The Art of Controversy: The Role of Museums Exhibiting Works By Kara Walker

Carmen Lookshire
Skidmore College

Follow this and additional works at: http://creativematter.skidmore.edu/mals_stu_schol
Part of the Arts Management Commons, and the Classical Archaeology and Art History Commons

Recommended Citation
The Art of Controversy: The Role of Museums Exhibiting Works By Kara Walker

by

Carmen Lookshire

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Skidmore College

May 2016

Advisors: David Howson, Sandra Welter
Table of Contents

Abstract..................................................................................P. 2

Introduction..............................................................................P.3

Roles in Arts Administration.................................................P. 7
Mission.....................................................................................P. 8
Funding......................................................................................P. 9
Research and Design..............................................................P. 11
Marketing..................................................................................P. 13
Educational Programming......................................................P. 15

Questions for the Museums....................................................P. 17

The Metropolitan Museum of Art............................................P. 21
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.......................P. 24
The Walker Art Center..............................................................P. 30

Best Practices...........................................................................P. 35
Mining the Museum.................................................................P. 35
Partnerships..............................................................................P. 38
Group Shows............................................................................P. 40
Education..................................................................................P. 43

Conclusion................................................................................P. 45

Figures......................................................................................P.48

References.................................................................................P. 55
Abstract

An art museum’s purpose is to collect, preserve, research, and display art. This is also true for works that may be potentially controversial. The introduction of this thesis presents the style and background of artist Kara Walker whose art has, in the past, been considered controversial. To create exhibits, a museum must consider administrative elements such as mission statement, staff, funding, research, design, marketing, and educational programming. These elements are outlined in the *Roles in Arts Administration* section. Questions were posed to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and The Walker Art Center regarding their administrative processes for creating exhibits of Kara Walker’s art. Observations of these case studies were then useful in determining practices that other museums can employ in exhibiting Walker’s work or similar potentially controversial art.
Introduction

Art captures human history through image, sculpture, and artifacts and establishes a unique interaction between artist and viewer. Art museums in particular are the vessels that hold and encourage these interactions, telling the story of interests, perspectives, and society as a whole. Because the subjects, inspirations, and artistic interpretation can be so varied, the task of the art museum to display these works can seem daunting. Thus museums have developed administrative processes to streamline the presentation of art to as broad an audience as possible. Often museums feel a work of art can and should be left for individual interpretation. However, in art that discusses harsh realities and that can be potentially controversial, it is often more important to provide as much interpretation as possible.

One such artist who is creating waves in the contemporary art scene is Kara Walker, whose work can be extremely thought provoking and purposefully provocative. She has exhibited her work throughout the world and has brought her images to countless museums, galleries, and art centers. Since her instant fame, immediately following her undergraduate education by winning the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s “genius grant”, she has become the center of controversial debates and critiques centering on her strong subject matter, depicting the harsh realities of African Americans both historically and socially. “New York-based artist, Kara Walker, is best known for her candid investigation of race, gender, sexuality, and violence through silhouetted figures that have appeared in numerous exhibitions worldwide.”

Such subjects consequently produce strong reactions. The forty-seven year old from Stockton, California, whose strong and unapologetic themes have been popular since her first exhibit out of Graduate School in 1994, has continuously created uproar with her work. The first piece that demonstrated her interest in silhouetted figures, entitled “Gone, an Historical Romance of Civil War as

---

It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Negress and Her Heart” (Figure 1), was met with strong opposition from some viewers, especially those of the African American community. This 13’ x 50’ diorama is quite imposing to the viewer. As Assistant Curator at The Walker Art Center Yasmil Raymond said of her works, “The mural’s scale insists that the viewer participate in the experience.” Most of her well-known pieces are this large in scale, but she has works on paper, which are quick sketches of images she sees in the media or from her own experiences.

By the tongue-in-cheek method of how she titles her works, one can observe how she likes to play with the minds of the audience in order to get them thinking. It is not just the facetious wordy titles, but also the deep subject matter that allows the brain to be bombarded with vital information. The size of her pieces lends to this overwhelming story-telling. Walker said about her work, “The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that’s also what the stereotype does.” The 18th century silhouette technique was used as a means of portraiture that could be captured quickly and inexpensively and which Walker utilizes to capture the stereotypical characteristics of African Americans. Walker’s cut-paper technique can be seen in her piece, Thicket Parts I & II, where Aunt Jemima-type characters are visible by their large lips and headscarves tied at the forehead (Figure 2). These figures are only visible through these characteristics the viewer usually associates with African American people. With the use of a silhouette Walker’s figures are only black or white, leaving out depiction of color. She places black and white on a level playing field, although black and white characters depend entirely on how the viewer perceives these characters by his or her own ingrained stereotypes.

---


Following her early exhibitions, critics condemned her gross approach to the depiction of black people enslaved in ridicule and shame saying, "What is troubling and complicates the matter is that Walker’s words in published interviews mock African Americans and Africans... Walker consciously or unconsciously seems to be catering to the bestial fantasies about blacks created by white supremacy and racism" and "I felt the work of Kara Walker was sort of revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly women and children; that it was basically for the amusement and the investment of the white art establishment.”

In her work African Americans are easily identifiable as being “pickaninnies” (Figure 3) in the eyes of the slaveholder from their particular hair, dress, posture, and facial features. Although the shocking scenes of inferior characters performing fallatio or being lynched can be quite disturbing (Figures 4 and 5), to Walker, they tell the harsh realities of African Americans historically in the antebellum South. This also comments on the duality of history and the racism that black Americans face today.

As the artist boldly creates these images, so too do museums boldly display her work. Her works have been exhibited at various museums despite the reactions they may receive from viewers. Is it not the job of the museum to share and educate even these images with the public? Therefore, what is the museum process of exhibiting the provocative works of Kara Walker and what are the best practices for other institutions to keep in mind?

As David Dean, author of Museum Exhibitions, states, “Museums uniquely collect, preserve, research, and display objects as an essential function of their existence.” This sets them apart from other institutions such as galleries. Art museums must consider certain elements of administration that other

---


6 Ibid.

arts-related organizations do not: specifically preservation, research, and education. In the case of Kara Walker, education is key to interpreting her work accurately to dispel controversy that demonstrates ignorance toward her work. Often museums can avert from this ignorance by holding a simple conversation with the audience. Why does Walker feel the need to utilize the characters, colors, and conflicts that she does in her work? What type of emotion is she creating with these works and why does it make the viewer feel a certain way? It is important to provide—through the use of labels, text, or lectures—intellectual research that will discuss the artist’s intent and context. Whether or not this changes the viewer’s reaction to the piece, it establishes a more grounded purpose as to why her work is being displayed and why this strong subject matter is so important. Museums must remember they collect and display, but their other main-and-important-function is to educate.

Museums cannot simply plan to avoid controversy altogether. Their process for creating exhibitions of these types of works must be initially executed in the same manner as any other exhibition. The outcome and reactions to the shows depend entirely on the audience. But the museums must be prepared to provide a well-rounded experience of Walker’s work. What follows are the descriptions of each administrative element and its role in the creation of an exhibition. These include: the mission statement, staff involvement, fundraising, marketing, research and design, and educational programming. Next, there will be an exploration of how these elements fit into her exhibitions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, The Contemporary Art Museum in Chicago, and The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Finally, there will be a discussion of practices that worked best in these cases of her exhibitions that other art institutions may perhaps adopt into their administrations, answering the question: What practices should museum administrators employ to present potentially controversial exhibitions?
Roles in Arts Administration

The following is a visual outline of the key elements used in creating an exhibit and the players who typically undertake these components of the exhibit-making process. This may change from museum to museum, but for the following case studies these were observed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative Function</th>
<th>Staff Member Responsible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Development Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Curator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Marketing Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Programming</td>
<td>Educator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ultimately, the needs and staff of museums are dependent on the size of the institution. A larger museum, such as the Louvre in France, may have numerous and more extensive exhibits to serve a larger audience in a big city. In smaller institutions such as an historical society museum in Troy, New York, a smaller staff size may suffice, or there may be a lack of resources to fund a large staff. In some cases if there is a smaller staff, staff members’ tasks may overlap and one department may assist in other departments.

