education. University students are demanding "safe spaces" – spaces free from speech that might cause emotional distress among socially marginalized groups – and "trigger warnings" – warnings issued before the classroom use of material that might prompt vulnerable students to experience post-traumatic stress symptoms.

The global turbulence around speech resonates within the domain of the arts. Curators and cultural institutions face pressures to self-censor from every side of the political spectrum. Failing to yield to those pressures carries steep costs. As a result, in all parts of the world today, negotiating self-censorship – which requires creative strategies, political acumen, ethical sagacity and resilience over the long term – is a significant part of the curator's remit. This is especially true in light of the critical role museums play in civil society by offering space to engage with difficult issues. At a time of worrying political, social and cultural upheaval across Europe and the United States, of tightening cultural controls in authoritarian regimes such as those in China and Russia and of the destabilization of democracy elsewhere, including

in Hong Kong, South Africa and Colombia, developing curatorial agency to negotiate self-censorship has particular urgency.

Curators ask themselves: where are the under-the-radar spaces in which it is possible to work freely? How can I anticipate particularly fraught moments or sites? To what extent should the pursuit of curatorial autonomy be balanced with respect to diverse local, regional and national contexts? Is it necessary to respond to social media attacks or is it wiser to ignore them? How can I balance my commitment to politically meaningful exhibitions and pro-gramming with my ethical responsibility to protect artists from government retaliation? How can I deploy language strategically to shield my projects? How can I communicate produc-tively through the media? What kinds of alliances should I enter into to foster mutual support and advocacy? How should I weigh up a need to defend curatorial values with the risks to the survival of my institution?

Curating Under Pressure defines censorship broadly as the suppression of ideas, including artistic expression, by an entity with the power to do so. While legal definitions of censorship focus on state action, our use of the term reflects the fact that culture in contemporary neo-liberal economies is increasingly privatized, giving private entities a power to silence artistic expression that often exceeds that of the state (Jansen 1991; Atkins 2006).

We define self-censorship as the suppression of ideas or artistic expression by an individual during the creative process or by an institution during the curatorial process. Such suppres-sion is subtle, often blending with non-censorious creative and curatorial decisions. It violates no laws. Therefore, it is difficult to oppose and sometimes even hard to identify or distinguish from the routine process of curatorial selection.

Although it is true that the lines between editorial choice and self-censorship sometimes blur, self-censorship is recognizable through its primary motive: fear. This fear comes in many forms, including the specter of reprisal from an authoritarian state; the threat of reduction in public or private funding and the possibility offending publics (Coetze 1996; Mintcheva and Atkins 2006: xxiii; Mintcheva 2012; Farrington 2013; Shaheed 2013: 11–12; Mintcheva 2016).

Self-censorship can occur on both individual and institutional levels. *Curating Under Pres-sure* focuses primarily on institutional self-censorship as enacted by museums, galleries and alternative spaces/platforms. While institutional self-censorship is often propelled by a deci-sion made by an individual – such as a curator or museum director – that individual is acting on behalf of the institution and the pressures at play are generally different from those expe-rienced by an individual censoring his/her own work.

Shedding light on an oft-opaque area of curatorial practice, *Curating Under Pressure* is the first book to look at self-censorship and the curatorial responses to it from a wide range of international perspectives and from a position at the intersection of curatorial, museum and censorship studies. Collectively, the contributors map the diverse forms that institutional self-censorship takes and offer creative strategies for negotiating curatorial integrity. Throughout, the focus remains on the thought and actions of curators as they seek creative solutions to the pressures they face. We offer this approach as a corrective to the assumption that censorship pressures render practitioners impotent. The book demonstrates that curatorial practice under pressure offers inspiring models of ingenuity and empowerment.

Contributors include academics, free speech advocates, artists, curators and museum directors. Many have faced pressures to self-censor and draw from these experiences in their chapters; some have assumed considerable professional risk to publish their accounts. Others have conducted extensive interviews and worked with practitioners grappling with

institutional self-censorship. A majority of the authors write from "outsider" positions – such as independent curating, retirement or immigration – that give them relatively greater freedom to express themselves frankly than many of their peers, who remain embedded within institutions.

Two parts – Understanding Self-Censorship and Negotiating Self-Censorship – provide a structural framework for the book, together signifying our dual – analytical and action-based – approach. While the individual contributions are grouped in those sections according to what we see as their primary thrust, in various degrees they all simultaneously identify pressures to self-censor and offer strategies to negotiate such pressures. Part 1, Understanding Self-Censorship, interrogates the silences around institutional self-censorship to help readers recognize and understand the phenomenon. It looks at how self-censorship operates in diverse political and cultural contexts. In so doing, contributors explore the complex mechanisms by which acts and threats of censorship lead to self-censorship.

In Chapter 1, Janet Marstine provides key groundwork for the book by arguing for a new concept of curation in which the skills to recognize and negotiate censorship and self-censorship feature prominently. She also shows how censorship, self-censorship and freedom of expression are mutually constitutive and slippery categories. She examines conditions and curatorial responses to them in mainland China, which is experiencing increasingly tight restrictions, and in Hong Kong, where pro-democracy activists are testing the limits of the city's political, economic and cultural autonomy. Marstine sets the discussion of China and Hong Kong within a wider international context so as to demonstrate how the insights yielded by one locale are relevant to practitioners in other parts of the world. Driving the chapter is the notion, initially proposed by one of Marstine's Hong Kong interviewees, that understanding and resisting the pressures of self-censorship represent a kind of "craftsmanship" to be nurtured and honed. Marstine identifies common ground for knowledge exchange, mutual support and joint advocacy around this "craftsmanship."

In Chapter 2, Julia Farrington examines the subtle ways that the state can suppress artistic expression within a liberal democracy. Her analysis focuses on incidents of police intervention in the UK where heavy-handed "advice" to close down a performance or remove a work in the name of public order constitutes de facto state censorship. While acknowledging that budget cuts for policing have created resource limitations, Farrington identifies two major problems at the heart of this situation: a lack of recognition among police forces that supporting the rights to exhibit, engage with and protest provocative art is a core duty; and a lack of understanding among arts organizations of how they might and should withstand the pressures of policing that limits freedom of artistic expression. Farrington offers guidance to help arts organizations prepare to meet such pressures so as to avert the preemptive cancellation of contentious programming.

In Chapter 3, Serena Iervolino, writing from the context of Qatar, identifies the state itself as self-censoring. Iervolino explains how, with support from powerful members of the Qatari royal family, Qatar Museums, the state-funded body responsible for the country's cultural heritage and policy, commenced an ambitious program of collecting and exhibiting global contemporary art as a gesture toward reform. They did not, however, consider the problems that transplanting Western ideas into local culture might bring. After sparking controversy for challenging traditional morals, works by Adel Abdessemed and Damian Hirst, unveiled by Qatar Museums in 2013, were quickly removed or hidden from view. Iervolino argues that these incidents of state-led self-censorship represent a political maneuver performed to shield

the royal family from criticism. The chapter offers a rare glimpse into the secretive censorship apparatus in the Arabian Gulf countries.

Silences and political jockeying equally characterize the self-censorship enacted by art institutions in Israel, as discussed by Noam Segal in Chapter 4. Segal, who has worked in Israel as an independent curator, offers several case studies from the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, including a sound piece that was quieted, literally and metaphorically, because of its political resonance and a conceptual work, in the form of a prayer, which, despite championing by the curator, was ultimately not commissioned because of its religious content. Segal analyzes the mechanisms behind this institutional self-censorship within the wider context of tense political conflict in Israel. In unpacking her case studies, Segal focuses particularly on the ways that institutions use language, aesthetic justifications and a lack of transparency to justify risk-averse decision-making.

Like Segal, Candice Allison in Chapter 5 writes from the perspective of an independent curator working in a turbulent political context and issues of transparency are vital to her analysis. Allison shares her oft-painful reflections on co-curating a feminist exhibition in South Africa. Though intended to reconfigure hegemonic narratives, the exhibition was criticized and disrupted by artists, activists and publics who interpreted the project as discriminatory. It fell apart after the organizing institutions removed almost half the works. In retrospect, Allison blames the exhibition's unraveling, in part, on the curatorial team's reluctance to be transparent about their values, agenda and ethical quandaries. Such transparency is particularly essential, Allison asserts, when curating in a culture reckoning with historical and contemporary racial and gender injustices. Allison identifies self-censorship not only in the removal of works from the show but also in the curatorial team's withholding of their deliberative processes from their publics. Sharing the deliberative processes of curation, she holds, is fundamental to constructive discourse and mutual understanding.

Sometimes, however, no matter how well considered one's strategies, censorship prevails. Social practice artist Ou Ning in Chapter 6 recounts such a story in his analysis of Bishan Project in rural China. Bishan Project created a small-scale utopian society featuring festivals, exhibitions, workshops and social enterprises. It was a collaboration with local people and tourists meant to address village problems by developing sustainable methods of farming and encouraging economic development and progressive education. The approach was reformist, rather than revolutionary, and Ou Ning sought government support and partnerships. Nonetheless, as Ou explains, local and national authorities responded by encouraging acts of self-censorship and, when this was unsuccessful, launching a campaign of rapidly escalating censorship until, eventually, he was evicted from Bishan Village, placed on a national blacklist and his work on the project erased from the village. Ou's willingness to try again in a different region and with new strategies underscores the importance of maintaining one's agency and resilience in the disheartening process of trying to anticipate when, how and why censorship may be exercised under authoritarian regimes.

Part 2, Negotiating Self-Censorship, while continuing to examine the silences of curatorial self-censorship, focuses on the strategies and tactics that practitioners have developed to maintain the integrity of their curatorial vision. Contributors offer nuanced responses to the pressures they encounter, arguing that sometimes a degree of self-censorship is inevitable and that small steps can be more productive than radical gestures. Invariably, our contributors demonstrate acute awareness of the effect that pushing political or social boundaries may have on artists, institutions or society at large.

Jack Persekian in Chapter 7 argues that the very existence of cultural institutions depends on balancing cultural, economic and power tensions and, for that reason, self-censorship is, to some degree, inevitable – and even advisable; it is part of strategically choosing one's battles. But most of all, Persekian argues, decisions on if and how to self-censor should be based on a thorough examination of the political context and focus on what would make a lasting difference now and in the long run. This is true in Palestine, where Persekian currently works, as well as globally. In Palestine, where censorship and self-censorship are pervasive, Persekian suggests forming collaborations with other cultural institutions, as well as with civil society institutions, grassroots organizations and community centers working to accomplish societal change as the best protection against authoritarian state interference.

For Özge Ersoy as well, decisions to self-censor are not an all or nothing proposition, and collaborating with other organizations is key to the ability to resist pressure. In Turkey, where all practitioners are under heavy pressure from both state and non-state actors and institutional solidarity remains weak, Ersoy in Chapter 8 sets out a survival strategy based on sustained discussion about how to expand the limits imposed on artistic expression while being careful about the selection and presentation of work. She outlines an alarming situation in which anti-terror legislation and ever-widening and ambiguous definitions of what constitutes criminal activity create unease and fear in the visual arts, especially in predominantly Kurdish regions. Due to their distrust of state institutions, many artists and curators choose to work instead with the private sector and at temporary and fringe exhibition sites. However, private philanthropists and corporations that support contemporary art are also subject to government and political pressure while fringe sites are vulnerable to community demands, which offer almost as strong a motive for self-censorship as threats from the state. In this context, protecting and expanding freedom of expression is a slow and uneven process.

In authoritarian regimes in East Asia, similarly ambiguous regulations generate fear: the fear in this case being that of violating unspoken rules, thus putting the institution, its staff and the artists it works with at risk. Through five case studies, Oscar Ho in Chapter 9 details the ethical and other professional struggles he experienced when dealing with censorship and self-censorship. Under the pressure of possible punishment for allowing "inappropriate" art to be seen, and in the absence of any clear regulations and standards, curators face a tough judgment call when weighing the aspiration to uphold artistic freedom against the need to protect the individuals and institutions involved. Ho shows that curators must be aware of the risk factors that affect all parties but also be willing to take some calculated risks themselves.

An acute – even too acute – awareness of risk, as well as of the oft-competing needs and interests of a diverse network of stakeholders, is equally central to Cristina Lleras' contribution. Lleras in Chapter 10 offers an insider look into the deliberations of the curatorial team of the Museum of Memory of Colombia in developing a narrative that represents the unique and shifting nature of conflict in Colombia. In representing a conflict sustained by silences, the team had to take into account the context of a society still deeply divided over the meaning of peace, the causes of conflict and what to do with the past. Lleras examines the team's fears in pushing the boundaries of what the Colombian public would accept, given the high stakes of potential fallout that could prove counterproductive to the ongoing peace process. In the unfolding of events, Lleras argues, a valuable lesson was learned: negotiating the complex challenges of representing the realities of armed conflict requires significantly more research, analysis and discussion than was built into the developmental processes for the exhibition.

Nadia Plungian in Chapter 11 shares the strategies that she developed over the last decade as an independent curator practicing in contemporary Russia, where creativity is hampered by political pressure and rigid systems of institutional control inherited from the Soviet era. Chief among these strategies are the creation of alternative platforms necessary for the development of novel artistic thought and the blurring of boundaries between research and independent curation. Bringing a strong feminist vision to her resistance of censorship and self-censorship, Plungian has curated exhibitions in collaboration with activist groups and other feminist practitioners, engaged art as a bridge to broad-based social movements and activism, worked outside of Russia to explore ideas censored within Russia and collaborated with private galleries rather than state museums.

In countries with more robust protections from government censorship, such as the United States, it is primarily private interests that curators need to take into account. Corporate entities often wield financial power over both legislatures and cultural spaces. Susan Moldenhauer in Chapter 12 reflects on her work at the University of Wyoming Art Museum developing an exhibition that featured a work about the history of biodiversity in the Gulf of Mexico as impacted by the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010. This was a challenging project, particularly because it took place in the aftermath of a major controversy in which an environmental sculpture installed at the University led to funding cuts and attacks from the fossil fuel industry. Moldenhauer traces the steps in the proactive strategy the museum deployed to see the exhibition to fruition, including fostering collaborative relationships with academic departments and preparing the Museum and the University for any potential pushback.

In Chapter 13, Ceciel Brouwer shifts the conversation to ethical concerns: in this case managing the fraught issue of if and how to exhibit and interpret artists' photographs of children. In order for museum practitioners to effectively address concerns around consent and protection, Brouwer argues, a more dynamic ethics discourse is necessary. Such an approach would actively acknowledge and analyze the complexities of ethical issues, rather than resorting to an aesthetic defense. She uses the example of the 2015 North Carolina Museum of Art exhibition *The Energy of Youth: Depicting Childhood in the NCMA's Photography Collection* as a model of a move toward a more democratic and ethically engaged practice in the representation of children. She especially cites the selection of an 8-year old to provide an online audio interpretation of the show. Such collaborations with young people, Brouwer argues, shift the focus from protection of children to their participatory rights and offer a way for museums to address the social, ethical and political significance of photographs of children.

