

Best Practices: National Coalition Against Censorship

“To exhibit a work of art is not to endorse the work or the vision, ideas, and opinions of the artist. It is to uphold the right of all to experience diverse visions and views. If and when controversies arise from the exhibition of a work of art, we welcome public discussion and debate with the belief that such discussion is integral to the experience of the art. Consistent with our fundamental commitment to freedom of speech, however, we will not censor exhibitions in response to political or ideological pressure.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Guidelines for Managing Controversy

- Exhibits are funded by the Arts and Culture Commission and managed by City Staff of the Planning and Development Department.
- Artwork or collections that have generated controversy should remain on display until the Planning Director, Planning and Development staff and the Arts and Culture Commission, has reviewed the reported issue.
- If applicable, the Communications Manager and Public Relations Department should be notified if controversy cannot be mitigated within the Planning and Development Department.
 - The artists and, if applicable, the curator/ project manager should be notified and prepared for possible press attention. It is recommended to not comment on the issue and defer to the Communication Manager and Public Relations.
- Construct a statement of support for freedom of speech. Refrain from partaking in disputes about content or interpretation of the artwork on display.
- Evaluate the complaint/ concern: Who is reporting? What are their credentials? Is the complaint sincere, an act of political opportunism, a group leveraging controversy to serve a goal, or personal bias?
- Prepare and publicize talking points, questions, and answers. Provide exhibit materials and selection guidelines.
- Establish a learning opportunity and engage in thoughtful discussion with stakeholders.
- Call on supporters and utilized the Arts and Culture Commission to advocate. Reach out to free speech and arts organizations.
- Develop an exhibit feedback form to enable complaints or questions regarding the exhibit, the artist’s intent or public art and the First Amendment to be addressed immediately.

ⁱ Cohen v. California. 403 U.S. 15. 18-19 (1971) (“The constitutional right of free expression..., is designed and intended to remove governmental restraints from the arena of public discussion.”) Managing Controversy p.13

ⁱⁱ Mach, Daniel. The Bold and the Beautiful: Art, Public Spaces, and the First Amendment. New York University Law Review. Vol. 72:383. 1997.p.387 “When artistic expression conveys a perceptible message, it enjoys full First Amendment protection 20. Art functions as any other speech, assisting in the pursuit of truth, encouraging public debate, and fostering individual self-realization. 2’ Artistic ideas operate with the same force and under the same constitutional guarantees as classic written or spoken communication.”. Managing Controversy p.13

ⁱⁱⁱ National Coalition Against Censorship. <http://ncac.org/resource/museum-best-practices-for-managing-controversy>. Managing Controversy p.14