The following sections outline museum functions with their corresponding staff member. These sections will discuss further the roles that are played in museums and this will be particularly important in discussing the exhibit-making processes exemplified in the Kara Walker cases that will be discussed later.
Mission

The mission of a museum deserves its own examination as being the core of museum and nonprofit operations. The American Alliance of Museums states, “There are as many different ways to create mission statements as there are museums. That should be the case, as each museum has its own distinct history, community and set of challenges. Typically, a mission statement explains the museum’s purpose and reason for existing.”

Aside from supplying initial funding for their participation on the Board, the Board of Trustees is responsible for creating the mission statement.

An understanding of what the museum wants to bring to the public and what it aims to achieve through its operation encourages the administrative departments to know how to set their goals and objectives. Thus in times of disagreement with the public on what may or may not be appropriate for exhibition, the mission allows the museum to know if the processes they take in displaying an exhibit is ethical. As outlined by the American Alliance of Museums’ Code of Ethics, since the public trust is so vital to museum operations, the mission can act as a pact, an agreement between the public and the museum, about what kind of art may be displayed, how the museum may go about displaying it, and what audience the museum intends to reach. If the exhibits a museum presents coincide with its mission statement, then controversy is more easily avoided. Examples of mission statements will be discussed in the case studies to follow.

---


Funding

One such administrative function that relies on the mission statement is funding. The role of this department is to establish monetary support for the institution and/or the exhibits. The mission statement for a museum allows the public to be aware of the type of programming that a museum offers or how it intends to assist the surrounding community. A possible patron may find a commonality between themselves and the museum and wish to donate to such an institution.

The Development Office or Development Officer supervises the solicitation of funding for a museum. For instance, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a Development Office and, although one third of the museum’s funding is supplied by the city of New York, the museum must make up for the rest by obtaining private sources of support including large corporations, foundations, government agencies, and individual giving. The donor pyramid below identifies where funds are usually obtained in non-profits. The top starts with the Board, where the least percentage of contributions are raised, and at the bottom starts the single ticket holders, where the most funds are generated. These percentages are calculated by dividing contributions by the total revenue received by the museum annually.

Individual giving remains the number one means of funding for non-profits, and there are often several levels of individual giving available that can best fit one’s budget. Again, using the example of The Met, *Individuals may join as a Member, become a Friend of a curatorial department, contribute to the capital campaign, or make a general donation to the Museum’s greatest needs.*\(^1\) Membership supports about twelve percent of their annual budget. The Met’s website also states that corporations may contribute in a number of ways such as joining the Corporate Patron Program or sponsoring an exhibition.

These forms of monetary support can then be broken into different types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unrestricted funds</th>
<th>No strings attached</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grants and contracts</td>
<td>Designated funds-awards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted funds</td>
<td>Strings attached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asset-generated funds</td>
<td>Investments, rentals-may or may not have strings attached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash and non-cash gifts</td>
<td>Special project, general operation, in-kind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Development Officer must be acquainted with these distinctions in order to most effectively utilize the funds received. For instance, restricted funds may entail difficult situations. If a wealthy patron were to say she would donate a certain amount every year if her deceased loved one could have a doorway named in honor of that person, and the museum would like to reconstruct the entryway to make for better access points for large sculptures, then the museum may have difficulty going back on the

written agreement. But if the museum decides to forego the annual donation for a new entryway it may not only lose a valuable patron, but also the trust between donor and museum. Development is about creating and nurturing a relationship with donors.

It is also important to point out that funding, although usually monetary, can also be provided in the form of in-kind services. If an organization needs services such as mail services, legal or tax advice, and office equipment along with or in lieu of cash grants; a company can show its support and be mentioned for their contribution in this way. Therefore, funding can come in the form of people, time, space, and materials. These are known as non-cash contributions.

Often members of a museum or visitors who sign up for programs will receive appeal letters in the mail. These ask for the generous support of programming or other donations to the organization. Appeal letters are vital to the Development Office. If the public is unaware of the museum’s mission or upcoming exhibitions, they may not be inclined to give. An appeal letter can jump-start excitement and enthusiasm for an institution and its programs. Figure 6 is an example of such a letter.

**Research and Design**

The basis of an exhibition is the message or educational aspect the museum wishes the audience to take home. Visitors to museums expect accuracy and authenticity. This is what sets museums apart from any other entertainment venue. Often the curator supplies the research behind the narratives and labels and a list of artifacts they hope to include in the exhibit to tell the ultimate story. This occurs before design even takes place, but often this research lends to the design by creating a basis for imagery that can be useful and inviting. Therefore, research and design go hand in hand because the design sets the stage for the information that will be discussed within the exhibit.

---

The curator often asks the questions who, what, when, where, and why? All of these aspects are important to understanding the history, significance, and creation of the works and artists who will be included in the exhibit. Often this leads to creating a catalogue or other publication in which the more scholarly information that could not be fully explained in an exhibit can be organized. Sometimes it may be difficult for curators to hone in their scholarly intellect to just seventy-five words per label. It is important to quickly capture the audience’s attention and have them walk away having learned something. As a general rule curators are taught to create texts that coincide with an 8th grade reading level. This is the reading level of the general public\(^\text{13}\), although this depends greatly on the targeted audience and surrounding demographics. Often dates, names, and places are utilitarian points of information. As David Dean, author of Museum Exhibits states, the text is merely an accompaniment to the objects, which are the main focus. The labels and texts must answer questions posed by the viewers or create avenues for new ones. They should be devoid of jargon or technological terminology. If visitors want to do more research, they will seek additional sources on their own; however, in general, museums and museum exhibits are seen as informal learning experiences, and some visitors may just appreciate a walk-through. Along with information and text labels, the way they are designed, organized, and presented to the public creates a more or less successful experience for the viewer. This takes meticulous planning. The design of an exhibition is “the framework upon which the educational content of the exhibition hangs.”\(^\text{14}\) This framework includes the style of texts such as narrative documents, titles, subtitles, labels, and the layout of art and artifacts. Often color and fonts are important to creating an atmosphere specific to the context of the artwork.

For example, the exhibit “In Living Color: A Tribute to Carl Plansky” at The Yager Museum of Art and Culture at Hartwick College in 2010, the choice of color on the walls played just as an important


\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 103.
role as choosing the artifacts to display in the exhibit. A soft orange was chosen because it was a recurring color in the focal piece—which was a self-portrait—as well as his other works. This color subconsciously brought the whole exhibit together, but also in a way celebrated his life and works through its brightness and uniqueness. It is not the color that is found in many fine art museums or exhibits but worked very well for this artist because it emphasized his love of color and the recent acquisition to the museum, his self-portrait. For Kara Walker exhibits often museums will utilize the utilitarian white walls of contemporary art museums. This usually aids the black silhouettes to stand out, but also is a play on the black and white theme of here artwork.

Since the design and the curatorial departments work so closely together, often these roles—particularly in smaller museums—are played by one individual. Since the curator has a plan for the theme and may have a vision for the way he or she would like the research presented, often the curator can be the one to design the space and organize its presentation in smaller institutions.

Marketing

Once the research and exhibit design are underway or completed, the museum can begin to draw in an audience. There are many ways to do this, and this depends on the museum, its budget, demographics, and available resources.

The Tronvig Group, a marketing firm based in New York City, believes that marketing is about communication.\textsuperscript{15} It is about figuring out what the consumer values and being able to provide what they desire. Marketing is not solely about selling a product, but most importantly, about communicating to an existing and potential audience what exciting things the company has that is of value to them so that they can buy in. And in no company is this more important than a museum. There are no tangible

products to sell other than keepsakes at the gift shop. Museums are selling ideas, history, beauty, creativity, and culture. They sell access to their collection by creating exhibits. Not only can the exhibits be marketed, but also in a way they are themselves marketing tools. When visitors see these exhibits they are aware of what is in the museum’s collection, what the mission of the institution is, and what resources are available to them for future research. But getting to these exhibits requires the museums to broadcast that they are available as well as when, where, and for how long.