Finally, Svetlana Mintcheva in Chapter 14 suggests an adaptive curatorial practice, i.e. a practice always actively aware of the sociopolitical environment and the interest vectors converging onto art institutions, a practice which, nevertheless, succeeds in navigating the resulting pressures and concerns and preserving the integrity of an artist's and curator's vision. Developing such a practice, she argues, is an urgent need, as the openness of our public sphere depends on the agility with which curators negotiate these pressures. Mintcheva first looks at pressures to self-censor facing US art institutions, starting with a brief history of how some of these pressures have developed in the last 30 years, and then focusing on specificity of the present moment of political turmoil and technological transformation; she then analyzes specific strategies and advocates for tactical approaches to dealing with sensitive and potentially controversial subject matter. In her conclusion, Mintcheva expresses a conviction shared by all

the contributors to this book: more than ever, art institutions need the leadership of prepared risk-takers equipped to preserve the complexity of an exhibition and integrity of their vision.

With its global reach, *Curating Under Pressure* challenges the silences, denial and seeming invisibility of institutional self-censorship. Seen as a group, the chapters refute the notion that self-censorship happens "somewhere else," instead showing that it is endemic to curatorial practice everywhere. They also demonstrate that self-censorship is not always something to be resisted but is sometimes an ethical imperative. Moreover, they provide conceptual and practical tools for curators to work, both individually and collaboratively, to negotiate institutional self-censorship through deliberative decision-making. *Curating Under Pressure* recognizes the agency of practitioners and inspires proactive, nuanced approaches to maintaining curatorial integrity.

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PART 1

Understanding self-censorship

1

RETHINKING THE CURATOR'S REMIT

Janet Marstine

"I Have No Enemies"

In the days after the July 2017 death in custody of Liu Xiaobo, who won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership advocating political reform in China, artists and activists around the world posted tributes and staged memorials honoring his work and protesting his long imprisonment by the Chinese government. Because the Chinese authorities staunchly censored any direct mention of Liu, a range of tropes referring to him emerged as acts of resistance in China and globally. One of the most common focused on a single chair, referencing the 2010 Nobel awards ceremony in which an empty chair stood prominently on stage, signaling Liu's absence due to his incarceration. Another popular trope adopted Liu's birth and death dates, rather than his name, to mark his legacy. Many of the tributes and memorials also deployed oceanic imagery, alluding to the fact that Chinese authorities cremated Liu's body and pressured his family to scatter his ashes at sea in an attempt to prevent a site of pilgrimage from materializing through a stateside internment (Hernández 2017; Phillips et al. 2017; Sui 2017). In mainland China, when censors became aware of these tropes and their meaning, punishment was swift (Gan 2017).

In Hong Kong, where, in theory, the "One Country, Two Systems" policy (Favre 2019) guarantees the city's economic and legal independence until 2047, 50 years after its 1997 handover to China following British colonial rule, artists and curators have had greater freedom of artistic expression than their mainland colleagues. Hong Kong artist and curator Kacey Wong claims this freedom while probing its limits in his tribute to Liu Xiaobo, the site-specific sculpture *I Have No Enemies* (2017) (Figure 1.1). Set in a space apart, *I Have No Enemies* calls out the dangers of self-censorship as it models an adept strategy to navigate political pressures.

Crafted from steel and placed in an undisclosed, remote Hong Kong coastal location (Wong 2017a), Wong's sculpture shows solidarity with the larger movement memorializing Liu and provides an alternative platform for expression censored in China. It references prevalent tropes: it harks back to the empty seat at the Nobel ceremony; the inscription made through perforations in the steel manifests Liu's birth and death dates; and its placement speaks to the scattering of Liu's ashes at sea.

FIGURE 1.1   Kacey Wong, *I Have No Enemies*, 2017. Steel. 54 cm × 55 cm × 107 cm. Location undisclosed, Hong Kong.

Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Wong's sculpture creates a unique memorial through its use of text and light. Aside from Liu's birth and death dates, perforations in the chair (Figures 1.2 and 1.3) also spell out Liu's name and most celebrated phrase, "I Have No Enemies" (Wong 2017b). When the sun shines, light streaming through the perforations projects the words "I Have No Enemies" along the horizon; it also projects those words, along with Liu's name and dates, down through the rocks and into the earth (Figure 1.4). As Wong's piece rusts and erodes, it serves as a moving elegy to the shifting, unstable nature of freedom.

For Wong, whose wider body of social sculpture shows his commitment to democracy and freedom of expression (Wong 2019), the phrase "I Have No Enemies" has particular relevance to political circumstances in Hong Kong today. Liu (2009) wrote those words for a statement he had planned to read at his 2009 sentencing but was prohibited from speaking, "I have no enemies and no hatred. None of the police who monitored, arrested and interrogated me, none of the prosecutors who indicted me, and none of the judges who judged me are my enemies." The statement was finally read a year later by actress Liv Ullmann as part of Liu's Nobel acceptance speech in absentia. The generosity of spirit captured by Liu's words has made them a mantra for activists worldwide (Hernández 2017).

Central to Liu's human rights work was his fight for freedom of expression (Simon 2017). His statement "I Have No Enemies" asserts, "Freedom of expression is the foundation of human rights, the source of humanity, and the mother of truth. To strangle freedom of speech is to trample on human rights, stifle humanity, and suppress truth" (Liu 2009). Wong's sculpture champions this vision. By siting the sculpture off-grid, without seeking authorization
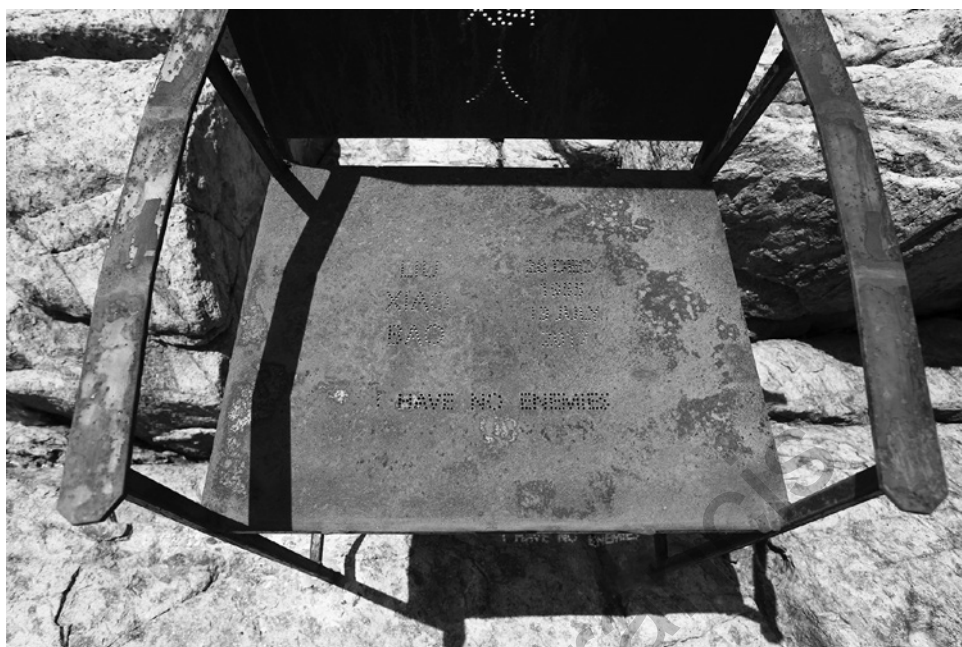
FIGURE 1.2 Kacey Wong, *I Have No Enemies* (detail), 2017. Steel. 54 cm × 55 cm × 107 cm. Location undisclosed, Hong Kong.

Source: Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 1.3 Kacey Wong, *I Have No Enemies* (detail), 2017. Steel. 54 cm × 55 cm × 107 cm. Location undisclosed, Hong Kong.

Source: Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 1.4   Kacey Wong, *I Have No Enemies* (detail), 2017. Steel. 54 cm × 55 cm × 107 cm. Location undisclosed, Hong Kong.

Source: Courtesy of the artist.

from relevant authorities, and by keeping the location secret, thus limiting the possibilities of encounter, Wong champions Liu's vision while acknowledging the current and future uncertainties of freedom of expression in Hong Kong.

Indeed, as China's "One Country, Two Systems" policy for Hong Kong rapidly deteriorates and self-censorship in Hong Kong's arts ecosystem becomes more pervasive, Wong's *I Have No Enemies* serves as a gesture of resistance to the threat, increasingly invoked, by mainland China authorities and their proxies in the Hong Kong government that "freedom of expression is not absolute" (Kong 2018). Wong (quoted in Guthrie 2016) speaks to the need for effective strategies to recognize and subvert the pressures to self-censor:

> Resistance work should be done before a full-blown occupation happens. What is full-blown occupation? Look at mainland China. . . . We are in the middle of a culture war; most didn't recognize it but this is how I see it. If we win, we get to keep our language, our identity, and our ways of living. Isn't that worth fighting for?

As Wong's *I Have No Enemies* looks out eloquently toward the South China Sea, it prompts us to ask: How does China's ever-shifting "red line" (Kong 2018) impose boundaries for freedom of artistic expression in the Mainland and in Hong Kong? How do government, economic and cultural actors exercise self-censorship in fear of this red line? How are those of us who stand assured in the assumption that censorship happens "over there, not here" complicit? How must we recognize the slipperiness between censorship and self-censorship

and the ubiquity of the latter? Finally, how can we appreciate and support the agency of artists and curators in negotiating the pressures of self-censorship?

The "craftsmanship" of negotiating self-censorship

In this chapter, I argue that self-reflective practice in recognizing and negotiating the pressures of self-censorship is vital to the curator's remit. This claim should not be surprising, given that the museum is a complex site of arbitration among many oft-competing stakeholders who hold differing levels of power. My argument represents a radical shift, however, in how curating is defined; it proposes an expanded concept of curation in which the skills by which to negotiate censorship and self-censorship feature prominently.

Drawing from interdisciplinary censorship studies, I also provide a new understanding of the complex relationship between censorship and self-censorship in the museum sector. Although, until the 1990s, it was widely assumed that censorship operates in authoritarian countries while self-censorship takes place in liberal democracies, since then censorship studies have offered a corrective to this binary construction; while recognizing the distinctively pernicious nature of censorship enacted by repressive regimes (Müller 2004), contemporary censorship studies interrogates the blurred boundaries between censorship and self-censorship (Moore 2013) and argues persuasively that censorship is constitutive. As Holquist (1994: 17) asserts, the censor and the censored shape one another as they "are locked into a negotiation, an exchange with the works they seek to abridge." Further, as Holquist (ibid.: 14–15) observes, those who engage with a domain that they know to be censored develop a sophisticated ability to identify and understand the exclusions.

In art history and curatorial studies, Meyer's (2002) groundbreaking study on censorship and representations of homosexuality powerfully unsettles the dialectic between censorship and self-censorship while also recognizing the agency of contemporary artists in resisting the pressures of the latter. Nonetheless, the US "culture wars," the battles of the late 1980s and 1990s between the political left and right over controversial works and interpretation in exhibition content, continued to shape censorship discourse in the museum sector (Bolton 1992; Dubin 1994, 1999; Wallis et al. 1999; Hartman 2015). This has created reductive, entrenched understandings of censorship (enacted or threatened) as a unidirectional phenomenon in which conservative voices erase those that challenge the status quo. In these accounts, institutional and individual self-censorship and the agency that practitioners claim to resist these pressures are too infrequently examined. In addition, such accounts leave little room to consider more recent pressures exerted by the political left and through social media.

This chapter rejects the notion that censorship and free speech within the museum sector are to be conceptualized as polarities. I posit, rather, that they are informed by the complex dynamic between them which can only be understood through the lens of self-censorship; censorship, self-censorship and freedom of expression function in a mutually constitutive spectrum characterized by its slippages. For example, institutional *self-censorship* exercised by a museum director in an exhibition may be experienced by the exhibition curator as direct *censorship*. And what might appear to be institutional *self-censorship* enacted by a museum may actually be state *censorship* imposed behind the scenes by a ministry of culture.

Moreover, I challenge the assumption that self-censorship implicitly and inevitably represents an ethical wrong; instead, I offer a pragmatic approach, accepting that self-censorship is sometimes necessary and that deciding if and how to resist by weighing up the ethical costs is

fundamental to curatorial work. In addition, I refute the idea that the pressures of self-censorship engender disempowerment and erasure. I show that artists and curators have agency to wrangle effectively with these pressures and I explore the innovative strategies they deploy.

I focus on practice in two distinct contexts – China, which is experiencing increasingly tight restrictions under the rule of President Xi Jinping (Economy 2018); and Hong Kong, where pro-democracy activists are testing the limits of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy (Favre 2019). I frame my analysis within a wider international context including that of the UK – where museums have increasingly become sites for examining rights-related issues (Sandell 2017) and anxieties about causing offense are rising (Farrington 2013). Through this approach, I demonstrate how insights concerning censorship and self-censorship in one locale are relevant to practitioners in other parts of the world. My framework purposefully resists the assumption that the pressures of institutional self-censorship are less of an issue in democracies than in authoritarian states. What unites curators globally is the impetus to develop effective measures in response to these pressures. As one of the Hong Kong–based informants for my study remarks presciently, "Our situation in Hong Kong is not as difficult as that in the Mainland but maybe in the end it's the same. I want to learn the 'craftsmanship' of a tactics of resistance from my mainland colleagues" (Hong Kong Informant 2 2016).

My research offers snapshots of particular places in time through which I identify common ground for knowledge exchange, mutual support and joint advocacy around the "craftsmanship" of negotiating self-censorship. In making my argument, I first provide an overview of institutional self-censorship, identifying the challenges that the topic poses to practitioners in diverse international settings, setting out a new framework for deliberative practice and arguing for the need to position this framework within the curator's remit. I then discuss how censorship operates in museums and galleries as one cannot comprehend the phenomenon of self-censorship without this context. I look at mainland China, where censorship is omnipresent and chiefly overt, and Hong Kong, where it is growing, due to the pressures of "mainlandization," but remains, to date, mostly covert. A case study of covert censorship in Hong Kong illuminates the destructive potential of such acts and demonstrates how this kind of censorship can readily lead to self-censorship.

Next, through a brief look more globally, followed by a sustained discussion of the China and Hong Kong contexts, I consider the conditions that have created institutional self-censorship and how self-censorship is manifest. I also explore the difficulties of recognizing self-censorship, given its embeddedness in curatorial practice and the silences that delineate it.

Finally, I deconstruct the perpetrator–victim binary characterizing censorship discourse in the museum sector by looking at the empowering strategies and tactics deployed by practitioners in China and Hong Kong. I show that, while eradicating self-censorship is neither attainable nor advisable, self-reflective curating involves assessing the ethical implications of when and how to resist and accept self-censorship. I emphasize the diversity of creative approaches that have been piloted in China and Hong Kong to counter the pressures exerted by political and business interests.

The chapter is informed by discussions among a research network composed of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese practitioners, convened in Hong Kong, and among national and international contributors to a symposium convened in Leicester, UK. These are supplemented by interviews with practitioners based in China, Hong Kong and the UK and by media accounts. Many of the Hong Kong–based artists and curators have also worked in China, as have a few of the UK-based informants. All of the informants – including eight

based in China, 13 based in Hong Kong and 10 based in the UK – have direct experience of or have contributed to research on censorship and self-censorship in the arts ecosystem. I have maintained the anonymity of all Hong Kong and China informants, due to security issues, unless the ideas and opinions they have expressed are already a matter of public record. Two of the UK-based informants have also participated anonymously.[1]

During my research journey, which included extensive periods spent in Hong Kong and China, I found myself, ironically, exercising self-censorship to meet the project aims. Sometimes, I was protecting others. At other times, I was protecting myself. Throughout, I was engaged in difficult ethical deliberation as I weighed up the need to self-censor in the short run so as to uphold the integrity of the research in the long run. The strategies and tactics I developed are directly inspired by those of the practitioners who contributed to the chapter.

