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RESIST: a Controversial Display and Reflections on the Academic Library’s Role in Promoting Discourse and Engagement

Stephanie Beene and Cindy Pierard

“Resistance and change often begin in art.”
-Ursula LeGuin

Abstract

Libraries engage communities in a variety of ways, including through exhibitions and displays. However, librarians may not always know how to promote critical discourse if controversy arises surrounding exhibits or displays. This article reflects on one academic library’s experience hosting a controversial display during a divisive political time for the library’s parent institution, its broader urban community, and the United States as a whole. The authors contextualize the display, created by a local art collective, against the backdrop of creative activism, and consider implications for library displays and exhibits within similar environments. Rather than retreating from controversy, libraries have an opportunity to frame exhibits and displays by engaging in challenging dialogues. Professional guidelines developed by both museums and libraries are beneficial to practitioners looking toward best practices in planning, managing, and promoting exhibits and displays in the face of possible controversy.

The Setting:
Albuquerque, New Mexico, and The University of New Mexico

The University of New Mexico (UNM) is a large public institution with five campuses and a combined student population of over 32,000 according to fall 2017 enrollment reports (University of New Mexico Office of Institutional Analytics, 2017). UNM is the flagship university for New Mexico, a Hispanic-Serving Institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) and an R1: Doctoral University (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2016). One of five U.S. states deemed a majority-minority state, 60.8% of New Mexico’s population self-identifies as members of a minority race or ethnic group (United States Census Bureau, 2015; United States Census Bureau Intercensal Population Estimates, 2012). UNM’s fall 2017 enrollment data reflect this diversity, with 64.6% of
students identifying as non-white (University of New Mexico Office of Institutional Analytics, 2017). The university’s main campus is located in Albuquerque, a majority-minority city in a metropolitan area of more than 909,906 (United States Census Bureau Population Division, 2016). Albuquerque is also the largest of the cities in the urban corridor of Albuquerque-Santa Fe-Las Vegas, where 55% of New Mexicans reside (United States Census Bureau, 2012-2016).

The Fine Arts and Design Library (FADL) is one of four libraries comprising the main University Libraries system, all of which are located on UNM's main campus. Other libraries focus on science and engineering, and business and economics. Zimmerman Library serves as the main library, housing services for undergraduate and graduate students, and collections in the humanities and social sciences, the Indigenous Nations Library Program, and the Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections.

Located on the top floor of the School of Architecture and Planning (SAAP), the FADL serves the disciplines within the School, as well as the College of Fine Arts. UNM faculty, staff, students, and community members use the library’s collections and spaces for study and research. The FADL is well known for its panoramic views of the city and four mountain ranges, its location just off Central Avenue/historic Route 66, and its beautiful Antoine Predock architecture. It frequently places high in campus polls for “best places to study” in recognition of its atmosphere and services, and offers a popular study and work space for the UNM community.

The Political Backdrop (Summer 2016 - Spring 2017)

Like many American colleges and universities, UNM experienced protests, divisive rhetoric, and even violence leading up to and throughout the 2016 presidential election. A rally for then-candidate Donald Trump in May 2016 ended in violent protest (Shephard et al., 2016; Associated Press, 2016; McBride, Smith, & Santucci, 2016). Events on and around campus reflected elevated tensions, which continued through the election and the following months.

On Election Day (November 8, 2016), an engineering student reported that a fellow student, wearing a Donald Trump shirt, disrupted her study at Zimmerman Library by attempting to remove her hijab and implying she was a terrorist. The story was widely reported in local and national media, including the New York Times and Library Journal (Quintana, 2016; Mele, 2016; Peet, 2016; Weill, 2016; Whack and Reeves, 2016). Messages condemning this and other incidents were issued by multiple campus offices. In his message to faculty, staff, and students, University Libraries Dean Richard Clement stated, “I am committed, as I know all of you are,
to providing a safe and inclusive working and studying environment in our libraries” (R. Clement, personal communication, November 10, 2016).