The two main forms of marketing are called *Programmatic* and *Institutional* marketing. *Programmatic* marketing can be thought of as marketing the programs. The programs at museums in this case are the exhibits, but can also include Kids Day, Family Fun Day, artist talks, lectures, and tours. *Institutional* marketing can be thought of as marketing the institution itself, the organization as a whole. This is often associated with branding. Branding is maintaining an image of the organization. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is known for its single capital “M” that is watermarked on just about every item from admission badges to gift shop souvenirs to appeal letters sent to possible donors. What lies behind that single letter is what the institution stands for: its mission, collection, and prestige. Color and font also play important roles in this process of branding as seen in an example through the marketing company, Motherhaus, which assisted The Akron Art Museum in Akron, Ohio to revitalize their brand.16 They wanted to capture the attitude of a modern art museum and its collection through the use of two main colors, purple and orange, and consistent typeface from logo banners to website tabs (Figure 7). Consistency with these elements is vital in maintaining the identity of the institution so the public may quickly recognize the museum. Branding the museum and opening a relationship to the public by recognition will draw in visitors to the institution and its programs. A museum’s brand continuously markets for the institution as it is worn on t-shirts bought at the gift shop, seen on public transportation, and read in the weekly newspaper.

Marketing also encompasses public relations, which brings this brand to the surrounding community for free by word of mouth. Different public relations strategies are more effective for some areas than others. This will take some research, trial, and error. Traditional forms of advertising through television, radio, and print seem to still be effective. However, today with social media technology residing at the forefront of communication websites, emails, and outlets such as Facebook appear to be the top three forms of advertising.\textsuperscript{17} It will depend on the community and budget of the museum to implement different outreach strategies. For example, museums in urban cities can implement advertising on buses and subway stations - which are considered paid advertisements-, while a suburban community may only require an ad in the weekly newspaper.

**Educational Programming**

The educational aspect of museums is what differentiates them from galleries, art centers, and small exhibitions at libraries. As Nina Simone discusses in her book, *The Participatory Museum*, museum visitors need to be engaged as cultural participants, not just passive consumers.\textsuperscript{18} Educational programming is an extension of the exhibit, allowing for visitors to obtain a deeper understanding of the objects on display and the themes that the exhibit seeks to convey.

Instead of taking a look at an object and moving on or doing a “drive-by”, a visitor can have a deeper experience with the object and obtain a more thorough understanding of its history, creation, and context by participating in activities or programs in conjunction with the exhibit. As Barry Lord states in


\textsuperscript{18} Simone, Nina. 2010. *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz, California: Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial.
The Manual of Museum Exhibitions, “If exhibitions are intended as communication devices, then the development of such programmes consistent with exhibitions themes...can appeal to a broader array of preferred learning styles, interest levels, and intellectual capacities.”

Educational programming allows for inclusivity in learning. The exhibit can be relatable to any visitor by bringing that object or art to one’s level. Applying what one sees to what one knows can allow the visitor to better understand the items in the exhibit or learn something new and even see the world differently.

Educational programming can come in a plethora of forms that depend entirely on the museum and learning types for the audience. These include kinesthetic, visual, and audio (touch, sight, and sound) learning. The Smithsonian Institute wrote a paper on the effects of early childhood learning in museums. This pamphlet discusses how vital exhibitions are to learning and catering to these three main styles. For instance, kinesthetic learning can take place by engaging students with large-scale sculptures. However, kinesthetic learning can occur in a small scale that may not necessarily include sculptures.

The British Museum held one such program that was very small but can be considered educational programming. They stationed staff members, most likely docents (tour guides), at small tables with artifacts from the museum’s collection. One such table was placed in the Greek and Roman section. This table held actual coins from these ancient eras that the visitor could look at more closely, and the docent explained in detail their significance and history. They were all different colors and sizes. The docent welcomed and encouraged questions. In this example the museum provided an opportunity to break these items out of the collections dungeon and share them with the public on a small scale.

The Holocaust Museum in London also connected to these types of learning and even included an audio aspect that drove the seriousness and meditation of the exhibit. One could sit in a booth


surrounded by speakers and hear the stories of Holocaust survivors as one sat across from a model of the Auschwitz concentration camp. One can deeply feel the emotional aspect, but the variety in the types of tools the museum used to explain the theme could be applicable to different learning types.

Different methods of educational opportunities like these vary by museum. In a fine arts museum a catalogue may suffice; in a children’s museum, there may be a need for interactives where children can touch and experience the artifacts or at least handle a replica of that object. For a visual learner perhaps having a docent can be useful because they can point out specific details of a painting. The visitor may even find that text and labels work best for them. An audio learner might invest in the audio guides that explain a painting, sculpture or artifact by typing in the corresponding number on the label to the handheld device. Utilizing these different means of learning styles depends greatly on the demographic of the audience and this is the job of the educator to appropriately lead. The different types of activities for learning can be just as numerous as the artifact’s in a museum’s collection.

Questions for the Museums

Combining all of this knowledge about Arts Administration in museums—The mission, funding, marketing, research and design, and educational programming—I posed the following questions to museums that contained exhibits of work by Kara Walker in the past. The museum samples comprised of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. From these cases it is possible to observe patterns or best practices of administration that the museums demonstrated with regard to Kara Walker’s art. Other museums may then pose these practices in their own exhibits of Walker’s work, but also with other artists’ work. These questions were addressed to staff members who would be most helpful in answering them. This usually included the curators who worked closely with the artist to create a tangible
environment to showcase the art. The questions opened conversation and achieved a foundation to understand the process of creating the exhibitions.

“How is an idea for an exhibit brought to the Board or Staff?”

In other words, how does the idea for creating an exhibit come to be? Whether or not it initially passes through the hands of the Board or Executive Staff, this question allows for the museum staff member to discuss how it all begins. David Dean of *Museum Exhibitions* discusses his conceptual phase. This stage involves the initial brainstorming for an exhibit. He proposes that ideas for exhibitions usually come from one of the following:

- Audience suggestion
- Board of Trustees
- Collections Management
- Community leaders

Also embedded in this conceptual phase is the question “*How did Kara Walker come to the museum’s attention, how was her work selected to be in an exhibit?*” I hoped this question would help to see the brainstorming process. Perhaps there is a standard way each museum determines their exhibit ideas, or maybe it is a combination of the proposal methods that Dean lists above. The process for creating an exhibit may be entirely different for each museum. Some may regard it as an executive decision, while others may leave it to the curator or even educators.

“Who were the key players?”

---

Meaning, who were the staff members, individuals, or leaders that played a major role in the case study. In the situation of the museum, what staff members were involved in the process of creating the exhibit?

After the conceptual phase, Dean discusses the developmental phase. Here lies the majority of production for an exhibit. He states the duties of management at this point include:

- Time management
- Money management
- Quality control
- Communication

These areas correspond with many of the arts administrative roles discussed previously and can be illustrated as such:

- **Money Management**: Development officer/Development Office
- **Quality Control**: Curator, Designer
- **Communication**: Educator, Marketer

*Time management is a role that can be played by all staff involved throughout the process.*

“How was the exhibit, or many exhibits at that particular museum, funded?”
It is vital to know the sources of donations, but also the specific techniques they may have utilized to obtain them.

“**What methods of marketing were utilized?**”

What traditional or non-traditional means of communication did the museum implement to draw in an audience to these exhibitions?

“**What type of educational programming was associated with the exhibit?**”

How did the museum intend to engage their audience, what worked and what didn’t? This will also paint the picture of the objectives for the exhibit.

“**Did this exhibit coincide with the museum’s mission? How?**”

This is also an important question in Museum Studies when creating an exhibit and for any organization to make sure they stay on track with their goals and objectives. Each museum has a written statement of purpose, what it is that they do and how do they do it. This question asks whether they followed their goals and objectives in the case of Kara Walker’s exhibit, but specifically how they were able to do this. This allows the institution to think about whether their organization purposefully had that mission in mind. The mission can guide the exhibits to success or failure. Ultimately, is the museum giving the public what its mission says it is supposed to be giving them?

“**Why Kara Walker?**”

Although a very broad question, it creates new avenues of why this particular institution does what is does. It can express how they go about picking other artists and other exhibits aside from Walker. This melds well with the question regarding the mission. If a museum can answer “Why
Walker?”, they can surely answer what their mission is, and that same question can then be applied to any other exhibits or artists they display.