The elusiveness of institutional self-censorship

Museum and gallery practitioners constantly run up against the pressures of institutional self-censorship. For example, at the UK Museums Association's 2016 annual conference, a poll of 63 delegates attending a session on institutional self-censorship revealed that 51% had consciously withheld information from audiences due to its controversial nature (Steel 2017). Making self-reflective decisions about how to grapple with the pressures of self-censorship is central to curatorial practice.

Most practitioners, however, are ill-prepared to deal with these pressures. What Next? (2016) notes that, of 117 UK cultural organizations polled, two-thirds had faced ethical dilemmas with potential to cause controversy, but only 50% had strategies for dealing with controversy. In China, even the term "censorship" (*shen cha*) is frowned upon, in favor of the bureaucratic euphemism "approval" (China Informant 3 2015). There is steadfast denial of institutional self-censorship across the museum sector.

The widespread denial of institutional self-censorship stems, in part, from the myth that museums are neutral spaces which maintain a strong hold in much of the world (Fleming 2016). Sharon Heal (2015), Museums Association Director, explains within the UK context:

> The very low level of awareness of self-censorship is partly rooted in the complete mis-conception that museums are neutral spaces. In this misconception, there is no curatorial voice, no authorship, just a neutral narrative – and thus no censorship. I think that message really persists. If you don't tackle the idea that museums are not neutral spaces, you can't then talk about what you do and don't display, what stories you tell and which voices you exclude.

Two long-held and intertwined assumptions have shaped the insistence on neutrality. First is the rationale that, because public museums are funded through taxes, they should not represent particular political or social viewpoints. Epitomizing this position is the response of the Natural History Museum London's former Director Michael Dixon (quoted in Steel 2005) to the question of why the 2005 diamond exhibition, for which it accepted sponsorship from the De Beers diamond company, did not adequately explore the issue of conflict diamonds, "We recognised that there were going to be socio-economic issues, but we are not a political organisation so don't normally concentrate on those areas." Second is the belief that objectivity is more truthful than subjectivity. However, over the last decade, scholars

have argued persuasively that museums' stance of neutrality and its associated silences also convey specific viewpoints, made all the more dangerous because they are unspoken, and that museums have an ethical obligation to contribute to the good of society (Marstine 2011; Janes 2015; Sandell 2017).

Institutional self-censorship in the public sector is equally motivated by risk aversion – the drive to lower uncertainty – even when risk assumption will more likely lead to successful outcomes (Bozeman and Kingsley 1998). In fact, as What Next? (2016) reports within the UK context, governing bodies in the cultural sector are increasingly making decisions that prioritize risk aversion. In a risk-averse museum climate, attempting to avoid controversy through self-censorship is a default position as leaders see controversy as exposing an institution to a host of potential dangers, including reputational damage, loss of income and a reduction in audience numbers.

In addition, the pressures to protect a museum's "brand" are strong, as independent curator Voon Pow Bartlett (2015) holds. These pressures can be particularly fraught within the context of social media. Curator Katie Bruce (2017) describes such pressures as exerted by the social media training required within her institution:

> We have all gone through training if we are using social media. The training makes clear that if we in any way raise controversy or damage the brand, we are subject to disciplinary action. Negotiating self-censorship is quite a complicated issue.

The pervasive silence around self-censorship in museums and galleries makes the phenomenon difficult to fathom (McClean 2016; Brouwer 2019: 31, 120). Much of this stems from the shame associated with self-censorship that is common to many cultures. In China, self-censorship is commonly associated with self-criticism (China Informant 3 2015), a mode of political self-examination and chastisement perfected during the Cultural Revolution that curators in some public museums continue to endure (Catching 2012: 242–243).

In Western democracies, publicly exercising institutional self-censorship is frequently viewed as a violation of principle. When Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art Director Bartomeu Marí canceled the 2015 exhibition La bestia y el soberano (The Beast and the Sovereign) and fired the in-house curators for refusing to remove from it Ines Doujak's sculpture Not Dressed for Conquering, which depicts former Spanish King Juan Carlos I sodomized by the late Bolivian labor leader Domitila Chúngara who, in turn, is sodomized by a wolf, Marí was forced to resign (Muñoz-Alonso 2015; Voon 2015). Further, three influential board members from the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Collections of Modern Art group, which Marí chaired, resigned to protest his leadership, given these actions (Voon 2015). Paradoxically, privately exercising self-censorship in one's own curatorial practice is easily misconstrued as simply part of professional editing. UK Informant 1 (2015) reflects, "I would choose the word 'editing' rather than self-censorship but, in a way, that is also what I do."

The growing recognition that museums and galleries have a critical role to play in fostering civil society through engaging with contentious issues (Cameron and Kelly 2010; Lehrer et al. 2011; Janes and Sandell 2019) has made increasingly urgent the need for robust, ethically informed practice concerning institutional self-censorship. The ethics of institutional self-censorship is particularly fraught because not everyone has the same rights to freedom of

artistic expression. United Nations Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights Farida Shahid (2013: 10) notes:

> Restrictions on artistic freedoms may target some categories of the population more specifically. Women artists and audiences are at particular risk in some communities. . . . Ethnic and religious minorities may also suffer from prohibitions such as using a language or artistic style specific to a region or a people. People with disabilities may suffer particular prejudice when wishing to perform or display their work.

Museum sector ethics codes do not provide the necessary guidance. The UK's Museums Association (2015: 10) ethics code embraces freedom of artistic expression as an ideal but without acknowledging the complexities of this; the ethics codes of ICOM (2017) and the American Alliance of Museums (2000) do not address the issue of censorship at all. Advocacy organizations have helped to fill this void by providing guidelines for procedures that support museums to prepare for potential controversy (National Coalition Against Censorship 2019; What Next? 2016), reporting current trends (Farrington 2013) and focusing on topical issues (Index on Censorship and Vivarta 2015). Still, wider curatorial engagement is needed to combat the elusiveness of self-censorship.

How censorship works

In the domain of the arts, acts of censorship are usually performed by the state, corporate interests or other powerful entities such as religious authorities. Censorship deployed by authoritarian regimes such as that found in China is typically recurrent and overt; even when the authorities do not declare themselves or directly explain why a project has been censored, the source and larger motivation of the censorship is obvious. In limited democracies, as exemplified by the government in Hong Kong, censorship is episodic by comparison (Movius 2019) and more commonly covert in nature; in this covert form, a complex web of proxies performs the action of the censor, making it hard to understand if, how and why censorship has occurred and who is behind it. Within liberal democracies, such as that of the UK, overt censorship is rare; it is exercised primarily to quash art projects that test legal and ethical boundaries, for instance, bioart employing human tissue (Wilding 2006; Levy 2011). Covert censorship is relatively more frequent – as seen with "soft power" funders of cultural diplomacy, for example, the British Council, for whom international relationship-building takes precedence over freedom of artistic expression in collaborative projects held in authoritarian states (Farrington 2013).

Within liberal democracies, fears of censorship are greater than is recognized and readily trigger self-censorship. In the UK art sector, such fears come from diverse sources, including public funding agencies who, as UK Informant 2 (2015) reports, "have got really quite covertly held positions;" corporate sponsors, particularly where a misalignment in values between the corporation and the museum prompts the sponsor to try to influence programming; and community groups with particular political or social positions. The growing impetus to become a safe space for exploring difficult issues, given the complex dynamics of diversity politics, has created a museum environment increasingly characterized by the fear not to offend (Farrington 2013). And while social media has introduced empowering platforms

for publics to shape museum discourse and action, when weaponized through mob mentality, these platforms can readily induce museums to attempt damage control through self-censoring exhibitions and programs.

As UK Informant 1 (2015) notes, "Most people I talk to here believe that, because we are in Europe, we have freedom of speech and that artists working in an international environment will not be affected but, in reality, that is not true." In fact, the common assumption among practitioners in Western democracies that censorship and its corollary, self-censorship, happen "somewhere else" is not only short-sighted but also carries colonial implications; Marko Daniel (2015), who has curated exhibitions in China, the UK and Europe, remarks:

> With regard to China . . . there is a knee-jerk reaction to identify censorship as equivalent to state repression. That is one of those lines that people draw internally as way of defining this is something that we do not experience here but is experienced over there. This is part of a process of setting up "the other." It's a kind of colonialism.

UK Informant 2 (2015) adds, "We suffer a different kind of censorship in Western democracies but it is still here; it is more insidious." The strong reach of censorship makes understanding it indispensable to curatorial practice everywhere.

Censorship in China: the illusion of seamlessness

In China, the structures and systems of censorship create the illusion of a totally censored world. China Informant 3 (2015) reflects, "In China, there is nothing truly independent; the reality we know is reality that has been censored." The Communist Party of China (CPC) has created an environment in which censorship is so pervasive that it is normalized, making self-censorship integral to everyday practice. China Informant 2 (2016) explains, "We never talk about censorship in mainland China. Because we've grown up and been educated in China, we know instinctively what we can or should do to avoid being censored."

The Chinese government deploys a wide and ever-shifting array of tactics to generate this semblance of a censored reality, including what MacKinnon (2011) calls "networked authoritarianism," a system of internet surveillance that makes China among the most restrictive media milieus in the world (Freedom House 2019). However, this remains an illusion as no apparatus of censorship is flawless and sometimes even deliberately so: in China, pockets of creative practice that remain unencumbered are necessary to demonstrate ascendancy and influence. As China Informant 6 (2015) notes, having a thriving museum and gallery industry is essential for China to maintain its cultural prominence on the world stage. Hence, authorities engage in a balancing act in which they cannot suppress the cultural sector too much and so rely on opaque and inconsistent policies and enforcement without any possibility of appeal (China Informant 3 2015). China Informant 2 (2016) recounts:

> Whenever an exhibition is censored, we have to cooperate 100 percent. If we mount any kind of defense, the officials will censor other things, maybe works in storage, maybe items on your computer. We try to explain the concerns of an exhibition but they don't care. . . . Communication doesn't work for us. We are completely voiceless.

The state's approach encourages citizens to feel that they have no uncensored space and engenders fear, provoking widespread self-censorship. Thus, the apparatus of censorship – which is limited – depends on self-censorship – which is limitless.

Motives and priorities

Censorship of the arts in China is largely politically motivated (China Informant 7 2016a) and can be traced back to Mao Zedong's (1942) famous speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in which he declared art to be a weapon of the proletarian revolution and a vehicle to serve the masses. Though this ideological approach has waxed and waned, President Xi Jinping has reclaimed Mao's propagandistic fervor (Ramzy 2014). The unprecedented growth of museums and galleries in China over the last decade has thrown a spotlight on art – Chinese museums received approximately one billion visitors in 2018 (Zuo 2019) – which, in turn, has prompted new levels of censorship (Steinfeld 2016).

Given that censorship cannot be omnipresent, particular patterns emerge in regard to priorities of the state. Chief among them is a strong correlation between the degree of censorship exercised and the potential public impact of a project or initiative (Catching 2012: 234; China Informant 6 2015; China Informant 2 2018). A major exhibition receives greater scrutiny than a one-off public program; a globally influential artist is seen as more dangerous than one that is more obscure (Judkis 2011). And, because the work of curatorship is not well understood, curators do not usually receive that same level of surveillance as artists (Daniel 2015).

In exhibitions, the subjects and associated interpretive texts most likely to trigger censorship engage with politics, gender, sexuality and religion (Catching 2012: 241; Brady and Movius 2018). Artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan undergo scrutiny at the national level when exhibiting in China while their mainland peers generally require approval only at the local level (Catching 2012: 237). International exhibitions of contemporary artists also necessitate national-level approval (China Informant 6 2015). Genres that are frequently targeted include performance art – because of its unpredictability (Yau 2013), video art – because it is linked to the highly regulated Chinese film industry which has wide potential impact (China Informant 6 2015; Brady and Movius 2018) and community art – because public gatherings that involve civic discourse are seen as a possible threat to political stability (China Informant 5 2017).

Censorship can be strongest in the epicenters of government and business, Beijing and Shanghai (China Informant 6 2015). "The Emperor is far away" is a long-quoted phrase (China Informant 2 2015) suggesting that cities and towns far from Beijing experience relatively fewer interventions from the state. However, as China Informant 7 (2016a) notes, the CPC maintains central control across the country. At the same time, as China Informant 5 (2017) explains, even within Beijing, the number of artists and activists working there makes it impossible for the security forces to police everyone; conversely, in remote artists' villages, one cannot easily hide from local officials.

Mechanisms

The Chinese censorship apparatus deploys both covert and overt tactics in its attempts to limit freedom of artistic expression. The primary covert mechanism is the seduction of increasing a

practitioner's standard of living through a system of rewards – opportunities and promotions meted out for self-censoring behavior and outputs that do not push boundaries; the thinking behind this, as China Informant 5 (2017) asserts, is that, "as your economic situation gets better, you will forget politics."

Simultaneously, a system of overt constraints hinders museum innovation and productivity (ibid.). Major state-run museums and art academies typically have a "minder" responsible for keeping staff accountable to CPC agendas (China Informant 7 2016a). And though Communist party membership is not required of every curator or art professor, it is often essential for those assuming a leadership role in a public institution (China Informant 4 2015).

The process of advancing a project is frustrating. For example, as China Informant 3 (2015) recounts, private contemporary arts venues are typically required to have a license to both operate and stage any particular project, a situation the informant refers to as "double censorship"; the approval process is extremely time-consuming and can represent approximately 50% of the total time on each project. It takes many months to hear back and often works have to be resubmitted (Daniel 2015; Brady and Movius 2018). It is not uncommon to receive a final answer just before the scheduled launch, meaning museums cannot adequately publicize a show in advance. Additional scrutiny is injected when officials inspect the exhibition just before the opening (Daniel 2015) and censorship is often enacted at this final stage. The timing is a conscious strategy to encourage self-censorship from the earliest phases of a project; censorship at the last moment inflicts serious damage as so much resource and emotional energy have gone to naught (China Informant 3 2015).

The reasons for censorship are rarely explained but, instead, cloaked as bureaucratic or technical problems. Not having the proper permit, not following import regulations and late submission of paperwork are frequently invoked (Catching 2012: 237–240) but sometimes authorities simply shut off the power, citing electrical problems (China Informant 3 2016). In some cases, a museum or gallery will discover, only after a project has been censored, that one of the artists involved is on a "blacklist;" because this blacklist is never made public and is always changing, one never knows for certain who is on it (China Informant 2 2016).

Because there is no independent journalism in China, curators do not have the option of going to the media to gain public support in the face of censorship (ibid.). In fact, the organization must do all it can to deflect media attention as any negative or sensationalizing press can escalate the possibility of censorship by authorities (China Informant 3 2016).

China's "great firewall," the synthesis of legislation and technology that polices the domestic internet, has strongly enhanced the effectiveness of arts censorship over the last decade. The Chinese social media applications WeChat (similar to Facebook) and Weibo (similar to Twitter), which museums and galleries employ for marketing purposes, closely surveil and censor user posts through techniques such as keyword blocking to meet government requirements (Janser 2011: 244; Freedom House 2019). The censorship exercised by commercial platforms is supplemented by the "50 cent army" of some two million party members paid 50 renminbi (RMB) per comment to report content deemed unacceptable to the CPC and to post content supportive of CPC views (Economy 2018). China Informant 3 (2015) remarks, within the context of the arts, that "if you post something controversial, your post and often also your account will be deleted very quickly." The system also relies on the wider public to exert the pressures of censorship through "fake news" and mob mentality. China Informant 3 (2016) recounts how unfounded rumors of sexually predatory behavior perpetuated on social media dogged a performer, eventually forcing his show to close, after an audience member in

the front row reported an innocent wardrobe malfunction during the production. Without independent media to foster robust arts criticism, it is difficult for most people to engage in substantive discourse.