Graffiti with the words Sieg Heil (Hail, Victory!) next to the name “Trump” and a swastika appeared on multiple UNM campus buildings and artworks the night after the election; similar graffiti was spotted in several other U.S. cities post-election (Yan, Sgueglia, & Walker, 2016). A student captured a photo of the graffiti on the campus sculpture, The Center of the Universe, early in the morning after the election, (Schmidt, 2016), prompting a rebuke from former UNM President Bob Frank: “There are times when emotions run high, but there are never times when it is appropriate to... create an atmosphere of intimidation” (as in Quintana, 2016).

Although the UNM President’s Office continued to share unifying messages, campus tensions increased both before and following controversial commentator Milo Yiannopoulos’ speaking engagement in January 2017 (Cook, 2017; Demarco, 2016). The speech at UNM did not result in the kinds of violence that had occurred on other campuses (Gilbert, 2017; Cobb, 2017; Nossel, 2017), but UNM’s leadership—citing safety concerns—decided to close several service operations early on the day of Yiannopoulos’ talk, including all University Libraries (Mckibben, 2017; McBride, 2017; Mozzone & Rush, 2017; Atkins, 2017). In his inaugural message to the campus, the new interim UNM President Chaouki Abdallah called for a “hospitable-and-challenging intellectual climate for all viewpoints” (C. Abdallah, personal communication, January 17, 2017). He reminded the community that “the role of UNM [is]... a center for... freedom of speech and thought.” and that “public universities are uniquely positioned to both welcome people from across all our social diversities and to challenge all to live up to our democratic ideals” (C. Abdallah, personal communication, January 17, 2017, emphasis his).

The day of Yiannopoulos’ speech (January 27, 2017) also brought the White House Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2017), popularly known as “The Travel Ban,” which targeted seven Muslim-majority countries (Choi, 2017). The ban caused chaos and protests at airports around the nation (Gambino, Siddiqui, Owen, & Helmore, 2017), which stretched into the following weekend and included Albuquerque International Sunport (Barnitz, 2017; Howerton, 2017). UNM, like many higher education institutions in the U.S., launched a local version of the national #YouAreWelcomeHere campaign to affirm “appreciation for students and scholars from outside the U.S. and the diverse population represented on UNM’s campus” (UNM #YouAreWelcomeHere message, February 2017).

In response to local, regional, and national events, especially after Yiannopoulos’ talk, an activist art collective affiliated with UNM’s College of Fine Arts organized a request for art displays in the University Libraries. Comprised of graduate students and faculty from the Department of Art and Art History, the group began
formulating ideas for artworks and events around Albuquerque, with UNM as the hub. The collective named itself #ABQArtSpeaks, with ABQ serving as the popular shorthand denotation for the city of Albuquerque.

The Artistic Backdrop: Activist artists and artists turning to activism

Throughout 2016-17, activist artists responded to local and national events as they unfolded. Tracing the art world’s responses to the presidential election through April 2017, Carl Swanson asks, “Is Political Art the Only Art That Matters Now?” (Swanson, 2017). The influential artist Shepard Fairey, in his trademark style, created a series of posters leading up to the election, called We the People, depicting Native Americans, African Americans, Muslims, and Latinxs. Taking its name from the first line of the U.S. constitution and signed, “Women are Perfect,” and/or “Defend Dignity,” Fairey told CNN that he thought these were the groups which were most criticized by Trump, and who were going to be “[the] most... vulnerable...[and]... neglected in a Trump administration” (as in Abrams, 2017, para. 4). Fairey urged visitors to his website to download the posters free of charge for use in protests, rallies, and throughout cities across the nation.