**The Cases**

**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, located on New York City’s east side of Central Park, welcomed an exhibit in 2006 by Walker entitled “After the Deluge”. Through this exhibition Kara Walker participated in an exhibition series with artists whom the Met called upon to fill an awkward space in the museum’s Modern Art wing. This exhibit spanned 30’ x 45’ and encompassed works from the 16th - 21st centuries. “After the Deluge” showcased the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Along with some of her original works, Walker was given creative license to “mine” the Met’s collection for pieces to curate an exhibit surrounding her idea of how water has had such an impact on humans in what she referred to as “the story of muck”. There were paintings by Heironymous Bach, Winslow Homer, and Poussain; as well as an African nkondi figure. (Figure 8) Also included was the painting of Joshua Shaw’s “Deluge Toward Its Close” (Figure 9), which inspired the name of the exhibition.

As explained by the curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Met, Gary Tinterow, there were only a few artists who partook in this series, with the main purpose being “to invigorate a somewhat awkward gallery space in a far-flung corner.” It is not a process that is very typical of museums, to have the artist pick out artifacts in the museum’s collection to utilize in his or her exhibit.

---


24 Tinterow.
Certainly this was a different role for the curator. When asked, “What was your role as curator, since it seemed that with this particular exhibit, the artist was the curator?” he responded that he enjoyed acting as guide, articulating her vision, and suggesting holdings of the museum he knew so well. It was very educational for him because although he had more of a hands-off approach, he worked similarly to a collections manager, knowing where to direct her roaming eyes to what could be most applicable to her exhibition. And in the end he was able to experience these works that he knew well and had seen often in a renewed perspective.

In conjunction with the curator, there are other key players that help aid in the process of exhibit-making. In the case of Kara Walker’s exhibit at the Met, these included, but were not limited to, the registrars, graphic designers, conservationists, technicians, and collections managers. According to Tinterow, these were vital players who enabled the artist to assemble her creative vision into an exhibit. The registrars made sure the works of art were transported and received safely. The graphic designers ensured a cohesive presentation of all the works and exhibit space. The conservationists matted and framed the works on paper, many of which had never been on view. The technicians assisted with installation of the works. And finally, the collections managers generously opened their storerooms for Kara’s creative process and allowed for these delicate items to be on display. Tinterow also stated the staff at Brent Sikkema Gallery were helpful in the execution of the exhibit and the subsequent publication of a catalogue. It shows that teamwork is a valuable source in the museum realm.

Also on this team was the Development Office. They are in charge of funding at The Met. For this exhibit, there was a combination of public and private contributors. These included government grants, corporate sponsorships, and individual donations. With the prestigious location of the museum itself, being on the edge of Central Park, The Met draws in wealthy patrons. As seen in their 990 tax forms from 2004, just before the exhibit “After the Deluge” was created, there was a total of ninety-six million dollars raised from gifts and contributions. This encompassed high level donors, but also the
individual donor. Optional admission prices allow for the student and others to visit for free,\textsuperscript{25} opening access to every type of visitor, not just the wealthy. However, this does allow for individual donations that may otherwise be only given if asked. An individual donation is just as important as a large gift in creating museum exhibitions.

To reach these different donors and visitors, exhibits such as “After the Deluge” are featured on the museum’s website, which according to Tinterow, receives hundreds of thousands of visitors per year. The Communications Department has access to journalists whose stories can be plugged into various outlets and resources.\textsuperscript{26} Critics also play an important role in spreading the word about exhibitions. Often their critiques can be found in prestigious papers such as The New York Times. An article such as the one written by Roberta Smith in 2006 can peak the interest of possible museum visitors. With a critique concluding with, “\textit{It tilts the great weight of the museum’s holdings in a new direction and makes the Met feel like a different place}”\textsuperscript{27}, prospective visitors were encouraged to witness the artist’s curatorial delight.

For Mark Stevens, of New York Magazine, “After the Deluge” was a healthy example of how open The Met is to appreciating art, not for its prestige, but for its artistic expression. He enjoyed the idea that Walker explored as she puts it, “the story of muck”, because it demonstrates that The Met can embrace contemporary art, however unconventional and eccentric.\textsuperscript{28}

This exhibition at The Met coincided with the mission of the museum by combining artifacts that span many years and in which visitors can recognize the common denominators of history and


\textsuperscript{26} Tinterow, Gary. Interview by Carmen Lookshire. Email message. July 20, 2015.


craftsmanship to learn something new. This exhibit allowed for the museum to showcase its rich history, but also embrace contemporary art. The show provided a unique, fresh, and smart way for the artist to voice history. The Met chose Kara Walker because she seemed to be at the forefront of a new post-modernism, utilizing historical techniques and story telling in contemporary ways.\textsuperscript{29}

The mission of The Met is to:

“Collect, study, conserve, and present significant works of art across all times and cultures in order to connect people to creativity, knowledge, and ideas.” This statement, which has been reaffirmed by the Board of Trustees for 2015, has been guiding the Metropolitan Museum of Art for over 140 years.\textsuperscript{30} Within that century and a half, audiences from all over the world have visited the large and diverse collection. With 6.2 million visitors just last year, they are successfully reaching a broad range of individuals with diverse backgrounds. The tourism to New York City lends a hand to drawing in massive audiences of varying cultures and ethnicities. Their audience is as broad as their collections of artifacts. Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint a theme or a group of people they appeal to the most, but it is clear that each of their exhibitions can connect to individuals in significant ways.

**The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago**

At the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Kara Walker’s work was exhibited in two shows. One was displayed in 2005 entitled “Trials and Terrors”, and the other was displayed in 2012 entitled, “Color Bind: The MCA Collection in Black and White.” These were both group exhibitions and showcased her piece “Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage” created in 1997 and owned by the MCA, Chicago collection. (Figure 10)

\textsuperscript{29} Tinterow, Gary. Interview by Carmen Lookshire. Email message. July 20, 2015.

Located in downtown Chicago, near Lake Michigan, the museum acquires and maintains contemporary artwork in such categories as painting, sculpture, photography, video and film, and performance. The MCA, Chicago encourages diversity in their collection and exhibitions and seeks to reflect the surrounding community of downtown Chicago. The museum holds an annual lecture based on “museums, diversity, and inclusion.” In these lectures they discuss how “Profound changes in demographics, modes of cultural participation, and approaches to social interaction and community creation are making accessible, inclusive, and diverse cultural institutions more possible and more necessary than ever.” Through these lectures, the museum, hopes to answer, “What does an architecture of participation look like at a civically-minded, contemporary art museum?”  

Delving in to the diversity of their collection, they produced “Trials and Terrors”, an exhibition that showcased a varied group of artists who sought to present the objective of the exhibit, which was to demonstrate a “transformation through hardship and evocations of sinister phenomena and events.” For Walker, this was the hardships and sinister activities of slavery and racism.

In “Color Bind”, again, there was a diverse group of artists whose works came together to present a single idea of “how color can be used literally, formally, and metaphorically in art and to reveal how apparently formal considerations are often rooted in social issues.” Kara Walker’s silhouettes in black and white can literally exemplify her characters and the social issues of slavery, race, sexism, and violence.

---


It was difficult to collect information on the administrative process of these exhibitions at MCA, Chicago because the curators no longer work at the institution. However, Steven Bridges, Curatorial Assistant at MCA, Chicago; was able to lend his expertise to demonstrate general operations of the museum to aid with better understanding of how that particular museum establishes its exhibits and what processes Walker’s work would have faced.

At this particular museum, the Board is typically not consulted when establishing individual exhibits. But as a whole, they do possess an Exhibition Committee in which many of the Board members reside. This is a way in which the institution can publicize its seasonal planning. Internally, proposals for exhibits are submitted directly to the chief curator who, with the director, delivers the executive decision on what exhibits to create.

Overall, the key players in any execution of an exhibit at MCA, Chicago, includes staff members from the curatorial, collections, design and editorial, education, communications, and development departments. To commence, the curator researches and ultimately puts the exhibit together by being aware of the goals and objectives that they and the museum would like to achieve. The curator will always be keeping in mind the mission of the institution to ensure that it will benefit the public appropriately. Although Naomi Beckwith, curator of “Color Bind”, was no longer at MCA, Chicago, there was a section of Chicago Tonight’s website that discussed the exhibition in their Cultural Connections segment, that includes a video interview of Beckwith. The museum professional stated, “These colors aren’t just about color and form, right? They’re also metaphors for so many things in the world so you can think about black and whiteness in terms of ideologically thinking and this was huge for me as I was preparing the exhibition during the last presidential campaign.”