Digital monitoring is supplemented by physical surveillance performed by neighborhood party committees and public security "volunteers" who are visible during large public events, including gallery openings (Catching 2012: 236–237). A social credit system, piloted in Xinjiang at the time of writing and expected to be implemented nationally in 2020, will provide a more encompassing online vehicle of punishment and reward based on assessing citizens' opinions and behaviors on the internet (Freedom House 2019), including those related to museums and galleries.

Censorship in Hong Kong: the pressures of "Mainlandization"

In Hong Kong, while freedom of expression is protected under the Basic Law (People's Republic of China 1997: 11), conditions are deteriorating as Chinese and Hong Kong authorities attempt to suppress pro-democracy protests with increasing vigor. The situation has been fraught since the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the student-led civic disobedience calling for universal suffrage that employed umbrellas as both symbolic expression and protection from the pepper spray and tear gas used by police (Lee and Sing 2019). Tensions have worsened dramatically since the 2019 pro-democracy movement initially sparked by a proposed bill, which has not been formally rescinded, that would allow the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China (BBC News 2019). Censorship in Hong Kong today is often politically motivated but is also exercised in response to a wide range of other subjects considered potentially controversial from gender and sexuality to death.

Galvanizing these protests is a resistance to the phenomenon of "mainlandization," the pressures for Hong Kong to assimilate the economic and cultural conventions of mainland China, thus abandoning local traditions and ideals (Chan et al. 2019). Mainlandization impacts all aspects of Hong Kong life. Fifty percent of Hong Kong's trade and 25% of its direct "foreign" investment now come from the mainland (Zhong et al. 2019); "patriotic" education is being embedded in Hong Kong schools (Higgins 2019); and the Hong Kong Liaison Office of the CPC has an 80% stake in the city's bookstores (Kong 2018). As Hong Kong Informant 5 (2016) declares, "The problem in Hong Kong is that everyone has some business interests in China. Even if, theoretically, we are protected by Hong Kong laws, it is more complex than that."

Many Hong Kong art organizations and artists are active in the pro-democracy movement not only because they share its ideals but also because they believe that the erosion of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy jeopardizes the sector (Pollack 2015; McMahon 2019). The extradition bill, for instance, is viewed as a grave threat as it could be used against Hong Kong artists and curators critical of China. To collectively voice their opposition to the bill, some 100 Hong Kong arts spaces participated in a city-wide strike by closing their doors on 12 June 2019 (Uttam 2019).

"Mainlandization" and censorship

Though the "great firewall of China" does not extend to Hong Kong, mainlandization has created an environment in which censorship in all sectors is on the rise. Moreover, incidents

that make the headlines are merely indicators of a more pervasive situation of both overt and covert censorship (Kong 2018).

In the museum and gallery sector, censorship is sometimes overt and clearly performed by Chinese authorities or their Hong Kong intermediaries. For example, the Hive Spring was forced to cancel the 2018 exhibition *Gongle*, featuring the work of Chinese-born, Australian-based political cartoonist Badiucao (a pseudonym), after Chinese authorities threatened the artist (Woodhouse and Lui 2019). Part of the city's celebration of free expression week, the show aimed to test the limits of freedom of artistic expression in Hong Kong (Lam 2018). Many mainland Chinese artists who in the past came to Hong Kong for a safe space to work now go elsewhere when possible (Galvan 2018).

Most often, censorship in Hong Kong operates through covert means. Chief among these is a lack of diversity in funding sources and the subsequent overdependence on the Hong Kong government arts granting agency, the Arts Development Council (ADC). Hong Kong curator and academic Oscar Ho (2016) warns, "singularity of resources is dangerous" because it gives the funder undue power. This is coupled with an insufficient number and variety of venues. Projects deemed to contain challenging content can easily be censored through the denial of a venue (Hong Kong Informant 3 2015). For example, the collected archival materials emerging from the Umbrella Movement have been neither accessioned nor exhibited by a Hong Kong public museum (Mannering 2018). In addition, the lack of venues creates value misalignments between venues and projects which also leads to censorship.

Hong Kong is a high-density city with some of the highest real estate prices in the world. Given the scarcity of public space, shopping malls and other commercial sites have become common but not always appropriate venues for art (Hong Kong Informant 7 2015). As Hong Kong Informant 6 (2016) declares, censorship by property developers that control these commercial spaces is common, "This kind of 'soft censorship' will always take place in Hong Kong as long as there are close relationships between property developers and the pro-establishment government camp. But we don't need to accept this."

The case study of Add Oil's *Countdown Machine* (2016) illuminates the complex dynamics of covert censorship in Hong Kong. This commission represents a perfect storm brought on by the collision of public funders, a commercial venue, a pro-democracy arts collaborative, a highly visible project and a sensitive political moment in which it is difficult to ascertain responsibility and motive. The ambiguities are typical of covert censorship and show how such an environment can readily lead to acts of self-censorship.

Switching off "Countdown Machine"

Originally titled *Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now*, *Countdown Machine* (2016) (Plate 1) was a monumental LED light installation for Hong Kong's tallest skyscraper, the iconic International Commerce Centre (ICC) Tower, which boasts Asia's largest video screen (Pau 2016). Created by Sampson Wong (hereon in referred to as Wong and distinct from Kacey Wong, referred to as Wong earlier in this chapter), Jason Lam and their collaborators known collectively as Add Oil, the piece consisted of six one-minute animations, interposed with slogans in English and Chinese, all musing on the theme of tracking time (Add Oil 2016). The animations included a clock, numerical digits and units of traditional Chinese measurement (Man 2016); the slogans read "Our 60-second friendship begins now," "I will remember this minute" and "You can't change this fact." As the artists explain, the piece was inspired by *Days*

of Being Wild (1990), a Hong Kong film directed by Wong Kar-wai, which concerns running out of time. In the movie's most memorable scene, the male and female leads gaze at a clock for 60 seconds while the male protagonist refers to this experience as a "one-minute friend-ship" that rings eternal (Add Oil 2016). On one level, the project functioned as a socially engaged artwork; it invited viewers to make their own one-minute connections with a friend or stranger nearby (ibid.).

However, Add Oil was well known for public art that champions Hong Kong's self-determination. For example, to support the Umbrella Movement demonstrations, Add Oil created *Stand by You: Add Oil Machine* (2014), in which the public was invited to send encouraging messages to the protesters that were then projected onto the facade of the Central Government Offices (Wong and Lam 2015). Moreover, the name "Add Oil" itself evokes the artists' political inclinations: a literal translation of the Cantonese phrase "*ga yao*," "add oil" is a common Hong Kong English expression connoting encouragement or support (Oxford English Dictionary 2018). In discussing *Stand by You*, Wong and Lam (2015) declare, "It is our hope that this emancipatory episode will 'add oil' to the civic life of our city."

Add Oil's ICC installation was commissioned by the ADC as part of the 2016 new media exhibition *Human Vibrations*, curated by Caroline Ha Thuc. The ICC Tower, which is fre-quently used for commercial light displays, is owned by Hong Kong real estate giant Sun Hung Kai Properties, which is aggressively expanding into mainland China (Chow 2016; Yu 2016). For *Human Vibrations*, all artists were required to sign a contract that commissions would not contain explicit sexual or political content (Pau 2016).

At the opening, Add Oil notified several media organizations that they had changed the title of their piece from *Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now* to *Countdown Machine* and that the last of the six animations represented the countdown in seconds to 1 July 2047, when Hong Kong is due to lose its status as a Special Administration Region and become fully integrated with mainland China. Add Oil did not clear the change in title or alternative reading of the final animation with the curator or with ADC (Man 2016; Pearlman 2016). It remains uncertain whether the curator had earlier privately suspected the alternative reading. Wong (quoted in Yu 2016) asserts that staff from both the ADC and ICC asked about the significance of the numbers but "didn't ask further after [we] the artists said the digits were "random."

Wong (quoted in Qin 2016) justified the reframing of the piece by stating that the com-mission was a critique of the commercialism of the typical ICC light displays, "Most of the animations shown on the ICC are ad-like, meaningless videos. . . . We wanted to show some-thing relevant to the social situation of Hong Kong." Wong argued that the uncertain politi-cal future of Hong Kong is the city's most pressing concern and requires the kind of public attention that the ICC Tower can garner (Cheung 2016).

The animation of the countdown to 2047 ironically appropriates the language of the monumental clock installed in Tian'anman Square counting down to the 1 July 1997 hand-over of Hong Kong from the UK to China (Yang n.d.), which bore the slogan "The Chinese government resumes exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong" (Wu 1997). Given this context and Add Oil's reframing, the ICC piece called into question, through the "machinery" of the clock, the underlying machinery of state rule (Yang n.d.). Of course, the monumentality and high visibility of what was now *Countdown Machine* raised the stakes for parties challenged by its new message.

The timing of Add Oil's announcement of the new title and interpretation was clearly strategic. The artists waited until the project was live and in the public domain to communicate the news. But what made the announcement particularly subversive was that it coincided with a visit to Hong Kong of Chinese leader Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and in charge of Hong Kong Affairs (Cheung 2016). In fact, *Countdown Machine* would have been visible from Zhang's hotel (Hong Kong Informant 8 2016).

On 22 May 2016, four days after the exhibition opening, the ADC announced that the ICC installation would be switched off (Man 2016). The removal occurred amidst a whirl-wind of security measures described by police as "counterterrorism," including calling up 8,000 extra officers to quell potential protests against Zhang (Pearlman 2016).

ADC Film and Media Art Group chair Ellen Pau (2016) insisted, however, that the removal of *Countdown Machine* was not politically motivated, "If ADC removed a work for political reasons . . . I would hold a press conference and tell the world." Indeed, the fact that the work was not switched off until four days after Add Oil's announcement – and after Zhang had departed Hong Kong – undercuts the widely held assumption that the removal represents political censorship by ADC (Man 2016). At the same time, the ADC felt compelled to distance themselves from any political associations with the work. "If there is any hidden message behind, it is solely the personal idea of the creators," ADC (quoted in Yu 2016) noted. The ICC's owners made a similar statement; the ICC (quoted in Yu 2016) "was not involved in the process of selection or curation of the artworks."

Pau (2016) notably admitted that an increase of political censorship beyond the sphere of the arts in Hong Kong had made the city's Leisure and Cultural Service Department, through which the ADC operates, more cautious. Pau (2016) also acknowledged that these pressures had prompted her to self-censor in her own curating:

> I have to be very creative to sneak in a few political works by writing a curatorial statement that is kind of elusive. I'm more aware of this change of practice now. I don't have to do this every day but I am aware that there is change.

Nevertheless, Pau and Ha Thuc (2016) justified the decision to remove the work by declaring on the ADC website that Add Oil's changes were disrespectful of both the contract and the curatorial vision, endangering funding and venues for other artists:

> We do believe in the freedom of artistic expression, and do support our artists. Yet, the disrespect demonstrated by Mr Sampson Wong and Mr Jason Lam against the original agreement and understanding made with the curator and ADC is jeopardizing our profession and put at risk any future possibility to work further in the public space.

Adding to this was Pau and Ha Truc's charge that the new framing reduced *Countdown Machine* to propaganda. Ha Thuc (quoted in Chow 2016) asserted, "amid the visit of Zhang Dejiang, the artists suddenly reduced the artwork to a straight-forward political statement. The artists did not respect the rules."

Add Oil responded, in turn, by arguing that the work itself was not altered and that reinterpretation is integral to engaging with art. Wong (2016) stated:

> I have never done anything to change the work. I don't have the technical expertise to change it, even if I were allowed into that part of the building. I can't hack into the

system. . . . If you have a basic understanding of post-structuralism, you will know that I can always change the interpretation of an artwork.

Simultaneously, Wong admitted that reframing the work through the new title and interpretation had been integral to the project from its conception. Wong (quoted in Sanchez-Kozyreva 2016) confessed, "We had always planned to reveal the meaning of the work, this seemed the most effective way." Clearly, controversy was a defining element of the piece (Man 2016) and the artists deliberately misled the organizers. They did so, however, from a position of desperation in their commitment to fostering freedom of expression in a rapidly deteriorating cultural climate which offered little public space for political discourse.

Despite the denials of Pau and Ha Thuc, did the ADC exercise political censorship? Was the ADC responding to intimidation or potential intimidation from the Chinese government or its Hong Kong proxies, given the visit of Zhang? Or were the ICC owners the driving force behind the removal? If so, was the motivation of the property company primarily commercial or political, given the pressures executives may have felt from their mainland Chinese partners? And, as a private venue, does the ICC have a right to exercise censorship, where ADC might not?

In fact, it is not clear who made the decision to remove the work. In their declaration on the ADC website, Pau and Ha Thuc state that they made the call. Neither of them are ADC staff or council executives. Hong Kong artist and curator Phoebe Man (2016) surmises, "A possibility is that they [Pau and Ha Thuc] were the ones who had recommended the artists and thus felt obliged to . . . shield the ADC from political attack."

However, the issue of who made the decision distracts from a more important concern – that the ADC contract can itself be thought of as a form of censorship. It required exhibition participants to self-censor in order to take part. Hong Kong Informant 8 (2016) challenges the legitimacy of this censorship through a contract; "why do we accept a contract that restricts political work?," she asks. Wong (2016) adds that the nature of such a contract makes it an obstacle to be overcome:

> It's impossible to maintain such a contract, no matter how you see it, I can still politicize it afterwards. When the curator came to me with the contract, the whole idea became my discontent with that contract. An exercise. You can't define what is political.

Ho (2016) warns that it is too easy to hide censorship behind such procedures and bureaucracy – as do authorities in mainland China.

In regard to the ICC, though Pau (2016) claims that the building's owners exerted no pressure on the ADC, it is widely understood that Sun Hung Kai Properties played a significant role in the removal and may have influenced the terms of the contract as well. As Hong Kong Informant 8 (2016) notes, "This incident has brought into sharp focus the unspoken rule that, in Hong Kong, commercial organizations prefer not to express or endorse political messages of any sort. This is because, in China, business and political interests always intersect."

This is particularly problematic when the facilities of a private enterprise are offered as a venue for public art that is funded by the public purse, as was the case with *Countdown Machine*. The lack of public venues in Hong Kong makes the issue of censorship motivated by both commercial and political interests particularly germane. Wong (2016) remarks, "if we unconditionally accept the property developer's judgment, then it undermines our right

to the city." Man (2016) suggests that funding councils such as the ADC might well rethink whether they should partner with venues that restrict freedom of artistic expression.

Add Oil's act of civil disobedience sheds light on the slippery nature of covert censorship – for which no party takes responsibility – which Wong (2016) characterizes as continually "being repackaged." Ultimately, what *Countdown Machine* called for was frank discourse to shed light on covert censorship as a symptom of mainlandization. "There was no adequate theoretical discussion about whether the work can be removed and no real reason [for the censorship] provided," exclaimed Wong (2016).

