

Museums and Activism

Iowa Museum
Association Plugged-In
March 18, 2024
Dave Bright

(Some) History of Museums
and Activism

Would it be an IMA Plugged-In if we didn't talk a little history?

Women's Suffrage

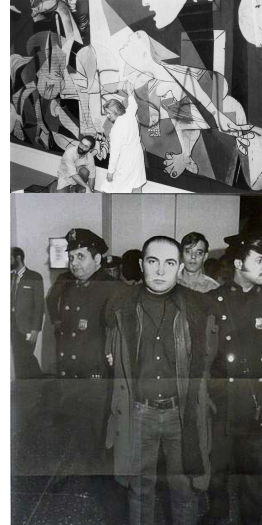
Mary Raleigh Richardson, slashed Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* on March 10, 1914.



The Vietnam War

Tony Shafrazi graffitied Picasso's *Guernica* in February 1974.

Fun fact: Tony Shafrazi is now a famous art dealer and gallerist.

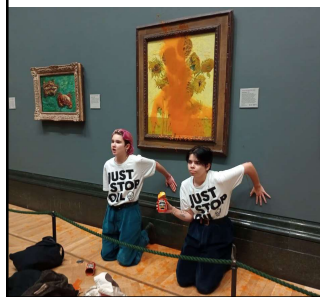


Recent Events of Activism in Museums



Museum of the American Revolution

- Held reception for Moms for Liberty summit in Philadelphia.
- Organization of American Historians and American Historical Association responded.



Climate Change and Art Museums

- Just Stop Oil, United Kingdom.
- Ultima Generazione, Italy.
- Letzte Generation, Germany.
- Inspired by tactics used by women's suffrage movement.
- Use high-profile art and museums to gain attention.
- What else is used? Social media.
- Varying responses in terms of punishment.

Pro-Palestinian Protests, February 2024

Brooklyn Museum

"Our outdoor plaza remains a popular meeting place for public demonstrations and gatherings, and we support any group's right to peacefully assemble."



Museum of Modern Art

Galleries closed for an hour and a half during sit in.



Attempted Arson

- On December 7, 2023 a woman poured gasoline on the porch of Martin Luther King Jr.'s childhood home in Atlanta.
- Visitors prevented a fire and detained the woman until police arrived; her motive remains unknown.
- Her motive may not have been clear, but her intent is very clear.

Hypotheticals

Hypothetical 1

An activist group has approached the museum seeking to rent out space for a meeting/event.



Questions to Consider

Does the museum have meeting rooms or event spaces?

If it does not have meetings rooms or events spaces, then the decision may be an easy one to make; no.

If it does have meeting rooms or event spaces, does it have any restrictions such as limited parking or accessibility?

If it has all that is necessary in terms of facilities, what about staffing? If you have a curator, do they have concerns about events? What about your insurance company?

Questions to Consider

Does the museum's mission include hosting external groups? Does it align with that activity?

If it does not, then why host any? The museum exists to fulfill its charitable purpose and follow its mission/vision/plan in furtherance of that purpose.

If the mission does not, should it? Are you missing out on educational groups that could further your mission?

What will the world think? Are you meddling? Dabbling? Leaning one way or another? What audiences will attend? Which will not?

Questions to Consider

Does the museum have standard meeting room or event space policies?

If so, what do they say? What limitations do they include?

Does the museum have additional restrictions based on its status as a public entity?

What if your museum has no policy? It is never too late to draft one, but make sure you aren't being reactionary.

Questions to Consider

How much do you know about the group?

Have you researched the group?
Have you researched the groups it affiliates with?

Have you looked at the group's social media? Have you looked at its other publications or communications?

Can you exclude a viewpoint?
Should you exclude them?

Hypothetical 2

A regular, and generous donor of the museum reaches out asking the museum to make a post on their social media taking a stance on a political issue.



Questions to Consider

Does your museum have a public statement policy?

If so, what does it say? What limitations does it include? Can you say anything, given the policy when compared to the request?

Does the museum have additional restrictions based on its status as a public entity? As a tax-exempt organization? Is this lobbying?

What if your museum has no policy? It is never too late to draft one, but make sure you aren't being reactionary.

Questions to Consider

What if the request was made by a board member? An executive?

What does your policy say? What about your conflict of interest policy?

Is this in conflict with the board members' fiduciary duties?

Who gets to deliver the news? ED? Board President? What if they are the one asking?

Questions to Consider

How would making such a statement impact the museum?

