Censoring Sexuality in North American Museums: Enforcing Moral Judgement and Prejudice

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Abstract

New Museology is used to discuss self-censorship practices in Canadian and American museums. The argument that self-censorship works against free thought, expression, and equality, is highlighted through examining the role and responsibility of museums. Positioning museums as agents of change, this discussion elaborates on how museums have succeeded in dealing with criticisms of controversial exhibits. Through examples drawn from Canadian and American museums, it is argued that self-censorship in museums should be abolished.

Keywords: Self-censorship; Sexuality Exhibitions

Introduction

In the 19th century, Western museums began to emerge as more homogenized and organized institutions based on Victorian patriarchal principles of authority and status (Bennett, 1995). Dominant museum practice operated with an understanding of their social responsibility to uphold hierarchy and normativity and ‘civilize’ the masses, serving a small social group of usually white, upper-class cis-gendered men (McCall and Gray, 2013). Historically, museums have continued to abide by such practices which had not been critically examined until new museological theories emerged in the 1970s. New Museology directly challenges traditional modes of museum thinking and instead places communication, accessibility, inclusion and social change at the forefront of emerging and revised mission statements. Contemporary museums have made great strides towards practicing these new
values by focusing on educational programming and public outreach. However, one aspect of museum practice that has not likewise progressed involves museums self-censoring objects and ideas that explore sexuality.

Self-censorship appears in many implicit and explicit forms within museum spaces, including through installing content advisory warnings or age restrictions on potentially contentious exhibitions. Museums use these methods to keep certain objects out of public view and, in its most extreme form, can lead to museums removing objects that have fallen under public scrutiny. Sexual display policies in museums rely heavily on self-censorship strategies in order to uphold broader societal norms and patriarchal ideals that aim to exclude non-normative expressions and protect vulnerable minds from ‘perversion’. Through an examination of several case studies in Canada and the United States, I will explore how and why self-censorship occurs within museums and why these practices should be abolished in order to adhere to new museological theories.

**New Museology: The Role and Responsibility of Museums**

To understand the environment in which museums are operating today, I will first examine the role and responsibilities of the museum according to New Museology. Opposed to traditional models of museum practice that upheld hierarchical structures, New Museology aims to transform the museum into an inclusive and engaging space that can educate its audiences in critical thinking and create positive social advancements. Museums have been transitioning into their newly designated role as agents of social change by shifting their focus from collections and curation to outreach and community involvement. As Silverman (2010) discusses in *The Social Work of Museums*, “today, the world’s museums are embracing starkly bolder roles as agents of well-being and as vehicles for social change... museums have become ‘socially responsible’... and they promote social justice” (p. 3). The increasing recognition that museums have a legitimate impact on how public knowledge is shaped has placed a significant amount of responsibility on them as educators and role models. As museums have largely embraced their new position as institutions of social service, they must also understand their role as possessing “the potential to alter people’s attitudes, values, knowledge and behaviour” (Silverman, 2010, p. 19).

The practice of self-censorship opposes New Museology in that it directly opposes the idea that museums are institutions meant to promote free thought and equality. Self-censorship through content advisory warnings have a significant impact on how visitors perceive certain content by implicitly or explicitly suggesting that some objects and ideas are deviant and inappropriate. By placing content advisories on certain exhibitions, museums are contributing to, rather than challenging, patriarchal ideas of censorship and morality. Hooper-Greenhill (1992) further discusses the social impact of museums’ actions in *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, which addresses how museums “manipulate materials things and set up relationships and associations, and in fact create identities”
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Enforcing self-censorship imposes moral judgement on objects that cannot otherwise speak for themselves. Cautionary measures such as age restrictions or content advisories alert viewers of potentially contentious materials before they are able to see and judge it themselves, making these implicit acts of censorship authoritarian, dangerous, and a threat to social equality.

The policing of ‘transgressive’ sexualities in A Third Gender and Focus: Perfection