And so, prompted by the illumination of the ICC a year later with a patriotic slogan celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China and the first visit of President Xi to the city, Wong (quoted in Lim 2017) warned that, without robust censorship discourse, Hong Kong risks sliding further into a default position of self-censorship:

> What was not sensitive yesterday has become sensitive today. . . . Once that atmosphere exists, those with power simply have no need to issue any orders. Everyone will prematurely submit: there will be no day where a new standard for "sensitivity" is not reached; fear will wipe out everything.

Wong's words are a stark reminder that informed deliberation concerning the limits of free speech and the relationship between censorship and self-censorship is central to the curator's remit. But how exactly does the phenomenon of institutional self-censorship manifest and under what conditions? How is it distinct from censorship? And what are the particular challenges that it presents to curatorial practices?

How self-censorship works

Self-censorship has a clear and direct relationship to censorship. And, like censorship, self-censorship does not take exclusively in authoritarian states, though it is more pervasive and deep-seated under such regimes. Self-censorship can result from an environment of covert, as well as overt, censorship. It can also manifest where censorship has not been exercised but where there is fear that censorship may occur. In fact, the limitlessness of self-censorship is more effective at restricting expression than acts of censorship which are, by nature, limited.

Given today's strong fears not to offend, institutional self-censorship, as artist Goshka Macuga (2015) notes, often functions as a kind of "othering" that reinforces the marginalized status of disenfranchised groups. Celebratory frameworks championing diversity and inclusion in the name of social cohesion often exculpate painful issues and analysis that might have been deployed to transformative effect (Walsh 2008). Containing difficult histories in alternative culturally and thematically specific museums enables mainstream institutions to maintain authorized narratives (Bunning 2017). And aestheticization, as seen, for example in the 2019 *Gauguin: Portraits* exhibition at the National Gallery (Homburg and Ripelle 2019; Jones 2019), allows art museums to gloss over the urgent ethical issues arising from collections and exhibitions. Moreover, when engaging with difficult issues, as Elizabeth Carnegie (2006) argues, curators are always required to make assumptions about audience needs and expectations that involve self-censorship; they must decide how much to challenge communities without shaming or alienating them and how much to hold back.

Though pressures for museums to self-censor have long come from politically conservative camps, increasingly, they are exerted also by voices from within political liberalism. Even the most progressive institutions find that a certain level of self-censorship is endemic to the work that they do. Ann Bukantas (2015), Head of Fine Art at National Museums Liverpool, describes this phenomenon within the context of writing interpretive texts which need to follow the protocols of institutional terminology documents:

> A document intended to empower staff to explore contentious issues, and thus aiming to counter self-censorship, at the same time also has the potential to foster self-censorship because it is intimidating and also because on some level the document itself is a mechanism of censorship. Such documents often raise more questions than they answer.

The extent of self-censorship will vary from one context to another, depending on the degree of risk perceived in pursuing free expression and the degree of fear perceived in causing offense, but patterns of its materialization are shared across cultures. Given the high stakes that many artists, curators and organizations face, self-censorship is sometimes an ethical good; China Informant 1 (2016) explains, "Self-censorship is the way that we are protecting ourselves." But because self-censorship is often enacted in the name of protection, it is vital to consider who is being protected and for what reasons. The silences around self-censorship make this a challenging endeavor. As Hong Kong artist and curator Wen Yau (quoted in Galvan 2018) describes self-censorship, "It is . . . like a ghost or spirit that is haunting you. You cannot really see or touch it. Because it is intangible, you really feel scared."

Self-censorship in China

In China, because the apparatus of censorship is made to appear seamless, the climate for self-censorship is completely naturalized. Indeed, it can be argued that, in China today, self-censorship is culturally prescribed. According to China Informant 7 (2016a), self-censorship is a "basic instinct" that only those who have spent time in the west feel compelled to discuss. State authorities make use of the cases where they do intervene – and a strategic unpredictability to these interventions – to elicit self-censorship at times and places of non-intervention (China Informant 3 2015).

Within large state museums, the minder plays an important role. As China Informant 3 (2015) recounts, the minder "organizes a weekly meeting in which everyone has to criticize themselves first and then criticize the others in the group. That is our culture of self-censorship." At the same time, China Informant 3 (2015) explains, such self-criticism sessions operate on a superficial level to satisfy CPC directives; "honest self-reflection is not to be shown as this is understood as exposing weakness."

And in every museum and gallery, leaders anticipate what might spark the authorities' ire and deliberate how to remove potential triggers. Public museum directors commonly do a walkthrough of an exhibition before the opening and, if they see a potential problem, require that the relevant curator and/or artist make the necessary changes. This might include the removal of works and the revision of interpretive texts (China Informant 6 2015).

The art market is among the most powerful vehicles of self-censorship in China's arts sector, as politically oriented work does not sell well in the domestic arena. China Informant 6 (2015) remarks, "Undoubtedly, the market is the major factor. It is an effective mechanism for

regulation. It requires no other hard measures. Art is a commodity." The systems of government patronage and tenure equally encourage artists and curators to avoid risk-taking and to develop their work in popular and commercial directions (Silbergeld 1997: 302–303; China Informant 7 2016a).

Representative of this phenomenon are exhibitions with patriotic themes that continue to be developed by state institutions. For example, the 2016 *Chinese Civilization Theme Art Project* at the National Museum of China commissioned artists from every province in the country to produce large-scale works that glorify Chinese civilization (Organizing Committee of the *Chinese Civilization History Theme Art Project* 2016). Artists were assigned particular subjects, titles and even sizes (China Informant 7 2016a) and the Publicity Department of the CPC approved the works in conjunction with the exhibition's organizing committee. This "approval" process, as detailed by the organizers (Organizing Committee of the *Chinese Civilization History Theme Art Project* 2016), captures the pressures of self-censorship in such a tightly controlled environment:

> The Organizing Committee and Experts Committee . . . played an important role in providing guidance for artworks submissions including with regards to their subject matter, variations of expressions, repeated deliberation of initial proposed sketches, and the execution of the final project and end review.

Such projects send a message to the wider arts sector that self-censorship is essential to professional success and recognition. Of course, there are many practitioners that work against the grain. But in China, without international connections, it is difficult to work outside the system of self-censorship and earn a living wage (China Informant 7 2016a).

Self-censorship in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, though the pressures to self-censor have traditionally come from the city's commercial sector, they are increasingly motivated by fears of offending political and business interests in mainland China (Qin 2015; Renfrew 2017: 13, 43–44) such as those that drove the shutdown of *Countdown Machine*. China's 2015 abduction and detention of Hong Kong booksellers and publishers who had sold works banned in the mainland sent shockwaves through the city's cultural sector (Tsui 2017; Palmer 2018).

Several high-profile cases of institutional self-censorship over the last several years have prompted artists and curators to recognize the growing intrusion of an ambiguous and shifting "red line" imposed by China. For instance, in 2016, the Asia Society Hong Kong canceled the screening of Evan Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas* (2016), a documentary about the Umbrella Movement. The Asia Society justified its decision by stating that a panel discussion due to follow the screening was too heavily weighted with pro-democracy speakers (Lai 2016).

And, in 2014, the Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery covertly refused to exhibit Otto Li's *Faces of Representatives* (2014) advocating universal suffrage. The work was part of the traveling show *Conforming to Vicinity – A Cross-Strait Four Region Artistic Exchange Project*, previously hosted in Macau and Taiwan and scheduled to move subsequently to Shenzhen in mainland China. Consisting of four busts depicting the leaders of each of the four locales to which the exhibition would tour, Li's sculpture was produced with a 3D

printer. He programmed the printer to fabricate the finish of the busts along a spectrum of smooth to rough quasi-pixilated surfaces corresponding to the number of votes each of the leaders had won to be elected; the bust of Xi Jinping, reflecting 2,952 votes, was smoother than that of Hong Kong's then Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying, representing 689 votes, while the bust of Taiwan leader Ma Ying-Jeou was smoothest of all, portraying almost seven million votes.

Li submitted his proposal when the exhibit was in Taiwan and it was accepted; however, the Hong Kong venue, the Hong Kong University Museum, insisted that the work could only be displayed in a peripheral space outside the galleries where the larger exhibition was installed (Li 2015) and where the busts would be easily overlooked. The Museum denied it had exercised institutional self-censorship, pinning the blame on Li (ejinsight 2015). Li (2015) explains that the situation for freedom of artistic expression in Hong Kong is so volatile that it is challenging to understand when and how self-censorship is occurring.

The ambitious new Hong Kong museum of contemporary art, M+, due to open in 2020–2021 and funded through the public purse, is a case in point. In a 2015 pre-opening exhibition of works from its permanent collection, held at the Bildmuseet in Umeå, Sweden, the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, England, and ArtisTree in Hong Kong, M+ conveyed mixed messages. At all three venues, the exhibition contained art known to be sensitive to Beijing authorities, including an installation by Ai Weiwei and a series of photographs of the 1989 Tian'anman Square pro-democracy demonstrations by Liu Heung Shing. However, at the Hong Kong venue, the first part of the exhibition title, *Right Is Wrong: M+ Sigg Collection: Four Decades of Chinese Contemporary Art*, was dropped and the programming and catalog edited to limit politically subversive messaging (Qin 2015). Pi Li (quoted in Qin 2015), curator of the exhibition, reflected, "The problem in Hong Kong is not censorship. . . . The problem in Hong Kong is self-censorship." Speaking of the environment for artistic expression in Hong Kong, former Director of M+ Lars Nittve (quoted in Qin 2015) adds, ominously, "Politics are real here. . . . It has real consequences and you have to take it very seriously."

Kacey Wong asserts that the small number of cases of institutional self-censorship in Hong Kong museums that have been made public is endemic of a much larger trend of curators removing works they anticipate might anger Beijing. He predicts that, in future, Hong Kong artists who push the boundaries will have to go underground (Tsui 2017). Clearly, given the eroding environment for freedom of artistic expression, developing a "craftsmanship" of resistance is more important than ever.

The "craftsmanship" of resistance

Indeed, practitioners facing diverse conditions of self-censorship – in China, Hong Kong, the UK and around the world – have devised a wealth of clever strategies and tactics that demonstrate a clear sense of agency. As China Informant 1 (2016) states, "If you take responsibility for self-censorship, you can win some freedom from censorship." This notion of agency serves as a corrective to the perpetrator–victim duality that has dominated censorship discourse in the arts. As Hong Kong Informant 2 (2016) remarks, practitioners in mainland China have developed a "craftsmanship" of resistance that Hongkongers find increasingly relevant and adapt for their own purposes. The goal across cultures is not to eradicate self-censorship – which is neither realistic nor desired – but, rather, to accept

that curating involves a delicate dance between resisting and exercising self-censorship. UK Informant 1 (2015) remarks:

> On the one hand, there is a positive aspect to navigating self-censorship, to taking control and being able to manipulate the conditions in which this censorship is taking place, but, at the same time, the necessity for self-censorship is a testament to certain socio–political conditions that we have to work within and that we cannot deny.

Making ethically informed decisions in navigating the pressures of self-censorship is central to the curator's brief.

Lobbing the ping-pong ball at the edge of your opponent's side of the table – or – "be water, my friend"

In mainland China and, increasingly, in Hong Kong, where pressures are exerted primarily by political and business interests, the pervasiveness of censorship makes it fruitless to discern between methods employed to resist censorship and self-censorship. "It's all about creativity," China Informant 3 (2016) declares. Sometimes, this work involves appropriating the tactics of stealth modeled by the censor. "I know how to do things quietly. The cultural revolution taught us to do this. . . . We know how to live in difficult situations," China Informant 7 (2016b) reflects.

There are many distinct pathways to negotiating self-censorship but a common refrain in both China and Hong Kong is to test and shift the boundaries whenever possible. Daniel (2015) explains what he learned from Chinese colleagues while an independent curator in Shenzhen:

> If you know that a certain act will get you censored, there's not much you achieve by attempting and failing to carry out that act because that's already a known. What's much more interesting is to work on the limits, on the border areas.

In Chinese the common term used to describe this is *cabianqiu* – pushing the boundaries – and it originates in the game of ping pong. *Cabianqiu* represents the idea of strategically lobbing the ball at the edge of the opponent's side of the table so that it is impossible for them to make a successful returning shot (Esherick 2014). The metaphor makes clear, however, the limitations of the strategy; a player can only push the boundaries so far or the ball will land beyond the table and they will lose the point – or the game.

In fact, gamesmanship characterizes much of the work of maintaining curatorial integrity in China. For example, China Informant 3 (2015) describes trying to stay one step ahead of internet censors as a "cat and mouse game." At the same time, it is critical to acknowledge the risks to safety of oneself and others when pushing the boundaries of artistic expression "to the edge of the ping pong table" and to maintain one's own ethical boundaries in the process. Daniel (2015) asks, "At what point does the testing of boundaries put you in the line of fire where the potential fallout moves from censorship to repression? That's a really dangerous game."

Hongkongers have their own distinct metaphors to describe how they push boundaries. Among the most popular is "Be water, my friend," words the late Hong Kong martial artist

and film star Bruce Lee (n.d.) first spoke in a US television series but which became among his most definitive pronouncements, "water can flow . . . water can crash . . . be water, my friend."

Shaped by Daoist philosophy, in which water connotes both power and flexibility, Lee's words have come to be understood as expressing the need to constantly vary one's approach, gaining strength through unpredictability. Hong Kong's pro-democracy advocates, including those negotiating the pressures of censorship and self-censorship, have used Lee's words to inform their tactics (Higgins 2019; Li and Ives 2019). At the time of writing, Hongkongers are still able to pursue their artistic and curatorial goals in ways that are more direct than those of their mainland peers but the situation is increasingly precarious.

Negotiating censorship and self-censorship in China and Hong Kong

Practitioners in China and Hong Kong have developed a diverse toolkit of strategies and tactics to resist censorship and self-censorship. Among the most fundamental of these in China and, increasingly, also in Hong Kong, is limiting exposure to sensitive times and places. China-based independent curator Rebecca Catching (2012: 234, 244) reports, for instance, that she avoids scheduling events during important days in the CPC calendar when authorities are on alert to avoid controversy; simultaneously, she plans important shows to open at Chinese New Year when officials may be distracted or on vacation. In the context of journalism in China, Wang (2012) recounts that sensitive stories are held back during moments of political strain and published later when the tension dissipates. Tsai (2013), also referring to the Chinese media context, explains that journalists take advantage of the time between when an incident breaks out and when the government decides to censor it. Artists and curators also use such methods. In Hong Kong, Add Oil's blatant disregard of the sensitivities of timing was undoubtedly a factor in the removal of *Countdown Machine*.

Practitioners keen to successfully navigate the pressures of censorship and self-censorship often strategize to situate venues and projects in locations not under the radar of authorities. In China, this might include second- and third-tier cities or overlooked neighborhoods in first-tier cities (Salmenkari 2004: 246). Catching (2012: 246) notes that it is important to choose locations away from government or military buildings. In Hong Kong, while Kacey Wong's placement of *I Have No Enemies* in a remote undisclosed coastal setting references the scattering of Liu Xiaobo's ashes, it also helps secure the longevity of the sculpture, potentially even after 2047, and until its erosion is complete.

In China, when the approval process presents daunting barriers, museum staff frequently subvert the mechanisms of bureaucracy. For example, when unable to obtain a license through the usual procedures, curators might buy or rent a license on the open market or operate as a commercial entity (China Informant 3 2015). Sometimes, large museums can have such complex bureaucracies that a practitioner can carve out a pocket for creative practice that is less regulated than others within the matrix of power (Hong Kong Informant 1 2015). And, as Steinfeld (2016) reports, curators fearing that works in an exhibition may be censored will frequently present an alternative version of the show to authorities inspecting it.

