Self-Censorship in Museums: The case of *Sex: A Tell-all Exhibition*

Katherine Seally

Abstract

The issue of self-censorship in museums, while a vitally important topic, is not receiving the same amount of attention from academics as other issues that face museums. Self-censorship is, as the word suggests, the act of museums selectively censoring their own collections, exhibits, or other content. This includes omitting an object or narrative from an exhibit due to its contentious nature, or removing the object or narrative after the exhibit has opened. Self-censorship is a pervasive practice, but it is not always discussed or analysed in museum studies circles. It often happens behind the scenes and away from the public’s attention. In the context of the Sex: A Tell-All Exhibition, this paper discusses how censorship and self-censorship manifest in museums today.

Keywords

censorship, self-censorship, museum

From Museums today face a variety of issues, including a difficult economic climate resulting in less funding, the looting of priceless artefacts from war torn countries, and the task of ensuring the equal representation of diverse communities and their narratives. While these issues are receiving appropriate attention in museum journals and circles, there is another issue that looms over museums that is not being discussed nearly as much. That is the issue of self-censorship in the museum. Self-censorship is, as the word suggests, the act of museums selectively censoring their own collections, exhibits, or other content. This includes omitting an object or narrative from an exhibit due to its contentious nature, or removing the object or narrative after the exhibit has opened. Self-censorship is a pervasive practice, but it is not always discussed or analysed in museum studies circles. It often happens behind the scenes and away from the public’s attention. In Canada today, what shape does self-censorship take? This paper will examine ideas of censorship and self-censorship, and analyse a recent case-study.

Censorship, in its basest form, is the “suppression of speech or communicative material that may be considered objectionable, harmful, or sensitive” (Desmond, 2011, p. 100). Similarly, censorship that is motivated by questions of morality seeks to remove artworks or materials that are seen as obscene or contrary to the values of the person or group objecting (Desmond, 2011, p. 100). Kathleen Desmond raises two important points: who is doing the suppression? And who decides what is considered objectionable, harmful, or sensitive? Indeed, one of the problems with censorship is “that it seems to be defined by a small number of people exerting a privileged view over a large number of people” (Chapman, 2002, p. 55).

This was certainly true in the oft-cited case of the *Sensation* exhibition by Saatchi artists at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA) in 1999. In the context of
the culture war, a battle between traditionalist and progressive values that was played out in culture and politics (O’Mara, 2007, p. 1), this controversial exhibition caused a fury. While it has been argued that controversy was courted by curators, this case nonetheless typifies many external calls for museums to censor their content. The controversy primarily surrounded Chris Ofili’s painting of the Virgin Mary, whose exposed breast was made of elephant dung. The ‘Dunga Din’ that resulted was led by the popular press, who did not normally cover art news (Howells, 2012, p. 26). The controversy was also quick to become politicized. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, while he did not see the exhibit, was so offended by it that he instructed his staff “to take all steps necessary to suspend funds from the museum” (cited in Howells, 2012, p. 29). Calling it “sick stuff” (cited in Howells, 2012, p. 29), Mayor Giuliani was a perfect example of a person “exerting a privileged view over a large number of people” (Chapman, 2002, p. 55). In this case the large numbers of people were the residents of New York and its boroughs.

The Brooklyn Museum of Art did not self-censor the exhibit or give in to the Mayor’s demands that Ofili’s painting be removed; instead, they went to court to defend their First Amendment right to free speech (Howells, 2012, p. 30). A less powerful institution may have chosen to remove the offending painting to protect their funding. Richard Howells notes that when museums seek to avoid causing offence, they are “empowering the interest group involved by agreeing to remove scrutiny, criticism, or even discussion of them from intellectual discourse and the public sphere” (Howells, 2012, p. 43). While museums or curators should not seek controversy in order to receive media attention, they must nonetheless “have the courage and vision needed to embrace controversy” (Bunch, 1992, p. 64, emphasis added). Lonnie Bunch goes on to argue that museums’ fear of controversy, and willingness to self-censor in order to avoid it, is far more dangerous and harmful than being placed in “uncomfortable and unwanted situations” (Bunch, 1992, p. 64). He states: “I would argue that the greatest danger is not from threats to funding sources or pressures from government officials, but from the profession’s willingness to self-censor exhibitions, to smooth the rough edges of history, in order not to offend in this politically charged atmosphere” (1992, p. 64).