Jonathan Horowitz, with fellow activist artists, started the Halt Group and began an Instagram feed called @dear_ivanka, a direct appeal to the soon-to-be first daughter (Swanson, 2017). As the Halt Group grew, so did the materiality of their art, expanding beyond Instagram and into publications such as Artforum (Bennett, Gingeras, & Webster, 2016). Halt Group members Alissa Bennett, Alison Gingeras, and Jamieson Webster composed artwork such as Ivanka, we need to talk about your Dad, or You’re scaring the hell out of women (as cited in Brooks, 2016, para. 1). “Ivanka is singled out not only as a fellow woman, but because, for artists in particular, Ivanka is a curious access point into the Trump administration,” writes Huffington Post columnist Katherine Brooks (2016, para. 8). “She is, as the three professional women and mothers behind the Artforum letter point out, a fellow #womanwhoworks. Ivanka also has a history of collecting art, rubbing elbows with gallerists and artists, occupying the same spaces as Bennett (Team Gallery director), Gingeras (curator) and Webster (psychoanalyst and cultural writer)” (Brooks, 2016, para. 8). The Halt Group became known for creating posters protesting President Trump’s now-infamous 2005 Access Hollywood recording, inscribing his words verbatim in gold on a black poster background (Frank, 2017). Immediately erupting into controversy, his comments were viewed by many as condoning sexual assault, while then-candidate Trump brushed them aside as “locker room talk” (Fahrentold, 2016). Artist Marilyn Minter and the graffiti artist and hacker KATSU created the poster along with Gingeras. Identifying as activists, the artists created a website where they invited individuals to download and print the posters, while they “[plastered] [posters] across various New York City walls”
The posters “went viral... and were shared across social media with the hashtags #pussygrabbingPOTUS and #dearivanka” (Frank, 2017, para. 7).

President-elect Trump’s proclamations and tweets continued to inspire protest. On January 20, 2017, Inauguration Day, museums across the U.S. charged free admission, collectively called J20 Art Strike, and the Whitney Museum of American Art collaborated with Occupy Museums on a series of programs. Galleries and museums provided free transportation and social media-friendly materials for the Women’s March and subsequent protests. When President Trump first announced the “Travel Ban,” the Davis Museum at Wellesley College covered or removed 120 works that had either been made or donated by immigrants; and The Museum of Modern Art hung works from its collections by artists from three of the nations on the list (Swanson, 2017). The Public Art Fund in New York City commissioned Ai Weiwei for a citywide proposition, titled “Good Fences Make Good Neighbors” (Swanson, 2017).

Even the 2017 Whitney Biennial, arguably one of the art world’s most anticipated events, could not escape politicization. Swanson reflects that the event “went from being almost universally well received for its political engagement to being the center of protests...because, right now, the art world is on a perpetual boil” (Swanson, 2017, para. 8). Even though the planning for the Whitney Biennial began in 2015, Saltz (2017) argues convincingly that it was the most politically charged Biennial since 1993; and while most pieces did not explicitly depict or address Trump, Trump-era politics and social issues were represented in most of the art on view:

A handful of Oto Gillen’s great photographs of Trump rallies... [pulled] back the curtain on intractable white-nationalist rage coming to a boil... Rafa Esparza’s... adobe-brick installation [of] portraits of exactly the sort of so-called ‘Mexican rapists’ and brown youth that Trump supporters [railed] against [during the 2016 campaign]. [Trump] [was] there in absentia in An-Mi Lê’s New Orleans photo dated November 9, 2016, of a brick building with graffiti that says ‘Fuck this racist asshole President.’... Trump was there, haunting the collective Postcommodity’s riling four-channel video of the border fences between Mexico and the United States. (Saltz, 2017, para. 4)

The multi-themed diversity of artwork at the Biennial delivered urgent messages from and for communities of color, women, and minorities while speaking to or around the divided electoral nation.
In the Southwest, the downtown Phoenix art gallery, La Melgosa, commissioned activist artist Karen Fiorito in January 2017 to create a billboard art piece that would comment on President Donald Trump’s administration (Janetsky & Borgelt, 2017). One side of the billboard portrayed an image of President Trump, flanked by nuclear mushroom clouds and dollar signs made to look like swastikas. The other side depicted the Arizona flag with the word “UNITY,” emblazoned across it. Beneath were a diversity of hands, signing in sign language, “unity,” a call for those in the minority to come together (Janetsky & Borgelt, 2017, para. 18). Fiorito originally wanted to represent raised fists under the word “RESIST,” but the gallery wanted something more uplifting (Janetsky & Borgelt, 2017, para. 16): “[The billboard] is...a form of resistance, a form of protest... I feel that I’m really just speaking for other people who might not be able to say anything... or may not feel safe in doing so” (Janetsky & Borgelt, 2017, para. 18). The billboard was erected during a downtown Phoenix art event, and responses were immediate. As a seasoned political activist and billboard artist, Fiorito expected it would stir up controversy but did not expect death threats.