Artists and curators may also revert to alternative platforms that limit the public-facing exposure of projects – so are less likely to attract the attention of authorities. Artists' collectives associated with private museums provide a space for discourse outside of the more regulated

realm of art academies (China Informant 4 2015). And novel types of small-scale institutions tend to fall off the censors' radar. The non-profit Video Bureau, funded by artist Chen Tong, provides an alternative platform to collect and research video art (*TimeOut Beijing* 2017; Grogan 2018), a medium often censored when included in museum exhibitions. Because Video Bureau has capacity for only a few people at a time to use its resources, it is not a priority for officials. To avoid flagging up potentially controversial themes, videos are cataloged by artist and title only, not by subject.

Within contemporary art museums, curators sometimes carve out secret gallery spaces in staff offices or cupboards where boundary-pushing projects are shared only with trusted individuals (Catching 2012: 241; Steinfeld 2016). Alternatively, practitioners may exhibit these projects in the domestic sphere such as the home of an expatriate or an apartment rented exclusively for that purpose (Salmenkari 2004: 245, 249). Or they will collaborate with colleagues overseas to show the project in a pop-up exhibition internationally, as was done by Oscar Ho with archival material from the Umbrella Movement (Brown University Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage and Chinese University Hong Kong 2016).

Of course, practitioners today rely most on the digital sphere for alternative platforms to share and discuss contentious work and ideas. While, in China, internet surveillance becomes ever more aggressive, the coded language deployed to evade the censors grows increasingly clever. This includes euphemisms, memes and homophones which are quickly invented and then replaced as their meaning is detected (Janser 2011: 245; China Informant 3 2015).

Wordplay occurs outside of the digital domain as well. Practitioners avoid contentious keywords. For instance, in his writing on anarchism, artist Ou Ning uses the transliteration *an na qi*, rather than the Chinese or English term (see Chapter 6). Add Oil's original title and interpretation for *Countdown Machine* also reflect this strategy. And when interpreting art with potentially sensitive content, artists and curators will use abstract jargon to make the object seem benign (Salmenkari 2004: 247; Catching 2012: 248); Ellen Pau (2016) reports that she slips politically oriented works into Hong Kong exhibitions by writing elusive curatorial statements. In addition, when working under high-ranking individuals at state museums, practitioners carve out space for autonomy by using verbal and body language signaling humility and predictability. Explaining that mainland colleagues mentored her in these tactics when she worked in a large Beijing museum, Hong Kong Informant 1 (2015) explains, "This makes them [senior staff] feel they can trust you and that they have the upper hand."

Strategic alliances are all-important in building resilience. Leaderless horizontal networks of individuals that share the same values have proven effective as they spread responsibility among the group while offering mutual support and the pooling of resources (Salmenkari 2004: 240–241; Hong Kong Informant 4 2015). Diversifying the circle of people one can turn to, including with international colleagues and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is also vital (Hong Kong Informant 4 2015).

Having financial independence is hugely helpful as well (Salmenkari 2004: 247; China Informant 6 2015). Most contemporary art museums in China are privately supported through an individual sponsor, typically a banking or real estate group, which provides scope for experimentation. However, these museums are undergoing increased government scrutiny (China Informant 2 2016) and the lack of diversity in their income streams places them in a precarious situation (Movius 2017). Refusing funding from sources that can curtail one's autonomy is equally important. Increasingly, Hong Kong practitioners are rejecting funding from Chinese corporate sponsors (Hong Kong Informant 7 2015).

Concerning publicity, in China, practitioners will commonly avoid the media whenever there is potential for controversy as this can trigger attention from the authorities (Catching 2012: 235). As China Informant 6 (2015) reports, contemporary art circles often operate as a kind of underworld (*jianghu*). The time, location and program of events are distributed at the last minute through personal channels (Salmenkari 2004: 247; Hong Kong Informant 8 2016) and many programs are "closed door" events that enable participants to speak freely (China Informant 1 2016). To date, the press in Hong Kong remains independent but the city's main newspaper, *The South China Morning News*, is owned by Alibaba (Chow 2015), the Chinese technology giant, and, at the time of writing, the media is being targeted in pro-democracy demonstrations (Sataline 2019).

Clearly, while empowering, the craftsmanship of resisting censorship and self-censorship in China and Hong Kong limits engagement and impact. China Informant 3 (2015) acknowledges the momentary conditions in which one is able to experience freedom of artistic expression as "freedom in a cage." China Informant 6 (2015) is also circumspect, stating, "We can only do something in micro-political circumstances. . . . Massive mobilization is impossible." However, for many practitioners, resilience means accepting a different, longer term perception of time.

That different perception can lead to sacrificing one artist in an exhibition who might be on a blacklist so that the larger project can take place (Daniel 2015). It can also mean that, when one artist in an exhibition is censored, the institution cancels the whole show so as not to put the other artists involved under the spotlight (China Informant 2 2018). Some curators will nonetheless find ways to make visible the act of removal so that it is noted and can shape future strategies. Such was the case in the 2017 Song Dong retrospective at the Rockbund Museum in Shanghai; several video screens, left blank after the works installed there were censored, read "This video has been removed for non-technical reasons."

China Informant 6 (2015) speaks eloquently about the hard ethical choices to be made:

> I think continuity is more essential than the glory of dying to be a hero. In the context of China, dying as a hero doesn't have any impact. They [state authorities] have every means to suffocate you. . . . Broken jades are meaningless. We would rather remain as an intact tile.

And while practitioners based in neoliberal societies do not assume the same level of risk as their colleagues in China and Hong Kong, the choices we all face in negotiating the pressures of self-censorship can be equally complex.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the pressures of censorship and self-censorship that Hong Kong artists and curators have encountered during the evolving 2019 pro-democracy protests, Hong Kong sound and installation artist Sampson Young (quoted in McMahon 2019) asserts:

> The events in the last couple of months have taught us all, I think, the importance of being *vigilant* – to resist as a community but also to self-reflect as individual artists to ensure that our imagination remains unhindered under these increasingly difficult

circumstances, that we don't ask for permission to be human, that we are passionately polemical but also wise, [and] that we never apologize for being complex.

Together, the stories recounted in this chapter define what it means to be vigilant – to recognize the pressures of self-censorship – and to resist – to negotiate these pressures – in self-reflective ways. The craftsmanship of such work lies in deploying strategies and tactics that are both polemical and wise. This craftsmanship, whether framed through the concept of ping pong, martial arts or something else entirely, is fundamental to the curator's remit.

Acknowledgments

Note

1 When referring to informants, I use the descriptors China, Hong Kong and the UK not to instrumentalize their identities but, rather, to make clear the connections between the location where these participants are based and the insights and experiences that they share. I use the terms mainland China and China interchangeably to refer to the Chinese mainland under direct jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China, not including the special administrative areas of Hong Kong and Macau.

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14

SMART TACTICS

Toward an adaptive curatorial practice

Svetlana Mintcheva

> How many are outraged by the thought of a self-ravaged tongue?
>
> *Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize lecture (Morrison 1993)*

In censorship controversies, it is the artists who are remembered. They are the ones that gain heroic status for challenging the pieties of their day. Those who present the work of artists to the public are rarely known. They may be publishers – few know the names of the courageous individuals who first dared publish James Joyce's *Ulysses*. They may be curators and museum directors – like the director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center who took the risk of showing the groundbreaking Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective, *The Perfect Moment*, when nobody else would. Or they may be the founders of small art spaces – like The Sanctuary in Buffalo, New York – serving as laboratories for artists to develop cutting-edge work and giving it a home when larger institutions shut it down.

And yet, those who present controversial art to an audience are often more vulnerable than the artists who made the work. In the early twentieth century, publishers faced jail terms and fines that could bankrupt them for publishing the likes of Theodore Dreiser or James Joyce (Boyer 2002). And even in our supposedly more enlightened century, alternative art spaces (like The Sanctuary) have been shut down on the pretext of minor code infractions but really because of the work they hosted (Crowe 2012). The last few years have added a different kind of pressure: ethical scrutiny. This results in calls for the blacklisting of artists because of their personal moral transgressions or removal of work because of its alleged insensitivity to how it may affect marginalized groups. Curators – and museum directors – may find themselves in the center of a public relations crisis; in court, as happened with Dennis Barrie, the director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center (Parachini 1990); or out of a job, as happened with Olga Viso, the director of the Walker Art Center, after a controversy over a public artwork (Chow 2017).

As a result, the pressure on curators to self-censor and play it safe is high. Not every curator and arts organizer has the determination to stand up to authority or mass pressure (especially that coming from the communities they serve) and take personal risks so as to protect an art

project. In 2019, Patrick Charpenel, the newly appointed director of El Museo del Barrio in New York, canceled a long planned Alejandro Jodorowski retrospective at the last minute after community discord built up over the Chilean-born filmmaker's well-known, provocative – though subsequently retracted – 1972 claim of having raped an actress while filming *El Topo* (Moynihan 2019). Charpenel's decision may have been a smart move in view of the fact that, less than a year before the El Museo cancellation, María Inés Rodríguez, who curated the traveling Jodorowski show for Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux (CAPC), had been fired from her position as director of the museum. The reason given was that her artistic program was "too demanding" (Rea 2018).

Most decisions to self-censor remain invisible as the calculation of risk happens early on in the curatorial process and often blends with the legitimate and necessary process of curatorial selection and decision-making. Yet the two are different: while there may be many reasons to include or exclude a specific work or a particular artist in the programing of an institution, self-censorship can be defined as the decision to cancel a show or exclude a work or an artist solely because of (potential) external pressure and the fear of controversy or repercussions.

Curatorial self-censorship has broad ramifications. As art critic Jason Farago (2019) notes, since the middle of the twentieth century, when the curated exhibition became the principal launch pad of contemporary art (taking over from the salon, the dealership and the independent show), the curator has combined the exhibition development once done by artists and collectors with the analytical work of the historian and the critic; it is now the curator who assigns "meaning and importance to new art." This expanded role of the curator makes their work essential to cultural life and the public sphere in general. Artists may freely create, they may even sell their work and be part of private collections but, if the public has no access to diverse and radical work through a solid infrastructure of venues, that work is unlikely to have an impact in the world at large.

The developing neoliberal cultural ecosphere in the United States is one where noble statements of support for free speech are often shadowed by the less noble demands of funding needs, as well as by community and special interest pressures and, ultimately, by fear of controversy. This ecosystem fosters a kind of constitutional – or structural – pre-censorship that constrains the ability of the art to offer unexpected or dissonant perspectives on political and social reality.

The arts in the United States have been in the crosshairs of cultural, political and economic debate for some 30 years – starting with the Culture Wars over public funding in the late 1980s. But, as I argue here, the much more recent growth of social media and an exacerbated sense of political crisis have multiplied the pressures faced by art institutions. The plans for any exhibition in America today must start with the joint questions of "can I show this?" and "at what cost – reputational, financial, relational – to myself and the institution?" The response to these necessary questions precisely maps the boundaries of what cannot be done, the outer limits of artistic freedom. This process of boundary exploration – which is at the same time boundary formation – is what I call structural (pre)censorship. Structural (pre)censorship is continuous with self-censorship but not identical to it: while self-censorship entails an initial curatorial decision that is being reconsidered in view of particular fears and pressures, structural (pre)censorship defines boundaries beyond which a curator would not even venture to think: these are the boundaries of cultural taboo, of what counts as art, of the very protocols and economics of exhibition programming within cultural institutions.

How can curators and art organizers resist the various pressures and challenges they face internally and externally? How can they dare pursue their vision, yet not have to fear for their livelihood? How can they respond to ethical imperatives without resorting to what Carole Talon-Hugon (2018) has called "ethical censorship," a policing based on a rigid binary of good and bad actors, acceptable and inacceptable ideas?

Recognizing the urgency of these questions today, as part of my work with the Arts Advocacy Project at the New York-based National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), I have been working proactively with curators over several years in the context of responding to censorship incidents, including conducting curatorial workshops and interviews. I have sought behind-the-scenes clarification of the pressures curators face and inquired about creative ways they have met and negotiated these challenges.

In 2016–2017, the Arts Advocacy Project surveyed 200 curators nationally and internationally on the pressures they face and how they have responded to these pressures (National Coalition Against Censorship 2018). This chapter draws on the survey, as well as on my work on specific cases of controversy over the last 20 years, to identify the power vectors at play in current challenges and examine some of the most productive ways curators have developed to handle such challenges.

As the sociocultural environment continuously mutates, new challenges are sure to emerge. And even in the current environment, there are no one-size-fits-all recipes for success. What I am suggesting here, beyond the details of various curatorial tactics, is a specific approach – what I call an adaptive curatorial practice. As I define it, adaptive curatorial practice is a way of working that is always actively aware of the sociopolitical environment and the interest vectors converging onto art institutions yet succeeds in negotiating the resulting pressures and preserving the integrity of the artist's and curator's vision. Adaptive curatorial practice is a new concept that is meant to recognize the elements of an already existing practice, one in which many experienced curators are already engaged.

This chapter is roughly divided into two parts: the first looks at pressures to censor and self-censor, starting with a brief history of how some of these pressures have developed in the last 30 years and then focusing on specificity of the present moment of political turmoil and technological transformation. The second part – based on the assumption that the openness of our public sphere depends, to an extent rarely recognized, on the ability of curators to negotiate these pressures – analyzes various strategies and advocates for tactical approaches to dealing with sensitive and potentially controversial subject matter. While much of what I identify as pressures in the art ecosystem in the United States can also be found in other neoliberal societies, and while curators worldwide share many of the tactics deployed in adaptive curating, my analysis is grounded in the specifics of political history and current context in the United States.

Pressures

Learning to fear

To get the full picture of the fears plaguing US art institutions today, one needs to look back into the last decades of the twentieth century. Several decades ago, museums and other large art institutions started opening their doors to programs showing contemporary art in varied new experimental mediums (Atkins 2006). Politically and socially engaged experimental artwork broke out

of alternative spaces into the mainstream. Established arts institutions began showing work, inspired by the feminist and gay liberation movements, which often frankly explored sexuality, as well as work irreverent toward religious taboo.[1] In publicly supported alternative spaces, artists introduced work about the AIDS crisis, expressing outrage at government indifference to it in exhibitions like the 1989 *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* at Artists Space Gallery in New York.

Politically and religiously conservative groups saw this development as a challenge to "traditional" values (which was true) and hence an opportunity to rally their constituencies. Fiscal conservatives, though not necessarily ideologically aligned with the religious right, also saw an opportunity: to cut public funding for the arts, which was, to them, an unnecessary waste of taxpayer money. Thus, the arts provided an opportunity for different sections of the political right to unite in the common cause of cutting federal funding for the arts (Mintcheva 2014).

Some 10 years of high profile controversies over public funding of the arts followed – known as the Culture Wars. The main object of attack, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the federal agency providing arts funding, survived, although not unscathed: its funding was drastically diminished (Koch 1998). But the Culture Wars left a much more insidious legacy to the arsenal of censorship: the argument that taxpayers should not be "paying for offensive art." Art institutions also learned just how all-encompassing and exhausting controversy can be for museum staff and they became more fearful.

