



REPORT OF THE REGENTS ADVISORY PANEL

INTRODUCTION

Following the recent events regarding the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), the Board of Regents asked its Executive Committee and the Chair of its Governance and Nominating Committee to convene a panel of individuals to review the future of Smithsonian exhibition planning policies and practices and assist the Regents in thinking through issues raised in the role of the Smithsonian as a national cultural institution.

The panel convened by the Board of Regents consisted of Regent John McCarter as Chair, Earl (“Rusty”) A. Powell III, Director of the National Gallery of Art, and David Gergen, Harvard professor, CNN analyst, and White House Advisor to four Presidents.

Panel Charge

The Board requested that the panel conduct a forward-looking review of the Smithsonian’s existing exhibition policies and practices as they relate to potentially sensitive and controversial themes and content. In doing so, the Board asked that the panel give special consideration to factors such as the new strategic plan, new modes and increased speed of communication in a digital world, the development of digital assets, and increased pressures on public funding. As a second charge, the Board requested that the panel identify any issues for further review and provide guidance, as appropriate, to assist the Board and the Secretary in determining next steps. The Board asked that the panel give specific consideration to recommending best practices for communicating with internal and external stakeholders about exhibitions as they are planned and implemented, especially during the inevitable times when particular exhibitions elicit passionate views and controversy. The Board requested that Mr. McCarter report on the panel’s work at the January 31, 2011, meeting of the Board of Regents.

Panel Preparation and Meeting

The Chair began by reviewing the exhibition catalogue and subsequently visited the exhibition with NPG Director Martin Sullivan. The Chair then met for a full day with Smithsonian staff, including the directors who had conducted an informal peer review of *Hide/Seek* for the Secretary.

In preparation for its meeting, the panel reviewed the current Smithsonian policy on exhibition planning (Smithsonian Directive 603); *E Pluribus Unum: This Divine Paradox, Report of the Commission on the Future of the Smithsonian Institution* (1995); articles on

the recent controversy concerning the *Hide/Seek* exhibition; and a summary of historical museum controversies both at the Smithsonian and elsewhere.

The panel convened on January 17, 2011, and met with the Secretary; the Under Secretary for History, Art and Culture; current and former directors of Smithsonian museums; the directors of the Smithsonian Offices of Communication and External Affairs and Governmental Relations; and Regents staff.

FRAMING THE DELIBERATIONS

The panel used four questions to frame its deliberations, observations, and recommendations:

1. *What is the role of a national museum in stimulating dialogue on potentially sensitive and controversial cultural topics?*
2. *What best practices are applicable for communicating with internal and external stakeholders about potentially sensitive and controversial exhibitions both during the planning stage and after opening in the case of controversy?*
3. *What is the specific role of the Regents as both the responsible governing body and as a resource for Smithsonian management with regard to the planning and execution of potentially sensitive and controversial exhibitions?*
4. *What core principles and practices should the Regents and management operate under when the inevitable controversies arise threatening some crucial aspect of the public trust?*

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. PERSPECTIVE

Observation

Hide/Seek is not the first exhibition to generate controversy. Other museum controversies in recent memory at the Smithsonian and elsewhere include: the *Enola Gay* (Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum); *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Corcoran Gallery of Art and Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati); *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (Brooklyn Museum of Art); *Back of the Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation* (Library of Congress); satirical painting of the late Chicago Mayor Harold Washington (School of the Art Institute); and the statutory amendment requiring National Endowment for the Arts to consider “general standards of decency” as a factor for funding and denial of grants to four artists on that basis. Controversies have extended to exhibitions in the fields of art, history, culture, and science.

Recommendation

The Smithsonian should assume that controversies will arise in the future and have the potential to be amplified and accelerated due to the new modes of communication via social media, Internet, and a 24-hour news cycle and so must plan a process to anticipate, prepare, and manage reactions with all of its stakeholders.

B. THE NATION'S MUSEUM

Observation

The Smithsonian is America's largest public cultural space. It is a complex institution of great international importance and, as a representative of the American people, has broad constituencies — the public, the government, the philanthropic community, and the Smithsonian staff. It is owned by the American people.

As the national museum, the Smithsonian must lead and encourage civil dialogue on important and transitional issues facing the nation. To do that, the Smithsonian is obligated to produce thoughtful exhibitions and programming with themes or content that may at times be considered controversial or sensitive. The Smithsonian's role is to elevate and lead discourse by contributing objective scholarship and a multidisciplinary perspective on potentially "flashpoint" issues.

There is inherent tension between the culture of free expression in the scholarly and artistic communities and a largely government-funded institution. Failure to recognize the reality of this tension and its effects on the various constituencies, audiences, and natural alliances can result in serious, negative long-term consequences for the leadership role of the Institution. On the other hand, avoiding the risks necessary to illuminate the important issues facing society and the American public would diminish the role of the nation's cultural organization.

Recommendations

1. The Smithsonian should celebrate our national heritage with particular attention to visits from families and schools which are long-standing American traditions. It should take advantage of the new digital world and the access to schools and homes that greatly enhance the institution's educational role.
2. At the same time, the Smithsonian must encourage and provide a forum for dialogue on the important issues of the day. This mandate carries the obligation to produce exhibitions that may be controversial. Topics such as immigration, race and ethnicity, religion, climate change, and sexual identity are within the scope of the curriculum and should lead to informed civic discourse.