Censorship and self-censorship have played an important role in the display and discussion of sex related items since the creation of modern museums in the late 17th century. In the 18th and 19th centuries, conservative values demanded that obscene objects, whether they were historical artefacts or not, be kept out of the public eye (Gaimster, 2000, p. 10). Since museums can be seen as a “physical metaphor for the way in which the present sees the past,” (Gaimster, 2000, p. 10) it is unsurprising that their collecting practices reflected the sexual conservatism of the day.

Many objects that were kept out of the public eye were labelled ‘obscene’. The definition has changed over time. While Romans considered images of penises to be symbols of good luck, if today your entry hall contained images of penises, it would most likely be considered obscene by guests. This word continues to be used in discussions of what should be censored in museum exhibitions. In Canada today, what is considered ‘obscene’? Interestingly, Section 163 of the Criminal Code of Canada, which deals with obscenity law, remains deliberately vague. This is so that the definition of what is obscene remains flexible through time. It does not impose a definition of ‘obscene’ for future generations (Casavant, 2007). Unfortunately for museums, a fluid definition of what is ‘obscene’ leaves controversial exhibits, objects, or artworks open to accusations of being ‘obscene’.

This discussion of what is considered ‘obscene’ is relevant to museums because most controversies surrounding exhibitions are not about the artefacts or artworks themselves, but about whether society defines them as obscene or not. If controversial pieces of art or controversial exhibitions are not actually about the objects themselves, Howells surmises that it is essentially a social phenomenon. Thus, society has the power to determine what is obscene or controversial. To establish this without a doubt, Howells proposes an experiment: “we take exactly the same exhibition with just the same content and precisely the same title but staged in a different city. If the argument was about the art, the outrage should be equal in both cities. If not, the controversy is much more likely to be socially rather than aesthetically determined” (Howells, 2012, pp. 32-33). Would he not be pleased to discover that Canada has produced a near perfect example of this ‘experiment’?

Sex: A Tell-all Exhibition was developed by the Montreal Science Center in 2010. It was intended to educate people, especially teenagers and young adults, about sex and sexuality. It featured sections on con-
ception, puberty, sexual attraction, homosexuality, and masturbation. Its main objectives were to encourage a “positive image of sexuality to visitors” as well as respond to the most popular questions posed by teenagers, including, and especially, those they felt uncomfortable discussing in school sex education courses (Montreal Science Center, p. 18).

After almost one year in Montreal, the exhibition travelled to Regina, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Kitchener. While in Montreal and Regina it barely made headlines at all, in Ottawa it caused a furor: Indeed, staff at the Canada Science and Technology Museum (CSTM) were taken completely off guard by the negative publicity and reviews they received in the local press.

The exhibit received an excellent review in the Globe and Mail, but the negative attention soon outweighed the positive. The fact that the staff did not expect to receive a negative public response meant that they could not “engage potential stakeholders before the fact, [or] prepare their staff, their visitors, or themselves for the controversy that may follow. ‘They are blindsided’” (Kamien, 1998, p. 16). In this instance, the museum would have benefitted from speaking with the Minister of Canadian Heritage, James Moore, far in advance of the exhibit opening to receive his comments and feedback, and perhaps explain their reasons for hosting the exhibit. As we will see, this could have prevented much of the controversy that surrounded the opening of the exhibit.

Instead, Moore’s office released a statement about the exhibit to the media, in advance of its public opening. The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (IMFC) further fanned the flames of controversy by encouraging its followers to contact the museum and ask that the exhibit be cancelled (Quist, 2012). By May 16th, the day before the exhibition opened, the CSTM had received about 50 complaints from parents and other concerned parties. Many of these people had not seen the exhibit, since it was not yet open to the public, and their views were influenced by the misinformation spread by some of the media as well as the IMFC and James Moore.