The experience of the Culture Wars gives deep resonance to every new vague threat of funding cuts. Anxiety about future retaliation through funding decisions can force an institution to censor itself. Outright censorship – which is difficult in the United States as it conflicts with First Amendment free speech protections – becomes unnecessary. In 2010, for instance, C. Wayne Clough, the then Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, ordered a video to be removed from *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, an exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, hours after the exhibition was criticized by US Republican Congressional Representative John A. Boehner, the incoming House Speaker, and incoming Majority Leader Eric Cantor (Gopnik 2010). Boehner strongly suggested that the Institution's funding would be at risk if the work were not removed, stating "Smithsonian officials should either acknowledge the mistake and correct it, or be prepared to face tough scrutiny beginning in January when the new majority in the House moves to end the job-killing spending spree in Washington" (quoted in Somander 2010). For a museum director to take a firm position standing up to government officials may mean risking major financial damage to their institution.

Art world in turmoil

National attention to art controversies waned after the heated years of the Culture Wars. Local skirmishes continued – and the Arts Advocacy Project at NCAC often heard the claim that taxpayers should not be supporting offensive art. However, with the one exception of the 2010 censorship of *Hide/Seek* at the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery, controversies were confined to the town or county where they occurred and did not hit the national news. Then, in 2016, an already polarized nation acquired a polarizing president.

The election of Donald Trump was more of a symptom of polarization than its cause. Nevertheless, Trump's divisive rhetoric reverberated through the sphere of culture, and, possibly, contributed to additionally exacerbating conflicts, especially around work exploring racism, police violence and the political standoff in the Middle East. And conflicts were increasingly

accompanied by calls for censorship, now coming from the left. Even before 2016, sections of the cultural left had begun to abandon their traditional support of free speech principles in the name of protecting marginalized groups from pain and offense. Advancing the ideals of social justice was no longer just about inclusion and diversity but increasingly about censorship: the excision of certain artworks or artists from the public sphere.[2]

Left-wing protests against exhibitions and art world inequities are not new. Take, for instance, protests against the exclusion of black artists from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 show *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968* or the many 1980s and 1990s actions of the feminist Guerrilla Girls Collective highlighting gender disparities in the art world (Cotter 2015). However, the frequency and influence of such protests, their power to mobilize a cohort of young artists and activists, and, most of all, the expansion of their goals beyond demands for inclusion to demands for the removal and destruction of artwork are creating a sea change in the art world.

The defining controversy crystalized around *Open Casket*, Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till, included in the 2017 Whitney Museum Biennial. Tortured and lynched in 1955 because a white woman claimed he offended her with sexually suggestive remarks, 14-year-old Till became an icon of the Civil Rights Movement after his mother decided to publicly release a photograph of his mutilated corpse in its casket. Schutz's painting, based on this historic photograph, was included in the Biennial along with many works on race-related issues by artists of color. The curators, Christopher Lew and Mia Locks, both Asian American, intended the high-profile Biennial to reflect the national conversation about race and police violence against black men (Lew and Locks 2017). This was solidly within the tradition of the Whitney Biennial to engage with the issues occupying progressive political thinking.

Schutz's painting, much as it aligned with the theme of the Biennial, provoked a firestorm of calls for removal and destruction: because it was painted by a white woman; because it "appropriated" a painful history that did not belong to her; because it retraumatized viewers (Smith 2017). The Whitney stood by its curatorial decision and responded by opening its space to a discussion program in which a variety of positions were voiced. Poet Claudia Rankine, founder of the Racial Imaginary Institute and a well-respected figure, was invited to curate and lead the event. The role of museum staff, including the two curators of the Biennial, was to listen. Rankine brought in a broad and varied range of participants, some calling for destruction of the work, all recognizing the racial tensions in the art world (Whitney Museum of American Art 2017). Divisions remained though the immediate tension dissipated.

There were aftershocks but the brunt in this case fell on Schutz, a leading mid-career US artist. A few months after the Whitney controversy, a group of artists and activists (unsuccessfully) advocated the cancellation of Schutz' mid-career retrospective at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston, solely because of her having created the Emmett Till painting (the work itself was not part of the ICA exhibition) (Halperin 2017). The Biennial curators, perhaps because they are themselves people of color, or perhaps because they took a back seat in the controversy, were not negatively impacted. Two years later, in 2019, Mia Locks became Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

A month or so after the Whitney controversy, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis faced questions and then loud protests over a new sculpture to be installed in the large public sculpture park in front of the institution. The design of the sculpture, which looked somewhat like playground equipment, was, in fact, a composite of seven gallows used in executions by

the US government over the past 200 years. Conceived by socially engaged multimedia artist Sam Durant, the sculpture, titled *Scaffold*, sought to draw attention to the death penalty and its effects (Eler 2017).

What fired up the controversy was the inclusion, among the historically sourced gallows designs, of one modeled after the gallows used in 1862 to execute 38 Dakota men in Mankato, Minnesota, about 80 miles away from the Walker Art Center. Minnesota has the largest Native American population in the country and, when some Dakota nation members recognized the Mankato gallows in the sculpture, they claimed deep emotional disturbance, the sense of being traumatized by the work (Eler 2017). While the race of the artist (who is white) was not the central issue, the claim to tribal ownership of historical pain and the right to its representation was central to the protests.

Just days before the official opening of the sculpture park, the director of the Walker, Olga Viso (2017), issued a lengthy apology for "any pain and disappointment that the sculpture might elicit" and promised to "provoke discussion about how the Walker can strive to be a more sensitive and inclusive institution." This apology, rather than acting as a bridge for reconciliation, sparked a wave of protests against the work. Just days later, representatives of the city and the Walker met with the artist and with Dakota elders and agreed that the sculpture would be removed and disposed of in any way the Dakota wished. In addition, all intellectual property rights to the work would go to the Dakota so that it would never be recreated anywhere (Eler 2017). Just months later, after a ten-year tenure, Olga Viso stepped down from her position as Director of the Museum.

The Whitney and Walker cases brought to light difficult questions regarding content engaging with the history of racism and ethnic violence in America: do white artists have the right to use that disturbing material? Do reminders of painful history only serve to perpetuate historical trauma? Are museums further demonstrating their structural racism by displaying material that is deeply disturbing to traditionally oppressed groups? If they want to be both relevant and committed to social justice and diversity, shouldn't museums consider their programming through an ethical lens sensitized to the concerns of minority groups and work in partnership with them? Above all, what is the role of art institutions in addressing racism, discrimination, historical violence and social inequality at a time when the country is facing a crisis of legitimacy and trust when it comes to both government and the media?

These are all timely questions. However, when the political passion informing them fires up calls for removal and destruction, the situation becomes uncannily reminiscent of the familiar outrage traditionally led by the religious right and conservative politicians.

Protests would be counterproductive to activists' own goals if institutions – fearing backlash – begin to avoid exploratory engagement with difficult political issues and settle for a superficial celebration of diversity. "Multicultural is now marketable," writes Holland Cotter (2019) in his review of the 2019 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) expansion – which also restructured the Museum's version of modernist art history to include more women, artists of color and non-Westerners – "To ignore it is to forfeit profit, not to mention critical credibility." But multiculturalism in the museum should be more than a development seamlessly connected to the neoliberal commodification of difference. To be politically meaningful, multiculturalism needs to face the hard tensions accompanying the deep transformation of democracies that have invariably been homogeneous at the top. And this is both a challenge and an opportunity for art institutions.

Weighing the risks

No matter how a controversy is resolved, the message to the field at large is that particular content can, simply put, cause the institution a major headache – and more, cost a director or curator their position. The long-term effects public censorship controversies have on exhibiting institutions add to the myriad of other political, community or financial pressures these institutions face in the process of preparing an exhibition. In response to those pressures, curators routinely modify exhibitions before they open, change wall texts or add programming.

Among the art museum directors and curators whom the Arts Advocacy Project at the National Coalition Against Censorship surveyed from 2016 to 2018, over a third expressed some doubt as to whether museums today are the best place to address difficult subject matter (National Coalition Against Censorship 2018: 13).

As Lisa Freiman (quoted in ibid.: 9), former director of Virginia Commonwealth University's Institute for Contemporary Art, shared in her interview with NCAC:

> [s]elf-censorship is one of the main things we encounter in museums because we are thinking of what potentially can go wrong; there is no question that people do censor themselves. The past years in the art world and on university campuses have given many administrators pause about weighing the integrity of programming against the possibility of public outcry.

A curator (quoted in ibid.: 8), who asked to remain anonymous, seconded that sentiment:

> You have to make a decision: is the work important enough? Is it at the heart of your mission and therefore worth it to take on controversy? Sometimes the answer is yes and sometimes it's no.

While a large number of respondents repeated the aphorism "museums should be safe spaces for unsafe ideas" and referred to museum mission staples like "democratic dialogue" or "open-ended conversations" as articles of faith, the picture became more complicated when we insisted that our respondents think not so much about what museums should be, but what they are in practice. To this the usual answer, as formulated by one participant, was "The role of museums is often said to be to ask tough questions, but in practice, this is not quite the case" (quoted in ibid.: 13).

Museums vary, of course, but, as Tobias Ostrander, Chief Curator and Deputy Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Pérez Art Museum, Miami, Florida, shared, their determination to attract an ever-broader public is founded upon the assumption that, for this broad public, the museum is a place of entertainment. Insofar as museums also offer sociopolitical critique, this critique is usually framed in very general terms (a critique of consumerism, for instance), rather than engaging in topically controversial or directly political issues (ibid.: 14). In our 2016 interview, Ostrander noted that interest in directly political material has diminished over the last 10 years (ibid.).[3]

The mixed blessing of social media

Social media has dramatically expanded the reach of art institutions but has also created a fertile new breeding ground for controversy. The instantaneous and wide reach of social media

quickly breaks disciplinary and social boundaries. As a result, debates that once may have been confined to people familiar with the visual arts can now easily spread to online special interest groups and other unexpected participants from different discursive backgrounds. Controversy erupted in 2015 around cultural appropriation and orientalism in a program the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston had, rather unfortunately, called *Flirting with the Exotic* when the event was announced on social media. The program invited visitors to don replica kimonos while standing before Claude Monet's *La Japonaise*. After social media backlash, much of it coming from people who admitted they never saw the show or entered the museum, the program was canceled (Boucher 2015).

But there is much more going on in social media than publicity gone awry. Social media, with its unprecedented mobilizing powers, amplifies and gives traction to all kinds of activist campaigns. This is a double-edged development: on the one hand, it gives voice to previously marginalized positions; on the other hand, because cheap speech and the quick-gratification logic of "clicktivism" does not allow for depth of engagement, it gives power to easy and reductive interpretations.

Because social media does not allow for the kind of control of interpretation that museums can have within the institution (via layout, wall texts, labels, tours and programming, for example), de-contextualized components of a show can quickly circulate to fuel activist agendas. Individuals or groups protesting an exhibition or program can use social media to rally large numbers of supporters very quickly, making it appear that an institution is facing massive opposition. That may not reflect the true state of affairs, as those signing petitions do not always research the details of the situation. As an example, some of the hundreds of thousands of supporters of a Change.org petition to remove work involving animals from the Guggenheim's 2017 *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World* show did not realize (as the comments accompanying the petition made clear) that, in two of the three works in question (Peng Yu and Sun Yuan's 2003 performance *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* and Xu Bing's 1994 *A Case Study of Transference*), the Guggenheim was presenting video documentation of historical performances, not live reenactments. Nor did they care, in their militant moral righteousness, to understand the rationale behind the use of animals by Chinese artists working in a very different cultural tradition and a repressive environment.

The online protest was followed by threats of violence. The Guggenheim's administration, which had stood firm in the face of the online petition, was unwilling to take the risk or place a heavy police presence in its galleries and decided, in consultation with the show's three curators,[4] to keep blank the video screens on which the documentation was to be projected. The one piece where live animals were to be present – Huang Yong Ping's 1993 *Theater of the World*, which was, ironically, also the title piece of the show – was exhibited as an empty structure. Explanatory labels and an artist's statement by Huang Yong Ping explicitly referred to the censorship. The controversy shifted the conversation around the censored pieces in *Theater of the World* to contemporary Western concerns over art and cruelty to animals, entirely occluding their original impact in the very different political context of China at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In heated social media debates, nuance, experimentation and ambiguity often become liabilities. This creates challenges for curators exhibiting art that strives to comment on the social but doesn't carry its message upon its sleeve.

Negotiating controversy and showing difficult content: toward an adaptive curatorial practice

> If you take on a controversial topic, you have to have a good strategy with the highest impact and least collateral damage.
>
> *Jill Snyder, Executive Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art*
> *(MOCA) Cleveland, Ohio (quoted in National Coalition*
> *Against Censorship 2008: 22–23)*

Entirely avoiding controversy is impossible – one can never predict what content will spark opposition. The notorious *Sensation* show of young British artists, for instance, came to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1998 with a history of previous controversy. However, the work that caused a scandal when the show initially opened at the Royal Academy of Art in London in 1997, Marcus Harvey's 1995 portrait of child murderer Myra Hindley, went mainly unnoticed at the Brooklyn Museum. A very different work provoked protests and the ire of the then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in New York in 1998: Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) (Ellison 1999).

Rather than focusing on avoiding controversy, curators need to ensure that, should potential objections arise, the museum's response is one of productive engagement, rather than a confrontational standoff. In a society where First Amendment law protects the arts from direct government censorship, preemptive self-censorship presents one of the greatest challenges to a truly diverse and lively cultural sphere. Consequently, it is the agility with which curators and museum directors navigate internal and external pressures that determines the openness of the cultural field – much more so than individual controversies.

This part of the curator's work is more important than ever in twenty-first-century multicultural yet polarized societies. But what exactly does such agility entail? In the course of my almost 20 years of work advocating for artistic freedom, as well as through a series of curatorial workshops and many focused interviews with experienced curators, I have identified key components of a practice I call adaptive curating because of its sensitivity and responsiveness to sociocultural context, as well as because of its nimble negotiation of a variety of internal and external pressures.

What are the components of an adaptive curatorial practice?

First and foremost, to display sensitive content, preparation needs to start long before a show is even conceived and be embedded in the daily operations of an institution and in an individual curator's professional practice. There are important strategies to be deployed after controversy hits but nothing can compensate for lack of preparation.

Researching context and building networks of support

Today, as museum professionals are increasingly mobile, nationally and internationally, a deliberate and focused effort to understand the local environment and build local networks of support is a crucial part of preparing an exhibition. Even before any program or exhibition is planned, curators and museum administrators need to research the institution's social, political and economic context, find out who the key political actors and local special interest groups are and where the social tensions lie. They should reach out to these groups formally and informally and establish and nurture relationships that could be activated when necessary. Failing to do so could be costly to an institution.

In 2016, for instance, the Contemporary Art Museum (CAM) in St. Louis, Missouri, was hit by a particularly antagonistic controversy over *Direct Drive*, a solo show of work by Kelley Walker. Walker, a white artist, repeatedly appropriates images related to Black culture and history, including photographs of racial unrest and Civil Rights protests, but also images from the covers of men's magazine *King*, featuring scantily clad black women. Walker enlarges and variously overlays the photographs with white, milk and dark chocolate and with white toothpaste.

Both the curator and museum director had recently moved from the West Coast to this Midwestern city where racial tensions were high (Boucher 2016). As CAM staff reminded the museum's Senior Directors, "St. Louis exists as a central location for the contemporary civil rights movement in the aftermath of the unrest in Ferguson" and "black staff members, allies and community members are constantly inundated with the recurring . . . deaths of black people at the hands of police" (Nichols et al. 2016). The result of ignoring this context and, instead, emphasizing the formal aspects of the work (CAM 2016) was a controversy that quickly grew out of hand and eventually led to the resignation of exhibition curator Jeffrey Uslip (Muñoz-Alonso 2016).