The narrator of the video explains how there are a variety of pieces in this exhibition including “small quirky pieces and monumental ones”. Beckwith discusses that “Kara Walker is an amazing example of an artist that

---

creates these monumental pieces that takes up half the room and tells a story and a narrative so you can’t help, as a viewer, to be drawn to this fantasy world and that this piece is then meant to be read almost like a cinema.” We know how well movies can turn fantasy back at us as harsh reality. And Walker does just that.

The next key player at MCA, Chicago is the collections department that administers the artwork and artifacts within the museum’s collection. This department is also in charge of storage, restoration, and sometimes transport. The department of design and editorial then establishes the layout of the exhibit from colors to texts and fonts to walls and hangings. Communications then assists with marketing. According to Bridges, the marketing department utilizes a multi-pronged system to get the word out about current exhibitions. These include, but are not limited to, printed ads, signage, and mailings. They streamline various means of media and disperse the information to the public through website, newspaper, and pamphlets. One such review from the public on the show included Rehema Barber of Sixty Inches from Center. She wrote: “Color Bind: The MCA Collection in Black and White was an intriguing presentation of the formal, metaphorical and cultural properties associated with a black and white palette. The various connections made throughout the exhibition were unexpected, prescient and at times challenging.” This captures an overall observation of the group show but perfectly summarizes Walker’s work and intent.

And finally, the Development Office nourishes relationships with patrons and visitors to establish funding for the institution and/or the specific exhibit. Upon further look at their website, it is

---


clear *Trial and Terrors* was supported financially by an individual donor, Barbara Ruben, but also by American Airlines. It states that American Airlines is the official airline of the museum. What does this really mean for the museum? Often large corporations, like American Airlines, stay away from sponsoring potentially controversial shows and usually expect to reciprocate the relationship by receiving something in return. This may be catching the eye of the demographic that is drawn to the exhibit or introducing themselves to this community. For American Airlines, their website states, “*American values serving the communities where we do business and where our consumers reside. Through sponsorship, American seeks to increase brand awareness and loyalty, foster new relationships, generate sales and communicate products and services that benefit our customers.*” This gives a good idea of what museums can expect in a reciprocal relationship with corporate sponsorships. They often hope to draw customers such as those visiting this exhibit who share in the value of art. Often these visitors are the well-educated and wealthy elite. More than likely this donation was made as a general contribution to the institution overall, not to this particular exhibition; therefore it is devoid of associating with its potential controversy.

“*Color Bind*” was supported by The Pritzker Traubert Collection Exhibition Fund, which is a family foundation that invests in people and programs that enrich life experiences of Chicago’s children. Additionally, this exhibit was supported by generous individuals: Cari and Michael Sacks, and Dr. Anita Blanchard and Martin H. Nesbitt. Under this exhibit, MCA, Chicago states that it receives

---


major funding from the Chicago Park District, which is a Parks and Recreation organization that invests in cultural programs to enlighten local families and children.\textsuperscript{41}

Although Mr. Bridges was unaware of specific educational programming details, he was able to provide that generally curators give tours of their shows, artists or docents guide student groups, and programs may be developed specifically around individual exhibits. The museum’s website contains a tab that includes educational resources for various groups such as \textit{Schools, Teachers, Families}, and \textit{Teens} (a demographic which museums tend to have the most difficulty to engage). There is a wide range of activities and events open to these groups that will enhance their overall museum experience at MCA, Chicago, such as \textit{Stroller Days} for parents with young children, 21Minus for teens to become involved in the production process, and the MCA Channel to allow schools and teachers to have their students see videos of artist interviews.\textsuperscript{42} These programs, similar to the institution and its exhibits, require exceptional funding.

Support for “Color Bind’s” educational programming was provided by The Efroymson Family Fund; Reyes Holdings, LLC; The Crown Family; Bank of America Charitable Foundation; the Helen Brach Foundation; Northern Trust Charitable Trust; and The Siragusa Foundation. Major ongoing support is provided by the Cari and Michael J. Sacks Fund for Chicago Public Schools.\textsuperscript{43}

Although the curators of these exhibits no longer work at the institution, it is possible to compare the description of the exhibits on the MCA, Chicago website and what information could be given from Steve Bridges with the museum’s mission to deduce if they coincide.


\textsuperscript{42} The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. \textit{Programs}. Chicago, IL, [cited July 20 2015]. Available from \url{https://mcachicago.org/Programs}.

The mission of the MCA reads as follows:

To be an innovative and compelling center of contemporary art where the public can directly experience the work and ideas of living artists, and understand the historical, social, and cultural context of the art of our time.

The Museum boldly interweaves exhibitions, performances, collections, and educational programs to excite, challenge, and illuminate our visitors and to provide insight into the creative process.

The MCA aspires to engage a broad and diverse audience, create a sense of community and be a place for contemplation, stimulation, and discussion about contemporary art and culture.44

The exhibit objectives for both “Trials and Terrors” and “Color Bind” seamlessly coincided with the mission’s idea of “understanding the historical, social, and cultural context of the art of our time”. Utilizing artwork from the MCA collection, they were able to include contemporary artists such as Walker, who illustrated the hardships of slavery, which had an historical, social, and cultural impact on the United States.

The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Like MCA, Chicago, The Walker Art Center has a focus in the contemporary arts. Starting as a personal collection of paintings, sculpture, Oriental rugs, and antique furniture, The Walker Art Center has become internationally recognized as a multidisciplinary arts organization and has grown to include the performing arts, film, and educational programs.45


The exhibit “My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love” was showcased in 2007 at The Whitney Museum of Art in New York City. This turned out to be an exhibition funded and created by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. So it was best to go to this source in order to understand the process of making this exhibit.

Curated by Philippe Vergne, who now works at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the exhibit was quite different from The Metropolitan Museum of Art and MCA, Chicago. It began as a retrospective of the artist’s work. The Walker Art Center began collecting her works in 1996, and the curator of the show felt a commitment to her work. In this exhibition he wanted to demonstrate the evolution of those works in the collection, including The Means to an End ... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts (Figure 11), Do You Like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk? (Figure 12), Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress (Figure 13), a video animation called Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions (Figure 14), and a portfolio of lithographs entitled Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) (Figure 15).

Vergne brought the idea to create this show to the chief curator at the time and the director. What would usually take three years took four years to complete due to construction of a new building. In this time they were able to do extensive research creating a catalogue, which Vergne believes was just as important as the exhibit itself because it was a tool that students could use and one that could spread awareness of Walker’s work, creating exposure for this artist. For one year of the four, the museum worked closely with members of the African American community in Minneapolis to figure out how they could approach the racial content of the exhibit. The museum was aware of the reactions they might receive from this provocative show and wanted to have a conversation with civil leaders and community members so they would not alienate the African American community, who would be the prime audience of this exhibit. They also needed help from the local community in creating appropriate educational programming so the works could not only be seen but also understood historically and socially.
Vergne confronted campaigners who wanted to boycott the show and who wanted the museum to take down the exhibit once it was in place. He represented the museum and went on the radio or sat down with these opposing individuals to have a conversation about the importance of this exhibit and why they would not take it down. When asked if the artist was a part of these conversations, he stated she was not because he felt he needed to protect the artist from these critics. He felt that it is often the artist who gets the backlash for his or her bold creativity. By educating these community members on what her work entails, he was able to change some minds. Those who still did not agree with the work approached him saying they still did not like it, but they understood it.

Fundraising efforts included an endowment that Vergne mentioned the institution has available to them. Also typical contributions from the Board of Trustees, foundations, and individual giving were essential. The exhibit page on the institution’s website states that the exhibit was “made possible by generous support from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., the Lannan Foundation, the Peter Norton Family Foundation, Linda and Lawrence Perlman, and Marge and Irv Weiser. Additional support is provided by Jean-Pierre and Rachel Lehmann.” It also states that the Walker Art Center partnered with Mpls. St. Paul Magazine as a media outlet and the Millennium Hotel as part of the Millennium on View program. Mpls. St. Paul Magazine is a lifestyle magazine that reviews and discusses people, places, and events in the Minneapolis and St. Paul areas.46 The Millenium Hotel, being at the center of downtown Minneapolis, is minutes from theaters, museums, and cultural centers.47 Its brand of elegance and contemporary class pairs well with the sophisticated art scene.