Swanson poses the larger conceptual problem framing artistic practice during this political era: “How [does one] actually go about effectively [protesting Trump?] What can artists themselves do to go up against the policies of a president who is, in many ways, a kind of performance artist himself?” (Swanson, 2017, para. 26). Adding to the complexity, he illustrates the social media realities of practicing art in an age of divisive exchanges erupting on social media: “The internet does: marshalling preexisting worldviews and arguments with imperious take-a-side disdain... made more complicated by... the quick-to-arise mob moralisms of social media” (Swanson, 2017, para. 31). Contemporary artists are utilizing and activating social media in their work, as with the artist collective Halt Group, while simultaneously having responses to their work subjected to social media, as with Fiorito’s work. The case study described in this article also grapples with conceptual impact and divisive rhetoric, both on and off social media, while self-consciously operating under the framework of creative activism, examined in the next section.

**Imagining a Better World: Creative Activism**

The scholar Gemma Bird (2017) argues that the arts allow imagination - including imagining a world different from the present. Artists share their visions of a better world through exhibitions, performances, displays, and dialogues, which can motivate change. Bird sees this process of imagining as not simply a creative act but a political one, offering commentary and affecting change through “raising the consciousness of the citizenry” (p. 6). The American educational philosopher Maxine Greene (1995) contends, “We acknowledge the harshness of situations only when we
have in mind another state of affairs in which things [could] be better” (p. 5). The arts can provide a platform for sharing political ideas, and - importantly - can give voice to silenced or marginalized groups; they can provide a safe space or transformative dialogue through artistic expression; or they can serve as a powerful tool in the fight for freedom (Bird, 2017, p. 11-12).

Expanding on these foundational arguments, Silas Harrebye, from the Dutch Centre for Artistic Activism, identifies creative activism as a type of emerging critique distinguishable from earlier similar forms of political art, rooted within the shifting political and social movements of the 21st century, “not only demonstrating against the status quo but also demonstrating how the world can be different” (Harrebye, 2016, back cover, emphasis his). In his seminal studies on the topic, Harrebye defines creative activism through three overarching traits: its strategic and conscious use of new media, which separates it from similar, earlier, political arts; its process-oriented, rather than results-oriented, agenda; and finally, its project-based campaigns (Harrebye, 2015, pp. 127-128). “Creative activists prefer to pose questions and provoke reflection” in audiences, but “do not necessarily fight for a common cause or subscribe to a certain ideology, and are more driven by eclectic engagement than persistent critique” (p. 128).

Affiliated definitions reverberate with Harrebye’s notions of political and social activism underlying methods of creative protest. Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert, instructors at the School for Creative Activism claim, “The first rule of activism is to know the terrain and use it to your advantage,” with the terrain being defined as “one of symbols and signs, images and expressions” (2017, para. 6). Creative activists use this terrain to broaden their base of appeal and the reach of their message by employing symbols, signs, images, and expressions alongside more traditional organizing practices: “Artistic activism... is forever doing things and creating reactions that are unintended... the creative process of artistic activism encourages us to notice, reflect, and be open to new creative and political possibilities” (para. 21).

Similarly, T.J. Demos (2016) defines visual activism as “politically directed practices of visuality aimed at catalyzing social, political, and economic change” (p. 87). Related, design activism as defined by Thomas Markussen is “representing design’s central role in (1) promoting social change, (2) raising awareness about values and beliefs... or (3) questioning the constraints [of] mass production and consumerism” (2013, p. 38). Design activism participates in what Markussen calls “disruptive aesthetics” in the public sphere, in “its ability to open up the relation between people’s behavior and emotions - between what they do and what they feel about doing... [Making] the relationship... malleable for renegotiation” (p. 39). Manifestos, social media (hashtags and websites), and peripheral creative methods are important for disseminating creative activists’ messaging, as “part of an ongoing attempt to facilitate democratic experiments that allow the subject to continuously reclaim and reinvent autonomy through a politics of... subversion” (Demos, 2016, p.
Differing from other forms of protest, “project organised [sic] social activism is not based on a stable political organization ... [but rather]... creative events, groups on Facebook, and spontaneous reaction” (Sørenson, forthcoming, as cited in Harrebye, 2015, 128).