3. The Smithsonian must communicate effectively with the Congress with particular attention to new modes of messaging and broad congressional interest in the Smithsonian.
4. The Institution must explain the importance of its Federal funding to the public, and to the academic and museum communities.

C. CURATOR, DIRECTOR, SECRETARY

Observation

Curatorial freedom of expression, expertise, and authority are critical to a flourishing museum.

Museum directors, while not expert in every curatorial field in their institution, should have competence in general subject matter and confidence in their judgment and in their leadership of the experience in their museums.

As the leader of a large and complex institution, the Secretary is not involved in curatorial decisions. However, the Secretary is sometimes faced with managerial issues that affect exhibitions and should seek timely input from a range of appropriate advisors to assist in decisions.

Recommendations

1. Smithsonian Directive 603 is an excellent template and should be studied and followed. New technologies, including film and the Internet, should be recognized. Standards and processes for reacting to the eruption of public controversies should be clarified, including timing, involvement of advisory boards and review.
2. The Smithsonian appropriately relies on guest curators from the scholarly community to bring world-class scholarship to its museums. Primary responsibility for planning and implementing exhibitions should reside with Smithsonian curators and scholars. When using content provided or produced by non-Smithsonian scholars or using scholarship from the outside, the Smithsonian should designate, as is provided in existing policy, a Smithsonian scholar with appropriate expertise and authority to review the content and provide institutional accountability. Ultimate decision-making for all exhibitions rests firmly within the Smithsonian. Adequate time for exhibition development should be provided and authority over outside expert curators should be established at the outset and exercised.
3. In anticipation of possibly controversial exhibitions, the Smithsonian should provide an opportunity for public input or reaction at pre-decisional exhibit planning phases. Culturally sensitive exhibitions should be previewed from a diverse set of perspectives. It would seem appropriate for the Smithsonian to be fully informed about red flags before exhibitions go public. Thus, we urge that there be a diversity of perspectives brought to

bear in advance. Diversity in all its aspects is highlighted in the Institution's strategic plan and should be embraced.

4. The Smithsonian should use the Internet during exhibitions to facilitate discussion of conflicts, debates, disagreements, and other views as a way of "listening" to Smithsonian audiences and informing institutional responses. Social networks are impactful, new ways of communicating.
5. In the absence of actual error, changes to exhibitions should not be made once an exhibition opens without meaningful consultation with the curator, director, Secretary, and the leadership of the Board of Regents.
6. Four initiatives should be considered:
 - a. *We applaud the formation of the Secretary's Directors' Advisory Group, which can provide the timely input needed by the Secretary.*
 - b. *Further, the art museum directors should be assembled and charged to bring in colleagues from the broad museum community to familiarize them with the Smithsonian, establish bridges of understanding, and build natural alliances. Professional associations of other museum directors are also a resource.*
 - c. *The concept of an ombudsman, "Public Editor," or other techniques should be explored to ensure that a broad range of opinion is available to the Secretary.*
 - d. *The Smithsonian should consider initiating a summer executive education institute for curators and directors to discuss case studies applicable to Smithsonian exhibition planning and implementation. The program would emphasize problems and strategies and best practices for crisis management in the unique context of a national museum. An executive education program — short in duration, built around case studies — would allow curators and others to come together in mutual deliberation on questions about the role of the Smithsonian in its many exhibitions and how to handle controversies after they break out.*
7. Continuous communication with members of the House and Senate, including leadership, relevant committee members, and individual members and spouses is essential. Further, the Smithsonian should develop deep working relationships with many members, including but not limited to the leaders of its oversight committees. Outreach should include museum visits, director and curatorial expertise, orientation sessions, and celebrations of interest to members.
8. Use of an immediate public forum for the community to express views is important around controversies.

D. MUSEUM BOARDS AND REGENTS

Observation

Museum boards and the Smithsonian National Board are sources of enthusiasm, outreach, and financial support. They provide guidance and in many cases they set policy. They are essential participants in the Smithsonian community.

Ultimate responsibility for the Smithsonian rests with the Board of Regents. That responsibility includes ensuring that the Smithsonian's programs are consistent with its mission and nature as a public trust. The strategic plan and museum calendars provide insight into pending issues that might impact that trust. At the same time, individual Regents represent and reflect the diverse perspectives of the nation and its government. The Regents should be relied upon to provide candid observations and advice on potentially controversial exhibitions. The Regents' Strategic Planning and Programs Committee, for example, can help identify potentially sensitive exhibitions that might require further Regent engagement and provide guidance on anticipating and responding to controversies. Open communication and early consultation between a deeply informed Secretary and deeply informed Regents is critical.

Recommendations

1. The museum boards should be actively involved in museums and made aware of issues and consulted on major challenges.
2. The Regents, through its Strategic Planning and Programs Committee, should review the three-year museum exhibition calendar to assess the curriculum against the Grand Challenges, the nation's agenda, and potential controversies.
3. Presentations to the Regents should be focused on major issues that impact strategy, budget, resources, and reputation.
4. Congressional Regents should lead the outreach to the House and Senate.

CONCLUSION

We raise all of these questions in the spirit of recognizing and celebrating the wonderful work that the Smithsonian does, even as we try to surface issues that deserve further exploration.

January 31, 2011