What differed in this exhibit was that it was created with the intent of travelling to other museums. And in this process the museums that housed the exhibit would pay The Walker Art Center a fee for it to be displayed in their museum. This included The Whitney in New York, The Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and ARC-Musée d’art Moderne in Paris. The fees that these museums paid went into funding the creation of these exhibits. Some silhouettes of the works needed to be cut four times, one for each museum. There were also shipping costs and research to be done to create an accompanying catalogue.

In a way this travelling exhibit was a method of marketing. It spread the word of not only the artist, but also The Walker Art Center institution. Philippe discussed that it was one of the first surveys of this artist’s work, and that created great enthusiasm from museums to partner with the Walker Art Center. As the exhibit travelled it would be carrying the name of The Walker Art Center and its publication- filled with research- would point back to the institution. Vergne believed that in serving the artist-by creating an exhibit of the evolution of her art-the Walker Art Center would be able to assist in creating a broader audience and context for her work. There is no greater sense of this exposure than that of a travelling exhibit that traversed even internationally. The Walker Art Center like many large arts organizations has its own Marketing Department and they were able to work with the press to do traditional forms of promotion. The department also presented programs to encourage visitation.

The webpage for Kara Walker’s exhibit “My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love” is accompanied by the educational programming that took place during its display. These included several lectures that focused on the ideas of racial segregation and stereotypes. Presented were talks on relative books such as Uncle Tom’s Cabin, poetry written in conjunction to Walker’s art, talks on the history of African Americans, workshops on creating narratives based on the artist’s work, conversations held with the artist herself, and tours given by the museum. One such tour called
“Conversations Between Collections”\textsuperscript{48} compared works from the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Walker collection to contextualize Kara Walker’s exhibit, allowing for partnership and education. These programs were individually funded, but these include individual donors as well as large companies such as Target.\textsuperscript{49} The exhibit was also accompanied by a gallery guide for deeper insight into Kara Walker as an artist, the controversy that she has faced, the history behind her pieces, and the intricacies of her works (Figure 16).

Vergne’s involvement in the questions and concerns of the local community allowed for him to bring education and the value of the institution’s mission to the public. The reaction in Paris to the sexual tensions within Walker’s works was more lax than that of the United States. And the Parisian approach to the race issue was one of empathy. Knowing the history of African Americans in France and the continued segregation and violation, especially in the suburban areas, allowed for such empathy. There was not so much of a confrontational reaction, but rather an understanding one. As Vergne stated, “\textit{It is not only the history of slavery in America, but it starts there.}” The topic of race, violence, and abuse in America is still relevant, and this resonated with so many viewers in France.

For the United States audience, Vergne held conversations with community members, not because he did not want to hurt their feelings, but because he believed in the mission: to allow for creative expression of the artist and actively engage the audience. The mission of the Walker Art Center states as follows:

\begin{quote}
The Walker Art Center is a catalyst for the creative expression of artists and the active engagement of audiences. Focusing on the visual, performing, and media arts of our time, the Walker takes a global, multidisciplinary, and diverse approach to the creation, presentation, interpretation, collection, and preservation of art. Walker programs examine the questions that shape and inspire us as individuals, cultures,
\end{quote}


By actively going into the community to have these meetings Vergne was able to bring the public into the conversation and examine these social questions of Kara Walker’s artwork and why they are valuable to an institution like The Walker Art Center.

**Best Practices**

There were particular aspects in these aforementioned exhibits of Kara Walker’s art that can detail best practices for museums in creating future exhibits of her work. These can also prove to be beneficial for other artist exhibitions and museums aspiring to create meaningful exhibitions on potentially controversial topics. Four of the best administrative practices seen from the three cases of Kara’s exhibits include: “mining” the museum collection, partnerships, group shows, and education.

**Mining the Museum**

In “After the Deluge” at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the artists were allowed to “mine” the museum. Meaning they could peruse through the collection and choose works to build an exhibition. Kara was able to present her views on the Katrina Hurricane disasters utilizing her works along with art and artifacts from the Met’s collection. This proved very beneficial for The Met. First, it demonstrated a well-rounded presentation of the museum’s mission. The mission of The Met can encompass works that derive from various centuries of artists and artifacts. The diversity of the collection was demonstrated perfectly in “After the Deluge” and explained the importance of The Met to strive for diversity amongst various cultures and geographies.

---

By allowing the artists to “mine” the collection the museum also lowers or eliminates costs that may be required for a new exhibit and new art to be produced. This allows for predictability in the Development Office and for funding to be allocated to purchasing new works or creating exciting programming. In 2002 the Smithsonian Institute conducted interviews with Smithsonian and non-Smithsonian museum staff on the topic of exhibition funding.\textsuperscript{51} They found that museums in the past tended toward exhibiting their permanent exhibitions in the style of “references” or “encyclopedias”, while temporary exhibitions were seen as “essays” with thematic ideas. Today museums are trending towards lowering the number of permanent exhibitions and increasing the number of temporary exhibitions to fit a “visitor-focused” style. “Mining” a museum’s current collection can provide an environment in which the casual visitor can feel like participating, learning, and being entertained as well as continuously return for something new.

The “mining” of a museum collection did not only occur at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, but also both The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and The Walker Art Center. At MCA, Chicago they utilized Walker’s piece, “Presenting Negro Scenes...” in both the “Trials and Terrors” and “Color Bind” exhibitions. By recycling this work they were able to save on cost and allowed the visitor to look at Walker’s work in different contexts. At The Walker Art Center they created a retrospective of the artist because they began collecting her work early in her career. They already owned the pieces; all they had to do was put them together to create an exhibition. By saving that expense and participating in a travelling exhibit, they were able to fund the creation of a catalogue.

Not only does “mining” the museum collection save on cost, it also allows for the rotation of works in the permanent collection. This can be an excellent means of educational programming, by

shedding new light on old works, as Gary Tinterow expressed in his interview. The curator was just as amazed as a visitor seeing “new” old works that have not been seen for a very long time. Just as the Met, a museum can create context around these pieces in a way that helps visitors compare their current lives, thoughts, and situations with those of even an 18th century Winslow Homer painting. It can bring forward works that would otherwise stay in the confinements of their storage units and give a new perspective to the theme of an exhibition. This is a great way to teach the history of art and the idea that everyone sees things differently. If this inspired the curator at the Met, then certainly visitors can also be inspired. “Mining” the museum collection at The Met incorporated different staff members such as the curator and the collections managers, allowing them to swap expertise and unite over the exhibition. That is a great team-building exercise.

By “mining” the collection, a museum can expand on the controversy surrounding Kara’s work. Controversy is not a new concept. There was controversy in Rembrandt’s day, and there was controversy over those beloved Impressionists. Mining the museum is a great way to demonstrate the evolution of controversy. What was controversial in its day? And how have times changed for perspective on that piece to change? Apply these questions to Kara Walker’s work. Why would individuals in our time see them as controversial now? How might we view these issues in the future, when her work is just as aged and classic as a Winslow Homer?

Marketing is also affected by “mining” the collection. According to the American Marketing Association, marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large. An art museum can communicate to the public that, unlike other temporary shows, the art and artifacts found in an exhibition such as “After the Deluge” are indeed part of The Met’s permanent collection.

---


collection. This may encourage returning visitors to see these particular works and may widen prospects for another institution to borrow these artifacts.

**Partnerships**

“Mining” within the museum may be beneficial, but there is also an external “mining” that can be just as advantageous for museums. “Mining” relationships with other museums is a huge benefit to museum operations. By partnering with other institutions, a museum can combine its resources with another organization. We easily see external collaboration with The Metropolitan Museum Art. It is so expansive and prestigious that it allows for this museum to work with other countries and arts organizations to exchange artifacts for exhibits or work on fundraising projects together. This sort of collaboration was also seen in The Walker Art Center’s travelling exhibit. They were able to link with other institutions nationally and internationally for the “*My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*” exhibit. This helped with funding the exhibit and its accompanying catalogue. These organizations paid a fee to hold the exhibit at their location and also demonstrated a strong marketing method to get the name of The Walker Art Center internationally known when it travelled to France. Barry Lord from *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* confirms, “*Negotiations about sharing the cost of catalogues and other retail items associated with an exhibition are often part of the discussions associated with participation by museums in shared travelling exhibitions.*”\(^5^4\) He states that partnering with other institutions is another way of reducing costs. It is vital to foster relationships with the public and viewer, but it may be just as important to foster relationships with other museums.