Being knowledgeable about context is crucial. But it is not enough. When a show with sensitive subject matter is in the planning stages, this knowledge needs to be activated through a deliberate process of building relationships and having preliminary conversations with local stakeholders outside the institution. Such partnerships can help define appropriate educational programs and framing, send the message that the institution is listening and offer credible advocates for the show if controversy arises.

The same process applies when traveling a show to different regions, both nationally and internationally. Different political contexts must be thoroughly considered in what are often very tight time frames. This is especially important for exhibitions addressing issues of importance to local minority or special interest groups. The controversy over Sam Durant's *Scaffold*, described above, is a case in point – when Olga Viso, the Walker's executive director, first saw the work, it was installed in Kassel, as part of the large international exhibition *documenta (13)*. In the context of Minneapolis, some 80 miles from where one of the gallows constituting the piece was used in the largest execution in US history, *Scaffold* had a very different presence. Conversations with Dakota elders in advance of the installation could have changed the fate of the work.

Too many times, public conversations are only convened in the aftermath of controversy as a means of damage control. However, consultations with stakeholders should pre-date a potentially controversial show. The 2015 exhibition *Zones of Contention: After the Green Line* at the Weatherspoon Museum, in Greensboro, North Carolina, explored the concept of borders and featured artists with different perspectives on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In preparation, curator Xandra Eden (2016) held informal discussions with local Jewish and Arab groups over several months. Though not everybody agreed with every aspect of the programming around the show – that is not necessarily even desirable – community concerns had ample opportunity to be voiced and the exhibition went on smoothly.

Open discussions about programming within the institution are just as important as outreach to community groups. Everybody in an institution, from front-of-house staff to trustees, needs to be comfortable talking about the controversial aspects of a show. Gallery attendants are often the institution's representative face for visiting audiences. Trustees, on the other hand, may be called on to defend exhibition programming in various sociopolitical contexts outside the institution; they should not be taken by surprise. It is the curator's responsibility to prepare staff, as well as trustees, to answer questions about an exhibition's purpose within the general mission of the institution.

Just like outside conversations, discussions within institutions should offer a two-way exchange: listening to what staff members have to say is just as important as preparing them with talking points. At a time of high mobility among museum leadership, the expertise of long-standing staff familiar with the specifics of local context should not be ignored. In the 2015 controversy at CAM St. Louis, for instance, staff members had attempted to alert the director to their concerns around the exhibition in an informal way; had their voices been taken into account, CAM would have prepared more effectively for what came to be a highly divisive exhibition. In a letter addressed to CAM Senior Directors, black administrative staff members and allied colleagues noted their disappointment that the concerns and insights of museum staff, expressed in the period leading to the opening, were not honored and taken into consideration by the curator (Nichols et al. 2016). As CAM's Director Lisa Melandri (2017) realized, after the fact, structures assuring transparency and dialogue with the entire team need to be established well before a controversial show is conceived.

When a project takes place in a university museum or gallery, it can be helpful to get support from other university departments and student groups and work in collaboration with them. In 2018, Ohio University's Kennedy Museum of Art wavered over a racially sensitive project involving a performance and installation featuring the "lynching" of a confederate flag. The artist, John Sims, was determined to overcome the curatorial fears and administrative opposition that he had repeatedly faced around this work. He succeeded by mobilizing the University's Black Student Cultural Programming Board, Multicultural Center and Department of African American Studies, as well as off-campus community groups, including the Black Life Action Coalition, United Campus Ministry and Appalachian Peace and Justice Network, among others (Garnett 2017). This broad support made a show containing relevant but extremely volatile material possible.

Long term, there is a widely recognized need to bring a broader array of experience into the art institution itself by hiring leadership and curatorial staff of diverse backgrounds. This is an urgent task if art institutions are to retain a position of cultural relevance. It will also help strengthen institutions' credibility when presenting sensitive subject matter.

Framing and labels

Perhaps the most important factor determining reception, especially when an exhibition or program deals with sensitive subject matter, is the framing and contextualization of the work. Framing includes title, exhibition design and arrangement, wall texts (including potential warning labels), programming, publicity and publications. It involves the curatorial, education and marketing departments.

With museum audiences more diverse – both generationally and culturally – than ever, and in a context of political tensions and social media distortions, framing an exhibition with interpretative content has an importance that exceeds its ostensible function of fulfilling the educational mission of the institution. It is also a way of maintaining a degree of interpretative control in the face of confrontational and reductive readings, as well as preempting criticism. This is especially true in the case of sensitive subject matter. Indeed, the Whitney Museum's first response to the Dana Schutz *Open Casket* controversy was to modify the label and explain, defensively, the artist's motivation in choosing the subject. After the controversy over the Kelly Walker show at CAM St. Louis erupted, the museum placed a partition wall with additional information about the show, as well as an advisory label (Greenberger 2016).

When framing is carefully considered in advance so as to take into account political and cultural sensitivities, the potential for negative response diminishes: in The New School Gallery's *Voices of Crisis*, a 2014 exhibition about the 1962 race crisis in the United States, for instance, the curator decided against installing an enlarged quote by African-American writer and activist James Baldwin in its front hallway because it contained the word "nigger" (Subramaniam 2015). This was a smart decision in view of the 2019 investigation of New School creative writing professor Laurie Scheck, who faced discrimination complaints for reading and discussing that same quote in her classroom (Flaherty 2019).

The importance of framing – be it through wall text or in publicity materials – to the reception of the work, especially when that work is politically or culturally sensitive, sometimes leads to internal tensions. In 2006, curator Chris Gilbert (2006) resigned from the Berkeley Art Museum because the leadership of the institution, together with public relations and audience development staff, rejected his description of an exhibition as being in "solidarity" with the leftist revolutions then in progress in parts of South America. Labels that take an explicit political position can run against an art institution's commitment to serve a broad audience. However, institutions can be overly cautious about demonstrating a specific political orientation, sometimes almost absurdly so: one anonymous respondent recalled the director of an art institution arguing against the use of Situationists' texts in a show about the creative misuse of city space because it would be too political (National Coalition Against Censorship 2018: 44).

Museums are, of course, not politically neutral spaces. Claims to neutrality, as former Queens Museum director Laura Raicovich and others have argued, deliberately turn a blind eye to an institution's history and position within the political field (Mintcheva and Raicovich 2020). But is there a distinction to be made between recognizing this history and position and taking a direct political stance on divisive issues? And when museums take active political positions, which audiences are museums taking into consideration? By catering to those audiences may they be alienating others and hence abdicating their role as much-needed open spaces for discussion in a divided society?

Warning signs

If we can properly inform the visitor, it's their choice and if they're offended it's their freedom, but we have protected ourselves and been responsible.

Steven Matijcio, Curator, Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, Ohio
(quoted in National Coalition Against Censorship 2018: 47)

I believe very strongly we shouldn't surprise parents or sensitive viewers, and in my experience the thing that upsets people the most is being surprised. It's not our place to force that. We will let parents know with signage in the front or in our site guides about sensitive materials. We feel we can tell parents and they can decide.

Anonymous curator (quoted in ibid.: 47)

Warning signs are a way to protect an institution from visitor objections: if a viewer decides to proceed in spite of a warning, they have, in effect, consented to see something that may potentially disturb or offend them. But warning signs also have the effect

of prejudicing viewers, reinforcing taboos and framing subject matter as inherently prob-lematic. They also privilege the assumption that there is a right not to be offended – or disturbed.

One of the most appropriate placements of a warning sign I have seen was in the lobby of the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center in the early 2000s. The advisory was a gen-eral one, warning of the potential to encounter disturbing material on display; it did not single out one show or a specific work. Thus, the advisory satisfied the goal of protecting the institution from complaints without prompting the viewer to look at a specific work or artist as offensive. In *Best Practices for Museums Managing Controversy*, NCAC (2013), in collaboration with a number of other art service organizations, offers a model statement that art institutions can use to notify audiences of potential discomfort without telling them which pieces should offend and disturb them. The statement reads, in part, "The works this institution exhibits may awe, illuminate, challenge, unsettle, confound, provoke, and, at times, offend." It leaves the viewers free to have their own interpretative approach, acknowledging the power of art but also implying that the encounter with a work of art is dynamic and unpredictable.

Advisory signs are standard practice today and notify audiences about a wide swath of content, anything that may be controversial or contain nudity or violence. But they ini-tially arose out of concerns about children and parental complaints about sexual or violent content.

The presence of children remains one of the most important audience-related factors driving signage, as well as decisions about the layout of a show and even, sometimes, content. Indeed, most frequently, signs warn viewers that the subject matter may not be appropriate for children (National Coalition Against Censorship: 46) The question that often comes up before a show is "could you bring a school group in here and design a tour so that a docent could do a tour without engaging with that material?"(ibid.: 45).

The most prevalent approach, outside of labeling, is to place sensitive pieces in such a way that you could lead a school group tour through a show without seeing them. Mov-ing an artwork to avoid the chance that children may see it, especially in areas that are open and where disclaimers cannot be added, is sometimes a topic of debate between education and curatorial departments (ibid.: 45). It is not a matter of evaluating what young people are prepared to see, but one of avoiding parental complaints and accommo-dating school groups. As Jill Snyder, Executive Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland, Ohio notes, art institutions are aware that "[t]here are restrictions that teachers and schools have, and you have to respect that" (ibid.: 45). In a country where some school districts are ready to penalize teachers for taking students on a parent-approved trip to a museum because the students are exposed to nudes, as happened to a Texas teacher who took her students to the Dallas Museum of Art, such concerns are not to be taken lightly (Blumenthal 2006).

Social media as framing

Exhibitions are also framed by the publicity around them and, increasingly, this is the public-ity circulated widely on social media. Such publicity can have a major impact, positive in its broad reach but negative if it fires up opposition. In the 2015 public outrage over *Flirting with*

the Exotic at MFA Boston, mentioned earlier, most of those calling for the cancellation were responding to the title and the online publicity and often explicitly stated that they had not seen the show or participated in the kimono project.

Similarly, in September 2018 the Greenspon Gallery in New York closed a show – or, rather, never even officially opened it – after outcry and threats followed the initial announcement of the exhibition on social media. The reaction had nothing to do with the works included; it focused solely on a moment in the personal history of one of the artists in the two-person show, Boyd Rice. A musician active in the avant-garde noise scene, Rice had notoriously appeared in a late 1980s photograph next to Bob Heick, the leader of the white supremacist group American Front, and on a public-access cable TV show with the white supremacist Tom Metzger. Rice denied allegations of being a Nazi but these past associations had made him a *persona non grata* (Greenberger 2018). Nevertheless, his work, much of it abstract, had been previously shown in New York without any high-profile controversy. That was no longer possible in 2018, a year in which deplatforming, i.e., denying a "bad actor" the opportunity to a "legitimizing platform" for their speech – be it a campus auditorium, a literary festival or a gallery – became a widespread tactic of the US liberal left.[5]

Some of the work in the Greenspon Gallery show, especially that by the other artist, Darja Bajagić, engaged in complex and critical ways with symbols of totalitarian and fascist power and the show could have been productively framed on social media as an examination of currently front-row issues such as white supremacy, the "alt-right" and the meaning of complicity. According to the curator, Chris Viaggio (2019), the goal of the exhibition was, in part, "to engage with the current political hysteria of our moment by complicating and frustrating its stubborn binaries and all-or-nothing ideological currents." However, the announcement simply stated the names of the artists without acknowledging the controversy around Rice or offering a curatorial statement framing the show and describing the rationale behind it. That omission turned out to be a grave mistake. Rather than complicating binaries, the social media storm and subsequent cancellation of the exhibition ended up activating those binaries and reconfirming polarities.

Conclusion

No matter how well-framed a show and how much advance collaboration a curator has done with the community, protests may still materialize. But when they do, being prepared and having allies make all the difference. Speed and reach – both of which require preparation – are key when responding to controversy in the age of social media.

NCAC (2013) has outlined, in collaboration with national and international art service organizations, a set of detailed guidelines, *Best Practices for Museums Managing Controversy*. They spell out specific action items in handling complaints, such as identifying who is behind them and what their platform and underlying purpose is, taking action such as quickly issuing a statement and organizing an offline face-to-face event where grievances can be aired and different positions heard, as well as managing press relations. The *Best Practices* document emphasizes the importance of initial preparation, from establishing clear selection criteria and engaging stakeholders to preliminary public relations and internal communications: the backbone elements of an adaptive curatorial strategy.

Yet, best practices need to be dynamic so as to meet rising challenges. Whether and how to respond to social media campaigns, for instance, requires an informed judgment call. Some

campaigns can be ignored; some need to be addressed. In either case cultural institutions must stay true to the responsibility of providing an open space for difficult or controversial art while also demonstrating their recognition of the legitimacy and importance of critique and protest. This becomes very difficult when an institution is threatened with violence. Conversation is hardly an option in such cases, which have become much more frequent worldwide in the years since the "Best Practices for Museums" was published in 2013. Threats of violence often succeed in their goal to force institutions to self-censor.

New and difficult questions emerge: when faced with such threats, should a museum be intimidated and opt out of opening a show or showing an offending work? Or should the institution disregard threats and potentially put audiences and staff at risk? These questions require careful risk assessment and demand that the institution look beyond its walls and work with law enforcement groups to evaluate the seriousness of the threats and examine options for ensuring safety.

In spite of all the challenges I have noted and the tense political atmosphere around art institutions today, it is encouraging that the long-term trend noted by the curators and museum directors we spoke to in our survey is toward embracing more difficult work. One of the reasons for that is the professional formation of today's curators and museum directors; they have grown up professionally with artists who are also political activists. Many museum directors have cut their professional teeth at artist-run and artist-focused spaces, where they developed an interest in experimental and socially engaged forms of art.

Adaptive curatorial strategies can go far in meeting the challenges of our polarized environment, where protest campaigns can quickly and cheaply amass hundreds of thousands of clicks, and where the visibility of art institutions makes them desirable targets in garnering publicity for a cause. More than ever, art institutions need the leadership of prepared risk takers equipped to preserve the complexity of a show and integrity of their vision.

Notes

1   Two of the foundational scandals that launched the Culture Wars concerned well-established public institutions which dared exhibit "offensive" work: the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, which hosted a traveling exhibition featuring Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ* in 1989, and the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center, which took on *The Perfect Moment*, a retrospective of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe in 1990.
2   While teaching a class on Censorship in America at New York University, a class I had been teaching continuously since 2010, I noted, around 2015, a sharp change in my students' attitudes: their support for free speech, our subject of study, became increasingly qualified. Simultaneously, NCAC started hearing about more cases of books or plays being challenged because of racial slurs. 1930s murals were being covered and threatened with destruction because of their representation of painful moments in history. A study has yet to be done to quantify and exactly trace the shift in attitudes, but it certainly predated the Trump presidency.
3   That appears to have changed in the years since – years coinciding with the Trump presidency and a politically exacerbated national atmosphere. However, a study of those changes has yet to be conducted.
4   Alexandra Munroe, Senior Curator, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Philip Tinari, Director, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, and Hou Hanru, Artistic Director, MAXXI, National Museum of 21st Century Arts, Rome.
5   Examples abound but the most high-profile deplatforming in the United States involved the cancellation of an appearance of Steve Bannon, former White House Chief Strategist for President Donald Trump, at the New Yorker Festival, where Bannon was to be interviewed by David Remnick, the editor of the *New Yorker*.

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