On May 17th, the day the exhibit opened to the public, James Moore was challenged by Andrew Cash (NDP) during Question Period in the House of Commons to defend his choice to “[interfere] with respected museum staff” (Debates, 2012). Moore replied, confirming that he believes “in the independence of our museums and [...] sex education” (Debates, 2012). Nonetheless, he felt the need to tell the director of the CSTM that “in [his] opinion, it is not appropriate for young children to be exposed to sexually explicit material without the consent of their parents” (Debates, 2012). While Moore never threatened the museum’s funding, his comments do “presume selectivity” (Howells et al., 2012, p. 6) over the museum’s content.

In response to Moore’s comments, Rosane Doré Lefebvre (NDP) remarked that: “The exhibit was very successful when it was on display in Montreal, and no holier-than-thou hypocrites were offended. After all, sex education is not the devil’s work” (Debates, 2012). She went on to ask Moore to stop interfering in Canadian museums, or “will the department of censorship blacklist anything that it does not agree with?” (Debates, 2012).

Due in part to the extent of the complaints about the exhibit, as well as the attention from politicians, the CSTM decided to remove an animated video that talked about masturbation, due to “concern about that video being to [sic] graphic” (Yves St-Onge, cited in CTV News, 2012). They also raised the age for unaccompanied minors from 12 to 16, as it had been in Montreal and Regina (Mills, 2012).

Doré Lefebvre’s comments raise an important point about the independence of museums, and the right of the Department of Canadian Heritage to influence what the museums it funds can contain. Fortunately for us, Canada is not like the United-States, and as Moore clearly realised, he could not threaten the funding of the CSTM. Nonetheless, Moore clearly still held some sway over the museum, for his comments to the director of the CSTM were enough to cause them to make changes to the exhibition content and age limits.

In the end, there is something to be said for the fact that the CSTM decided not to cancel the exhibit altogether. It is unfortunate, however, that they felt the need to censor it by removing the animated video about masturbation. Indeed, if we accept that the “museum community has an obligation to visitors to provide educational experiences through exhibitions and programming events,” then “this responsibility should be respected despite the type of attention certain subjects can attract” (O’Mara, 2007, p. 44). In addition, the CSTM’s mandate includes sharing knowledge about scientific developments, including in the field of medicine (CSTM, About the Corporation). By self-censoring the exhibit, and denying unaccompanied admittance to an important target audience, the CSTM has betrayed their man-
date and their responsibilities towards the public.

Museums’ important role as centers for education is well-documented. Museums can be just as useful, if not more so, than schools in educating their publics about a variety of topics (Bunch, 1992, p. 65). This includes controversial topics, like sex. By providing a safe place for learning, without some of the pressures of the classroom, “museum exhibits can be forms that stimulate debate and understanding [...]” (Bunch, 1992, p. 65). David Damrosch proposes that when museums began embracing their educational role, they opened themselves up to increasing public criticism (Jennings, 1998, p. 24). Damrosch insists that museums accept that some of their exhibitions may draw criticism, and he “proposes that museums openly embrace their educational function and provide a forum for ideas and discussion, understanding that the consequences may not be popular” (Jennings, 1998, p. 24).

As we have seen, censorship and self-censorship has been practiced in museums since the 18th century. Museums have only embraced the display of sexual or ‘obscene’ objects quite recently (Frost, 2008, p. 30). This makes the continued censorship and self-censorship of sexual or ‘obscene’ objects and topics unsurprising; museums are still growing accustomed to the idea of drawing controversy for some of their exhibits while their publics grow accustomed to the idea of seeing ‘obscene’ objects in a museum setting. Censorship and self-censorship remain pervasive issues and yet are largely not discussed. While we have come far from the secret museums of the 18th century, we still have a long way to go. Museums are urged not to allow the threat of controversy to deter them from creating or hosting exhibits on sensitive topics.

References

Notes
1See Richard Howells, Outrage, 27.

2 See the article at: http://www.ottawacitizen.com/full-frontal+exhibit+ottawa+museum/6601048/story.html


4He is the Vice President Public Affairs and Marketing at the Canada Science and Technology Museum.