Michael Kaiser, Arts Manager and “Turnaround King”, discusses in his book *The Art of the Turnaround: Creating and Maintaining Healthy Arts Organizations*, the importance of partnerships. Institutions should not fight for funding or resources. Non-profits understand each other’s circumstances

---

and ideally should mutually support each other by sharing resources, and most often do. Since marketing is more than brochures and advertisements, partnering with other organizations is a great way of producing institutional marketing. The name of the organization can be linked to a travelling exhibit or educational event that takes place in the public eye, just like The Walker Art Center. Seeing the success and interesting programs that the institution conducts will then interest visitors to attend and donors to give. Of course, the greatest partnership of all is that between the public and the museum.

In the case of MCA, Chicago, there were collaborations beyond the art community, with The Millennium Hotel. Museums can consider joining forces with local restaurants and businesses located near the museum. It will be mutually beneficial for a museum to partner with local businesses. They can send customers to the businesses and the local businesses will draw in visitors to the museum. Visitors to a museum may enjoy lunch at a partner restaurant or stop at a nearby shop. Think about what is offered around one’s area. What is the demographic of the audience that one brings into one’s museum? What are their interests besides art? What are their needs? How can one create a partnership with those businesses around one’s museum?

MCA, Chicago also coupled with Mpls. St. Paul Magazine. Here is a local paper that discusses fashionable eateries, entertainment, and sites. This is a great opportunity to have one’s museum reviewed and exposed to the local community. What are some local publications in one’s area that one can work with? In these publications one can post reviews from everyday visitors to the museum and include dates for upcoming or current exhibitions.

The Walker Art Center’s website contains a list of Community Partners that can be helpful in stirring ideas on organizations to partner with. These include the YWCA, schools, and associations that


assist the local demographics of low-income families. This page explains how these organizations can relate to the museum’s mission and why this museum partners with them. It is important to think about one’s mission and applying that to how one intends to serve the surrounding community. This can assist in finding partnerships that may be outside of the norm, but beneficial.

Aside from external partnerships, there was a unique internal partnership that took place between Kara Walker and the curator at The Met. They worked together to create the exhibition and allowed for more involvement from the artist than is usually seen by museums. In a way the artist acted as a curator herself. This partnership became an inclusive process that brought in different staff members. It made the curator aware of the extensiveness of the collection and the collections managers aware of the artistic process of the artist.

When it comes to potentially controversial art, partnerships can be a catharsis to controversy. By involving others in the creation of an exhibit such as Walker’s, there is a sense of investment. One becomes knowledgeable on the topic and one feels included in its creation. Partnering with the community can create a new perspective for visitors and community members.

**Group Shows**

The idea of partnerships can be an important method of support and marketing. Even more so is this applicable in group shows. This method was utilized in MCA, Chicago with both “Color Bind” and “Trials and Terrors”. In this last exhibition there was a conglomeration of different media and artists that surrounded one key theme of *transformation through hardship and evocations of sinister phenomena and events*. In “Color Bind” there was a focus on the color scheme of black and white, in which the artists could manipulate to demonstrate *how color can be used literally, formally, and*

---

metaphorically in art and to reveal how apparently formal considerations are often rooted in social issues. A group show like this can be especially beneficial for controversial topics because it demonstrates a variety of perspectives on the same subject. This would be a great means of expanding educational programming by making controversial topics interesting and debatable by increasing diverse interpretations. Controversy is more easily avoidable if the museum is willing to talk about it.

A group show can also expose more artists, the diversity of the collection, and emphasize the organization’s mission. Michael Kaiser also discusses in his book, The Art of the Turnaround, how vital programmatic planning is for an arts organization. Similar to the performing arts, a museum wants to be sure that they will be able to book the artists that they are looking to hire. By doing a group show an art museum can make sure the artist they want to work with will be available. Instead of presenting one artist, then waiting until the following season to bring in another who may be in popular demand, such as Kara Walker, get them together to create one show, simultaneously presenting these artists who may otherwise have been scooped up by another museum or art institute.

Aside from being able to book the artists that one wants in advanced, a group show can aid in creating an atmosphere of discussion over potentially controversial topics such as those that Walker illustrates. Kara Walker brought the idea to discuss the devastating aftermath of hurricane Katrina and how that emotionally impacted the black community and others. She was able to utilize works from other contexts and exhibitions to fit the theme of “After the Deluge” and had the viewer think about another area of natural disasters they may not necessarily think about, like the inequality of rescue and recovery efforts. It may be easier to bring in different artists and have them attack a single topic. This

---


can allow for a variety of perspectives on difficult topics. These can include, but are not limited to, domestic violence, torture, sexuality, or race.

A group show may also aid future planning by preparing the organization such as the Met, or even a small art institute, to account for the expenses in the budget. A museum can prepare for an event annually in their seasonal plan if they have similar programming that occurs year after year. This can be the case of a group show. If the museum knows this will be part of the program annually, they will be able to plan for and obtain the appropriate funding necessary for its development.

A group show can save on marketing costs as well. If successful, the public will already be aware of these events from previous year. This can be a consistent event that can take the place of trying to come up with new exhibit ideas while demonstrating both institutional and programmatic marketing. The museum will be able to market the artists that will be participating and the annual event can promote the museum as having a successful event that people look forward to attending.

In a way this is similar to McDonald’s annual Monopoly Game sweepstakes. The public knows it is McDonald’s that holds this and the public will go and purchase those foods that have the game pieces. So this proves beneficial for the company, but exciting for the consumers. The same can be done for an exciting program such as a group show. As consumers the public can expect continuity, but also a refreshing event from the regularly scheduled programming. It is a form of branding and institutional marketing by making the public aware of a consistent service the museum provides that is exciting and out of the ordinary. Michael Kaiser emphasizes in his leaflet, The Cycle, the spike in energy and enthusiasm that events of institutional marketing creates.60 This is vital for creating awareness for an institution and its programs.

---

The enthusiasm that Kaiser speaks about should continue through to educational programming. Education is key in museums. It is the large difference from being just a gallery. It is a museum’s job to educate the public on the art and artifacts in its collection. Some museums might feel that perhaps art should be put on display with no explanation. For example, Madeleine Grynsztejn Director of MCA, Chicago since 2008, organized an exhibit based on two environmental artists. She said that the audience could easily make a connection to these two artists. “You don’t need a book or a label or a docent. You walk into the Bucky Fuller show and you walk into Eliasson and you are done. This is how visual art should work.”

Perhaps that worked for these two artists, but the same cannot be said of all artists. This is especially true for potentially controversial artists and exhibitions. Not all visitors are well versed in the language of art. There may be symbols and techniques that make sense to the artist and the art world, but not to a common visitor. There may be themes that artists explore, such as in Walker’s art, which must be explained in detail. In addition, there are different types of learners, not just visual learners. Museums cannot assume that everyone will understand the art just by looking at it.

I do, however, agree with Grynsztejn’s comment of working with the Art Institute of Chicago. She stated that, “Collaboration is the wave of the future in this city.” As aforementioned, partnerships are key for the art museum. I appreciate the energy she brought to the museum as she took up her position as director by making updates and changes. But one thing that cannot be compromised from the old way of doing things is education. When it comes to controversial exhibits, works, or artists; nothing can be more important than educating the public to dispel ignorance, confusion, and misunderstanding.

---


62 Ibid.
The Museum of Contemporary Art does supply educational opportunities by attempting to engage their visitors in unique ways by having Stroller Days for parents and 21minus for teens. Although there was no programming mentioned for those exhibits at MCA, Chicago or The Met, I do suspect and hope they at least had labels to explain some of the art. Especially so for the nkondi figures included in “After the Deluge”, the audience may have no previous knowledge of these artifacts.

There is no greater example of the power of education than The Walker Art Center. The exhibit at this museum demonstrated the type of relationship and responsibility the museum has with its local community. The steps that the curator took in order to not only mount the exhibit, but also ensure that those who saw it understood why it was so important to display, can be a model for what other museums can do to foster a relationship with its own visitors in the spotlight of controversy. It is not the opposition that they should linger on, but the responsibilities they hold to the artist and the education of the audience. It was vital for Vergne to sit down and have a conversation with the local community. This education changed a lot of minds, but if it did not change minds, at least it opened them. Often in controversial art exhibits, protesters will attempt to compromise the museum’s funding or slander its integrity. But with Vergne’s educational demonstrations of addressing the mission of the museum and the importance of this exhibit, it did not have to come to that.