According to New Museological discourse, it is the museum’s responsibility to promote discussion that challenges audiences with new and different perspectives. Acts of censorship counteract this responsibility, but are often employed by museum professionals as a preventative measure against public controversy. However, this strategy often works to invite negative interpretation, as self-censoring acts such as warning signs are “emotionally charged interpretations of something that is not already or otherwise observable” (Tyburczy, 2016, p. 111). Disproportionately targeting depictions of non-heteronormative sexualities, self-censorship in museums act against any positive statements they may be attempting to make by exhibiting these objects and ideas. This was the case of A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints that was on display at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) from May 7 to November 27, 2016. The exhibition explored the social construction of gender and sexuality in Edo period Japan through erotic shunga prints and other objects related to prostitution, underage sex, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgendered, Intersexual, Queer, Questioning, 2-Spirited (LGBTTIQQ2S) identities. The entrance to the exhibition displayed a warning to visitors that the exhibit contained sexually explicit content, and as such, conveyed moral judgement on what is and is not deemed normative through the authoritative voice of the museum. A Third Gender was located on the third level of the ROM and to access it visitors had to first travel through the Ancient Greece galleries. These galleries display numerous nude human figures and sexually suggestive mythological scenes in various mediums without any content advisory, immediately designating them as acceptable expressions in opposition to the sexualities found in A Third Gender. This curatorial distinction of normative vs. perverse sexuality not only reinforces traditional Western and puritanical ideals, but deliberately policed the way visitors could experience the censored space. As Jennifer Tyburczy (2016) writes, “warning signs micromanage effect on the basis of who they project their publics to be and in so doing, they create [in] those publics and a negative set of feelings” (p.112). In the case of A Third Gender, additional acts of self-censorship conflicted with the ROM’s public programming series. Public programming events that support the New Museological mandate to provide further education through lectures and workshops should demonstrate a move toward inclusion and accessibility, however ‘It’s Complicated: Gender Ambiguity in Early-Modern Japan’ which took place on June 7, 2016 was accompanied by a warning on the ROM’s website and advertising publications. The warning, which read “**Please note this lecture will contain explicit images and discussions of a sexual nature, and is not recommended for
those under the age of 18*,” continued to pass judgement and imposed limitations on an open-minded educational discussion about factual social issues. The ROM anticipated public scrutiny to surround the exhibition, and in doing so, wittingly or unwittingly, cast a shadow of negativity around an otherwise groundbreaking and successful show that ultimately received no controversy.

Focus: Perfection - Robert Mapplethorpe, on display from September 10, 2016 to January 22, 2017 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, also imposed ideas of non-normative sexuality by including a content advisory inside the exhibition. Focus: Perfection was a retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe, a famously queer artist that documented gay sadomasochist culture in the 1970s and 1980s and had notoriously faced obscenity trials and censorship since his career began. In this case, a warning sign was installed inside the exhibition itself outside of a darkened room that featured Mapplethorpe’s work involving nudity and sexual acts, a stark contrast to his celebrity and floral portraits displayed without caution. The warning read as follows: “Content Advisory: This section of the exhibition contains sexually explicit content that may not be suitable for all audiences. Viewer discretion is advised.” Deliberately drawing attention to the possibility of ‘unsuitability’, this warning sign invited visitors to enter the space with a different frame of mind in which they entered other galleries within the museum, and even other rooms in the same exhibition. In conjunction with the museum exhibition but with no official affiliation, the Westmount Public Library in Montreal featured a book of Mapplethorpe’s photographs as a feature in their main display case. After receiving a complaint about the books sexually explicit contents, the library decided to uphold its mission statement and rule in favour of “upholding intellectual freedom” (Tierney, 2016). Unfortunately, the museum did not act so liberally as demonstrated in its enforcement of the content warning and hiding sexually explicit works in separate corridors from the rest of the exhibition. As one commentator for the Montreal Gazette noted, “it is a profoundly sad exhibit, rendered even more so by the curators’ decision to create two rooms of ‘bad’ photos, complete with adult viewing warnings over the doorways. I wish this decor felt witty, a slight hand trick or a wink-wink to old-fashioned backroom porn shops. It doesn’t” (Tierney, 2016). This attitude appears to wish the museum was braver and use the threat of controversy to proudly stand up for freedom of expression and sexual equality. By continuing to use forms of censorship on Mapplethorpe’s work, Focus: Perfection perpetuated feelings of shame and animosity toward non-normative sexualities. Warning signs rarely succeed in what they had been created to do, and instead “act as social and ritual performatives that influence not only subject formation but also the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject as well” (Tyburczy, 2016, p.111). Self-censorship through warning signs directly prevents museums from following New Museological practice by reinforcing puritanical ideas of what has been categorized as acceptable by a patriarchal society.