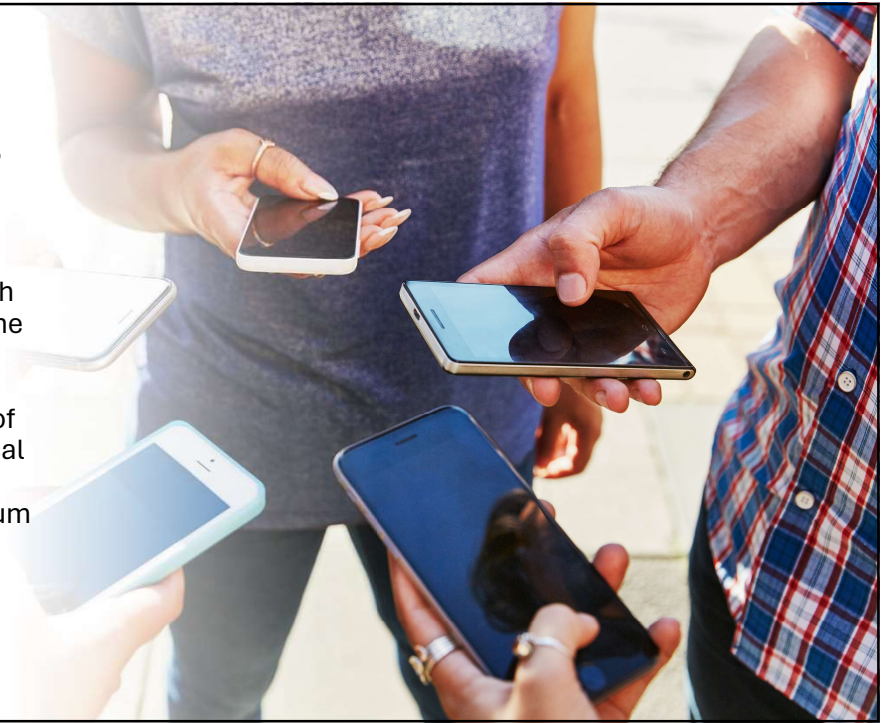
Assuming you can get to yes but before you agree, make sure you think about the potential reception of the statement.

Who will agree with it? Who will not?

What is the best outcome for the museum? Remember the mission.

Hypothetical 3

The museum has recently unveiled a new exhibit which has raised controversy online due to a recent statement made by the artist (or a descendant of the subject of the exhibit). A small but vocal community has started the hashtag #cancelyourmuseum to call out the museum's perceived support of the individual.



Questions to Consider

Who is the group?

Are they supporters, members, or friends of the museum? If so, can you engage them?

If you can engage them, to what end?

Have they done this before? If so, where? Can you talk to someone there?

Questions to Consider

What do they want the museum to do or not do?

What is the ask? Can the museum reasonably respond?

How does the museum decide what exhibits are made? How does it decide what goes into an exhibit?

Does it feel that it has done its due diligence? Did the exhibit go before the board? A committee of the board? The staff?

Questions to Consider

How much is this harming business/reputation?

Does the museum tell difficult stories?

Does it shy away from them or contextualize them?

Is the exhibit in line with the charitable purpose? With the mission/vision/strategic plan?

Policies

Best Practices for Policies

Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look for good models or starting points.• What are similar institutions doing?• Tailor them to your needs. There is no one size fits all option.
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have the board and staff review policies.• After an event, assess what worked well and what needs improvement.
Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assign specific responsibilities.• Ensure your people are trained in what they need to know.• Create a schedule so that all policies are regularly reviewed, and revised as needed.

Potential Policies

- Emergency Management
- Media
- Room Rental

Policy Pointers – Emergency Management

- Create a plan for all relevant emergencies and threats.
 - Including but not limited to severe weather, crime, pandemics, medical episodes, and mechanical failure.
- Address needs of staff, visitors, building, and collections.
- Communication plans.
 - Flood of 2008 example.
- Assign individual responsibilities to reduce bystander effect and panic.
- Practice Makes Perfect.
- Review your insurance coverage regularly.



See the American Alliance of Museums' Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response Plan guidance at <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/disaster-preparedness-and-emergency-response-plan/>

See the American Alliance of Museums' Suggested Practices For Museum Security at <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/suggested-practices-for-museum-security.pdf>

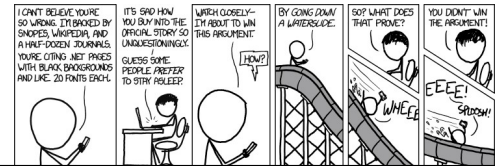
See the Association of Midwest Museums' guidance on Safety and Security Plans for Museums at <https://www.midwestmuseums.org/safety-and-security-plans-for-museums/>

Policy Pointers – Media

- Define your goals in using social media, ensure alignment with mission.
- Create a posting schedule; plan ahead of time.
- Recognize differences in audience behavior and expectations across different sites.
- Highlight staff, volunteers, and collections.
- Protect confidential information.
- Nobody wins an argument online.



See the Texas Historical Commission's slide deck on Social Media at <https://www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/preserve/museums/files/History%20Social%20Media%20Webinar%20Slides.pdf>
 See the Smithsonian's Sample Social Media Policy at <https://museumonmainstreet.org/sites/default/files/sample%20social%20media%20policy.pdf>



Policy Pointers – Room Rental

- Tailor policies to your space.
- Consider creating an application process.
- Whether you create a permissive or restrictive policy, apply it equally.
- Determine whether your organization is a government entity.

See AAM's guidance on Renting Museum Facilities for Events at <https://www.aam-us.org/2011/07/01/renting-museum-facilities-for-events/>
 See the Whitney Museum's Special Event Terms and Conditions and Entertaining Policies at <https://whitney.org/special-event-terms-and-conditions>

Meeting Room Reservation Application

Organization information		Name of Organization	
Contact Information	Primary Contact	Secondary Contact	
	Phone number: Email address: Address: City, State, Zip:	Phone number: Email address: Address: City, State, Zip:	
Date and Time		Date: Event Start Time: Event End Time: How much time will you need for set-up and tear-down?	
Expected Attendance			
Equipment			
Fees			
Description and Purpose of Meeting			
Signatures _____			
Name _____			
Title _____			
Date _____			

Takeaways



Prophylactic policies prevent panic.

Insurance.
Emergency Plans.
Standard Operating Procedures.



Perception is important, but it is not everything.

Mission.
Visitor Numbers.
Employee and Public Safety.



Easy to give, hard to take away.

Once a policy or decision allows something, the door can easily swing the other way.