In every text on Museum Studies there is a section on Museum Education. This illustrates the importance of learning in the museum and the responsibility the museum possesses in the education of its visitors. In Museum Basics, the authors discuss the various learning types and state that “Museums have an important role in providing education services to users, whether these are children or adults.” And, “It is the aim of museum education to foster contact between people and objects: not to teach facts, but to sow a seed of interest, a spark of inspiration.” Museum education can and should be interesting,

---

thought provoking, and fun. It is best to think outside of the box to create engaging activities that will benefit visitors. This will help to foster that relationship between the community and the museum.

**Conclusion**

Despite Kara Walker’s edgy display of racism, sexism, and violence, the job of the museum is to have an objective view when exhibiting her work, but at the same time admit to the subject matter that she illustrates in her work. It is not for the museum to censor the work, but to actively educate the public as much as it can, provide background for the pieces, and hold an open conversation about the subject matter. Although, one of the main functions of a museum is to display art, the most important of all is education. For potentially controversial works, it is not enough to leave artifacts or artwork up for interpretation. It is the choice of the viewer whether to read the labels or take part in programming, but the museum must provide as much knowledge as it possesses on the topics so that the public can be better informed on the why’s of the works. *Why was it created? Why is it important to society? Why does it make sense to have in this museum?*

In knowing that an artist’s work has caused controversy in the past, these museums know that Walker’s work may draw the same reactions to their exhibits of her work. But today museums can see controversy as a teaching tool. They can educate their staff on how to plan for it. It should not be to stop negative reactions or strong opinions, but at least be aware of how, as an educational institution, they can be prepared. This preparedness begins with the administrative process. It begins with deciding what the institution stands for. Then, the museum should decide on the artists the museum wants to include in its seasonal plan. Next, the museum must plan how they should fund this exhibit. Then, the museum must do research and know the why, when, and how’s of the artwork. Next, the museum must design how this information will be presented to the visitors. Importantly, the museum must have a conversation with the public on why they should come to see this exhibit. And finally, when this process
is complete and the exhibit is established, the museum must have a conversation with its audience about why this exhibit, artist, and artwork are important.

These steps correlate to the administrative elements of mission, staff, funding, research, design, marketing, and educational programming to appropriately discuss artwork such as that of Kara Walker. This does not only speak of Kara Walker, but other artists as well. These elements of the administrative process in an art museum can be applied to that of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Contemporary Art Museum, Chicago, and The Walker Art Center because they all abide, more or less, by the same processes to create art exhibits. From these case studies it is then possible to see the best ways these processes can be applied to potentially controversially art such as Kara Walker’s. These include: “mining” the museum’s collection, partnering with other arts organizations, creating group shows, and finally, education. In fact, all of these practices are a form of education. “Mining” the museum educates the institution and its staff internally. Partnering with other organizations educates other organizations on what it is your museum represents. Group shows allow artists to work together to educate visitors about a common theme.

Art museums should continue to push education to demonstrate to the public what it is they fight to display and how applicable it is to the art world, society today, and one’s own self. Museums understand the subjectivity of art and how it may not be suitable for every individual who passes through. But if, like The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and The Walker Art Center, museums can do as much as they can to educate, as is one of their main functions, best serve the artist’s creativity, and display interesting art, then they are doing their job by sharing knowledge on human history and culture. That is the importance of a museum. It is a museum’s job to tell the story of why those artifacts are significant, their historical background, and how they were created; otherwise it is just a collection of objects. Telling the story of these “objects” takes planning, it takes a team, many hours, money, and a vision to see that it gets shared, not just Kara Walker, but other
artists just like Kara Walker, whose works sit in the confines of a temperature controlled storage area until their stories can be told.

By bringing together skilled and organized staff members, a museum will be able to raise money for an exhibition, draw in an audience, and communicate with the public on all types of art and artists, but most importantly, potentially controversial ones. When an art museum has an artist or artwork that stirs negative reactions, they must be prepared to handle the research, presentation, and education necessary to have a conversation amongst themselves in the staff and with the visitor. And the museum must be prepared for outreach and education in creative ways. The art museum must work with the artist, other institutions, and the community to continue to display a variety of art that may be uncomfortable for some, but may educate the individual, the society, and humanity as a whole. By realizing and fulfilling their mission, an art museum can appropriately present art of any kind.
Figure 1 "Gone, An Historical Romance of Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Negress and Her Heart", 1994.

Figure 2 "Thickets Parts 1 & 2", Cut paper, 2009.
Figure 3 "The Keys to the Coop", 1997, Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery

Figure 4 "A Warm Summer Evening in 1863", 2008.
Figure 5 Detail from “Gone, An Historical Narrative as it Occurred B’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart”, 1994, MOMA.

Figure 6 Example of an Appeal Letter
Figure 7 Example from Motherhaus website.

Figure 8 From "After the Deluge", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006.

Figure 9 Joshua Shaw, "Deluge Toward Its Close", c. 1813.
Figure 10 "Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May be Found By Myself, Missus K.E.B Walker, Colored", 1997.

Figure 11 Detail from "The Means to an End...a Shadow Drama in Five Acts", 1995.

Figure 12 Selection from "Do You Like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?", 1997.
Figure 13 “Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress”, 2001.

Figure 14 “Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened By Good Intentions”, 2004.
Figure 15 Selection from "Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)", 2005.

Figure 16 Selection from gallery guide for "My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love".

giving birth to a child as sheiguage to the Issa people. In this allegory of its- terance, Walker manipulates her literary source to reveal a story she thought we knew, thereby revealing the topic of representation.

**CENSORSHIP?**

Walker’s changed imagery has generated in- terest. By July 1864, no likene generation of African American artist could have produced a book setting campaigns in which they public- ly asked colleagues to "spiral awareness the image images produced by the young African American artist, Kara Walker" and lose to exhibit her work. Questioning the maturity and artistic merit of Walker’s art, the campaign invoked accusations of censorship but also support. The controversy over the appropri- ateness of depicting her work renewed through letters and articles that appeared in national art journals and culminated in a public symposium “Change the Joker: Film and the Visual” A Harvard University Conference in East Lansing in 1998.

The series of 15 watercolor drawings in this gallery, (It’s Like Coming in Your Gallup and Cheesburger in Your Boots), 1997, aimed as a response to the controversy. In one, she centers the image of White People—"Better Image of Blacks." Another reads “The Final Solution: How to Naturally Consume Whites People” and at the beginning of the gallery, a text, “From the beginning of the text, is “is being dealt with.” This consistent theme is a tension that plays a large part in Walker’s work, the use of color and white as a symbol of society’s discrimination against blacks and black people against white people in response.

Kara Walker follows the footsteps of a long line of artists who use images to speak truth to power. Nineteenth-century art- istic fairs and image, and the African American George Grosz, for example, also used symbols to reveal to society. Person:  

**NEGRESS NOTES**

"One of the things that happened here with the Negro that I did not like is that before it was a nurse, and nurse is a kind of nurse when it comes to work produced by black women in this country that’s like an expression of something about the kind of people I care. It’s a kind of thing that’s been a certain way. A female nurse was a nurse through a process of of inferiority. As a woman, she was a woman in a certain way. A female nurse was recognized as a nurse and that’s why she had the subject that I’m talking about in the piece that I’m talking about.

In her series of drawings entitled Negrress Notes, Walker addresses many of the same themes that appear in her large-scale paper installations. In the series all of the figures are eroded "black" but her narrative and casual drawings fully display the raw, un-LinkIdary, and honest of her characters. Here again, the artist employs the fictional persona of the Negrress: "The name I had picked up a few minutes inside, and really how just rolling it from one source, which was The Convent by Thomas Bata, there’s a reference to a "noisy Negro" who is the author of our moral life and our morality. She’s miserable, but she doesn’t really do anything. She just sits there, though she is described all over the place. You know, the ability eye, the running mind, power hungry, dear.

In those and other works, the Negrress is referred to as a type of heroine, a ”Negress burdened by good intentions.” Ultimately, she is also an "Eunuchized Negrress," a con- tradiction, is fine, and with an eroded soul, an allegory for the sick identity posed by African American, alienation and alienation.
References