**Negotiating Controversy: Recognizing Invalid Criticisms**

*Sex: A Tell-all* Exhibition differs from previous examples outlined in this paper as the exhibition
took a scientific educational approach as opposed to a historical or artistic educational approach. The exhibition began at the Montreal Science Center in 2010 with the intent to provide a healthy, sex-positive platform to answer basic questions that people, especially young people, may have about sex. *Sex: A Tell-all Exhibition* was well-received in Montreal and Regina until it reached the Canada Science and Technology Museum (CSTM) in Ottawa where it attracted attention from conservative critics, including Heritage Minister James Moore. Moore decided, without viewing the exhibition, that it was inappropriate and urged concerned parties to contact museum president Denise Amyot to take censorship actions, which ranged from raising the age requirement for unaccompanied minors to visit to completely cancelling the entire exhibition (Raj, 2012). One complaint from The Institute for Marriage and Family Canada took specific issue with the discussion of anal sex, blatantly showcasing their homophobic agenda (IMFC, 2017). Because the museum operates at arm’s length from government control, these calls for censorship would have to be self inflicted. After numerous complaints led by conservative activist groups, the CSTM agreed to raise the age of admission from 12 years old to 16 and removed an animated video explaining masturbation. This incident was not only an attack on the museum’s freedom of speech, but it led to many people questioning the responsibility of the museum to stand its ground and uphold democratic values associated with New Museological theory. As author Sarah Elton (2012) wrote in a comment for the National Post, “when a publicly funded museum censors an exhibit after the minister who funds museums in Canada questions its content, it is an attack on our democracy. What we talk about in our museums — the stories we tell each other in these public forums — helps to determine who we are as a country” (Elton, 2012). By bending to invalid criticisms from groups that did not share progressive views of education and equality, the CSTM participated in self-censorship when it had no direct obligation to do so and in turn granted undue legitimacy to the opposition.

While there are few imaginable instances when controversy surrounding depictions of consensual sexualities may be valid, the case of the *Art AIDS America* exhibition that toured the United States in 2016 provided examples of when criticisms should be ignored and when they should be listened to. Much like *Sex: A Tell-all Exhibition*, this exhibition faced backlash from conservative government officials when it was displayed at the Zuckerman Museum of Art (ZMA) in Georgia. State Representative Earl Ehrhart called the exhibition, which focuses largely on how the AIDS crisis impacted the gay community, “sickening” and “a blatant political statement” (Gillooley, 2016). This clearly homophobic and conservative call for censorship was rightfully ignored by the ZMA, who choose to respect their mission statement outlining their commitment to education and the exchange of “ideas that inspire” (ZMA, 2016). The United States does not hold the same ‘arm’s length’ policies in its relationship with museums as is practiced in Canada, making the threat of defunding from governmental officials a tangible danger. Faced with this additional risk, the commitment and clarity displayed by the ZMA demonstrates how museums should navigate against censorship and criticisms that do not align with New Museological values.
On the other hand, constructive criticism reached the exhibition when it toured at Tacoma Museum of Art where protesters staged a die-in to “make visible the ways that the white gay art establishment maintains the same erasure, censorship and exclusion [of black histories] that fueled the initial AIDS crisis” (Kerr, 2016). As this criticism aligned with New Museological efforts to promote equality, a constructive discussion was welcomed and positive change was made through the inclusion of more diverse artists when the exhibition travelled to the ZMA and the Bronx Museum (RYSE, 2016). This example showcases how museums can effectively act as agents of social change, respecting their role and responsibilities above all else.

Conclusions

Historic acts of censorship and withholding appear in explicit ways throughout museum history, such as in 19th century Naples when a ‘Secret Museum’ which contained erotic art from Pompeii and Herculaneum was accessible only to upper-class white men, excluding “women, children, and the poor of both sexes and all ages” (Kendrick, 1996, p.6). Contemporary examples tend to be more implicit in the ways of censorship, upholding the same traditional values but in less obvious ways. The policing of non-heteronormative sexualities is intentionally or unintentionally enforced when museums use any self-censorship methods. According to New Museology, it is the museums duty to break down social barriers and taboos and create a platform for controversial and groundbreaking new ideas. When museums choose to place content advisories or other qualitative judgements on expressions of sexuality, they are contributing to a patriarchal system that calls for an authority figure to dictate what is appropriate for ‘vulnerable’ minds. It is the museums’ responsibility to challenge harmful practices from the past and question why certain sexualities can be publicly contested while others are not. I suggest that the practice of self-censorship is counterproductive to new museological efforts and should be abolished as these frameworks are developing. Knowledge is constructed within museum spaces and censorship of any kind contributes to how certain sexualities and sexual behaviours are perceived. Through an examination of several cases across Canada and the United States, it is clear that self-censorship in museums should be abolished to freely share knowledge without forced moral judgement.
References


