

Dangerous Ideas: Negotiating Controversial Art At Cultural Nonprofits



By Nick Pozek

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Nota bene: One of the finest sessions among many at our latest Risk Summit in Philadelphia was a program presented by Nick Pozek on the stewardship of cultural nonprofits. Since not everyone had the pleasure of sitting in, NRMC asked Nick if he would write this week's RISK eNews column, so that our readers could experience his perspective on the use and abuse of controversy. We are grateful he accepted our invitation.

We've said it before—it's essential that nonprofit leaders take on enough risk to keep their organizations innovative and relevant. The risk tips Nick provides below are applicable to all nonprofits that seek greater access to, and engagement with, their communities.

Cultural organizations are laden with an array of responsibilities and opportunities. Arts administrators, curators, patrons, and artists often find themselves on the front lines of a struggle over images, ideas, culture, and identity. Operations can grind to a halt when an unforeseen controversy erupts into a crisis. The crisis may emerge as media coverage that questions the morality or suitability of work for public consumption, and interrogates the judgment of your institution for choosing to present the work. From there, open letters by prominent activists calling for the removal or censorship of a work, sign-wielding protestors encircling your facilities, or even threats of violence can disrupt even the most resolved institution.

Thankfully, not all controversies are of the same magnitude. Some are anticipated, even welcomed, for new and challenging works, while others might seem to come from left field. But often the same practices and protocols can be observed.

Controversy is not necessarily a crisis. We often invite controversy. If handled thoughtfully, it can serve as a platform for critical discussion. It is an opportunity for your institution and your community to participate in a discourse and connect. Controversy arises out of a disagreement over priorities, values, significance, and meaning—topics that, when discussed with their stakeholders, can prove insightful for any institution. In this sense, the controversy and your response provide an opportunity to further your mission.

What Are Controversial Works And Why Are They Important?

Controversial works can provide an entry point to explore an issue from a new angle. They can give voice to an underrepresented or alternative viewpoint that challenges the status quo. They may probe our cultural

boundaries and can illuminate topics that might be difficult to tackle in other forms of communication.

Creative works can frame issues in surprising and multifaceted ways. Some works are truly multivalent—they offer the viewer or listener abundant opportunity to bring their own meaning to the work. The work serves as a subjective experience for the viewer and creates a transcultural exchange of ideas. The experience can be an enriching and transformative one for the viewer. However, organizations run the risk that, if handled incorrectly, the viewer may extract only the most negative interpretation of the work and be offended by it.

Bear in mind that a controversy may erupt more out of the cultural and political environment, rather than the specific intention of the work. Sometimes a controversy may not stem from the work at all but may be instigated by activists to draw attention to their cause. Seemingly mundane subjects can take an organization by surprise; or, an issue previously thought to be a dependable for controversy may turn out to be unsurprising, and fizzle.

Identifying A Potential Risk

Your organization may be treading into controversial areas intentionally, as a part of your work and your mission. Presenting new works that challenge existing modes of thinking, or presenting issues in a new light, are bound to generate disagreements—which is an important contribution. Controversy isn't categorically bad—those who are close to the work understand this and might even relish the plurality of opinions generated by a work. But for those who aren't prepared, controversy can seem synonymous with scandal, and all the attention that a controversial work receives may seem like a crisis, rather than a gift.

Preparing For And Managing Controversy

Develop standard operating procedures. When an issue arises, who should take the call from the press? Think about the channels for communication and each potential contact-point for the public. Think also about unofficial or informal representatives for your organization—especially those that might be excluded from 'all staff' communications—such as organization-wide meetings or internal mailing lists. How do you provide talking points or a script? How quickly can you communicate the scope of the issue to your internal and external stakeholders?

