

Book Reviews

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Janet Marstine and Svetlana Mintcheva, eds. *Curating under Pressure: International Perspectives on Negotiating Conflict and Upholding Integrity*. New York: Routledge, 2021. Paperback, 264p., \$44.95 (ISBN: 978-0815396192, hardcover ISBN: 978-0815396185, eBook ISBN: 9780815396215).

Curating under Pressure: International Perspectives on Negotiating Conflict and Upholding Integrity is a timely and relevant book that addresses issues of censorship and artistic expression through the experiences of curators from around the world. The book is the second to be published (after *Museum Diplomacy in the Digital Age*) in the Museum Meanings series, which is concerned with the shifting role of museums. Its thirteen authors hail from South Africa, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Colombia, the United States, Israel, and Russia. The authors variously work as curators, administrators, artists, filmmakers, activists, and scholars, offering a wealth of perspectives on challenges to intellectual and artistic freedom.

Most chapters in *Curating under Pressure* offer first-person narratives describing situations the authors were personally involved in, and thorough bibliographies accompany all chapters, offering valuable historical, political, and intellectual contexts for the individual case studies. To illustrate the works and exhibits discussed, the book includes black-and-white images within individual chapters as well as twelve color illustrations in a section at the end. Introductory and concluding chapters by the editors bookend the volume. The introduction by Janet Marstine sets the contrib-

uted chapters in the context of museums' role in free speech and censorship, asking how curators can balance their curatorial autonomy with the political realities of the world around them. The conclusion by Svetlana Mintcheva offers suggestions for "adaptive curating" based on the experiences of curators' "sensitivity and responsiveness to sociocultural context" and "nimble negotiation of a variety of internal and external pressures" (219).

In its treatment of perennial issues like censorship and artistic expression, the book focuses particularly on *self-censorship*, bringing a new element into the discussion. Marstine states that "We define self-censorship as the suppression of ideas or artistic expression by an individual during the creative process or by an institution during the curatorial process" (xix). That is, there may not be any overt act of censorship or objection to an exhibit or individual work. Instead, the fear of criticism, public outcry, or demands to take down a work may prevent it from ever being created or shown in the first place, or the artist or curator may amend the work in anticipation of possible challenges. The varied chapters in the book speak together in asking one overarching question: What pressures do curators and exhibit designers face when deciding whether and how to alter an exhibition based on public sentiment, press and social media reactions, or political contexts – even when there is no formal edict implementing censorship?

The book's authors do an excellent job of elucidating the nuances in each situation of self-censorship. Choosing how to proceed with a work or an exhibit is never a simple decision, and there are many ethical questions to consider in each case. What is the best decision for the artist, the public, the museum? Should compromises be enacted, and if so, how? What are the political realities of the situation? Authors candidly share what decisions they came to, why, and how. The title of chapter 9, "The Complexity of Taking Curatorial Risks," sums it up well. In that chapter, author Oscar Ho Hing Kay discusses "various ways of negotiating the imperatives of artistic freedom and curatorial integrity as well as those of protecting the artists, their subjects, the institution and its staff. In some cases, these imperatives require the radical modification of a work, while in others the relevant parties will decide to take a risk. All cases require discussion and deliberation between staff and, sometimes, with the artists and subjects involved" (147). His précis serves as a good overview of the whole book.

A few examples can highlight the book's illuminating case studies. Some especially memorable chapters discuss

- Kacey Wong's *I Have No Enemies*, a site-specific sculpture memorializing imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo, placed in an unknown remote location in Hong Kong to avoid censorship or destruction;

- controversies around three public artworks in Qatar, including Damien Hirst's *The Miraculous Journey*, a series of fourteen large sculptures depicting human gestation from conception to birth;
- challenges in creating a utopian village cultural cooperative in rural Bishan, China;
- an exhibit and community engagement activities created by the Museum of Memory of Colombia, interpreting and reframing the story of armed conflict within the country;
- Chris Drury's *Carbon Sink*, an outdoor sculpture at the University of Wyoming Art Museum that was removed based on negative responses from some who interpreted it as critical of the state's fossil fuel mining industry.

The chapters are uniformly excellent and maintain a consistent standard of quality. All are written in a readable and engaging style while maintaining intellectual and scholarly rigor. Though similar issues are addressed in multiple chapters, there is never a sense that the book is repetitive, and reexamining the same overarching questions through the lenses of different case studies is helpful.

While all chapters are excellent, a particular standout is chapter 7, "Navigating Censorship: A Case from Palestine," by Jack Persekian. This chapter is more theoretical than the others and sums up the themes and issues from the rest of the book very eloquently: "Freedom of expression is a human right. Yet the ways in which people can feasibly and safely express themselves are inevitably tied to the forces of governments and markets that attempt to also control artists and art institutions" (119). Persekian also notes that no part of the world is immune to censorship and restrictions on artistic freedom; both are "increasingly a part of global culture" (119). His observation eloquently underscores the need for a volume such as this one.

Overall, *Curating under Pressure* is an excellent treatment of an important topic, and the blending of scholarly research with compelling personal stories works very well. The breadth of examples from so many different political contexts will be interesting and relevant to a diverse audience from many types of museum backgrounds. The book will be of particular interest to curators and exhibit designers in art or history museums, as well as to artists creating work for museums or other public spaces, in any part of the world. It could also be a valuable resource to students in museum studies programs and to writers and researchers interested in free speech issues. Especially thanks to its focus on the specific topic of self-censorship in curating, it is a strong addition to global conversations about curatorial and museum ethics and about museums' responsibility to creators, audiences, history, and to the world at large. — *Martha Tanner, Nebraska Wesleyan University*