Here are steps that every risk manager can apply:

- *Understand the work at hand.* Dig into the context of the work—what is the history of the work? What was the artist's intent when creating the work?
- *Consider carefully the viewpoints of the opposition.* What do some people see as offensive in the work? Weigh them against the value of presenting the work. What do some people see as having merit about the work? It is possible to present a work not out of an admiration of its message, but for the specific time that it serves to document.
- *Evaluate Strategic Alignment.* Ask: how does this work fit with the organization's mission and overall strategy? Is the significance of the work not in its own merits but in the way it contributes to a larger pool of ideas about an issue, movement, theme, or topic?
- *Identify the stakeholders for the work.* Think about the audiences for the work, the funders that were involved in the work's creation, acquisition, and display. Consider the communities represented by a work—both those that are depicted in the work itself, but also those that may make a claim to the work.
- *Make your board comfortable with the debate.* Prior to considering a program, it is important to have an early conversation with the board about your organization's responsibility to present difficult, challenging and perhaps controversial work. Prepare your internal stakeholders early, to think about risk as being central to your organization, not an unfortunate consequence of it. Frame the discussion generated by the controversial work as a social good.
- *Respond to an active controversy—"Get Out in Front of it."* Be the first and most accessible source of accurate information. If you don't tell your side of the story, someone else will tell one for you. Your response will never be perfect, and it will be a continuous balancing act between communicating early and providing accurate and thoughtful responses.

Risk Tips: Take Deliberate Action

When a controversy is recognized, it is important to set a baseline through a public statement (e.g., in support of artistic expression and free speech protections). This statement clarifies your position and anchors your activity.

Prepare staff in advance of programs and events, especially public programs. While these situations can offer opportunities for rich discussion and debate, it's easy for the conversation to be hijacked by grandstanders looking for a soapbox. Consider creating a program that actively engages the issue that is at the center of the controversy. Offering a safe space for listening, feedback, and conversation provides an opportunity for communities on all sides of an issue to feel heard, while limiting the degree to which the most vocal zealot may feel a need to shoehorn these topics into the Q&A portion of an unrelated program. If there is going to be an open forum for discussion, consider ways that it will offer opportunities for a broad representation of opinions.

I can't emphasize this enough: prepare any staff that might interface with visitors and audience members with brief talking points. Make sure that they are aware of which aspects of the work and its reception that can discuss and which they should avoid. Consider the scope of audience-interfacing staff broadly. Beyond your community outreach staff, you should consider docents, ticket sales staff, ushers, daytime custodial staff and even security guards. Often visitors might look to anyone wearing a uniform for direction and information.

Clarify issues with the artist, and ascertain if the offensive element is integral to the work's message and integrity. The artist may not have anticipated the response. Once a public position surfaces the artist may see these issues as distracting rather than aligned with the work's intent. You can work with the artist to try to find an appropriate solution that achieves his or her goals while still preserving the work's integrity.

Always discuss modifications with the artist. Making changes to the work without the consent of the artist will only deepen the crisis by presenting a set of ethical and legal issues. Be sure that you are able to express, as much as possible, a shared agreement about the modifications. You want to be able to say: "We worked closely with the artist to find an appropriate solution while maintaining the integrity of the work."

At the same time, the artist may see the controversial reception to the work as essential. Making any changes to the work could be seen as censoring the artist. In this case, consider ways to manage audience expectations. You can provide information on your website, prepare your ticket sales staff with a one or two sentence statement about the work in jargon-free language and/or install signage on site. If you provide opportunities for audiences to mentally prepare for a work, they are less likely to have sudden negative responses to it.

While you can take precautions to mitigate the negative effects of a controversial work, your organization also has an obligation to present the work in a way that preserves the artist's intent. Instead of trying to "shut down" the controversy, use it to initiate a broader conversation. A risk-aware controversy, well managed, might be one of your best tools for innovative practices. By facilitating an open dialogue, you can serve your mission and deepen your connection with your communities.

Nick Pozek is an arts advocate, consultant and strategic advisor with over a decade of experience leading groundbreaking initiatives in the cultural sector. He has pioneered new models for engaging audiences internationally, developed strategic cross-sector partnerships, and championed innovation in some of the most globally recognized arts organizations. Nick's consultancy, Pozek Consulting LLC, engages public companies to design cultural programs and build premiere private collections. He also advises cultural organizations on strategic planning and leadership development. Nick invites your comments about any of the topics in this article at info@pozek.org.