The ambiguity of creative activism quite often leads to controversy. Both Harrebye and Markussen discuss creative activists’ methods of protest through opening up discourse, identifying schisms and liminal spaces, creating disruptions in daily life, and exposing hierarchies and systems. Supporters view artistic projects as challenging the status quo and engaging democratic ideals. Critics view “the ironic activist” as a “selfish elitist preaching to the choir and arrogantly distancing herself from reality in the assurance of the possibility of a better world” (p. 140). Further, “the activist has often been accused of being irresponsible because she has not always felt obliged to present coherent alternatives to the system [being] criticiz[ed]” (p. 140). Far from distancing themselves from such controversy, creative activists embrace it, viewing discourse as a necessary step toward progress.

Whether or not these artists embrace the term activism, they are likely to use affiliated terms, like strategy and tactic (Jackson, 2015, pp. 175–176). Quoting Michel de Certeau (1988), Shannon Jackson highlights terms used by creative activists:

Tactic... was De Certeau’s term for identifying modes of resistant practice, embedded within spaces of constraint... Adjusting, reframing, and ironizing the spaces and materials, tactics [can] take shape in alternative readings of dominant space, in momentary uses of available forms, and in the reassemblage of the low-tech, cheap media to be found at hand. Tactics are also practices that respond in time to opportunities as they arise, but which they cannot predict. (2015, p. 176, emphasis hers)

Like many of the artists cited in this article, creative activists may be loosely organized around a social or political campaign: they may critique and “ironize” public or dominant institutions through their use of these spaces; and they may formulate their aesthetics around cheap, available media which can be easily duplicated and disseminated. A group or collective often forms quickly in response to social and political events and opportunities for action. The artist collective cited in this article, #ABQArtSpeaks, conforms to all of these practices.
#ABQArtSpeaks:
A Case Study of Creative Activism at the University of New Mexico

UNM’s University Libraries has a history of hosting displays, exhibits, and performances in library spaces, including the annual campus-wide all-day arts festival, Arts Unexpected. Arising in the particular political and artistic zeitgeist of early 2017, the #ABQArtSpeaks’ display and subsequent controversy led to a realization that certain gaps existed in the University Libraries’ policies. Such policies and guidelines can assist during times of turmoil and disruption. This section describes #ABQArtSpeaks, discusses its mode of creative activism, and details the controversy surrounding its art installation at the FADL.

On January 24, 2017, the UNM artist collective, #ArtSpeaks, issued a call for members (fig. 1). They began organizing through a Student Solidarity Workshop, to “celebrat[e] diversity in the face of hateful and divisive rhetoric taking place on campus” (Listserv communication, 2017, 24 January). The workshop included banner making, sign and tee shirt screen-printing, and a discussion on “everyday resistance tactics”. The inaugural communiqué asked for donated materials, including black and red inks for screen printing, large cardboard or poster board, and/or poles for attaching to signs. Most of these materials would later be (re)used for the RESIST signage around campus.

Fig. 1: #ABQArtSpeaks, initially #ArtSpeaks, issued an announcement on the UNM College of Fine Arts news page. Jan 2017. Screenshot by Stephanie Beene.
Two weeks later, on February 6, UNM arts librarians were contacted by a member of the collective with a request to display signs on February 16. The group envisioned a series of public installations of “visual solidarity” containing the word RESIST installed in the windows of several buildings more visible to the public. The request for a FADL installation was inspired by a video piece that students in the group had created, which would be projected onto the side of the SAAP building. Planned to coincide with this installation, the signage would showcase “large singular letters in the library windows facing East [and] South” that spelled out RESIST and “would fit perfectly in [the floor-to-ceiling] windows.”

Due to the expedited timeline, arts librarians rushed the request through administrative channels, requesting information on any existing display policies. Despite a history of hosting displays, the University Libraries did not have written guidelines addressing how requests should be made or considered. The public-facing nature of the work, and its content (protest) made this request different from others the Libraries had received. The proposed display was approved by Libraries administration with the understanding that guidelines were needed and would be drafted separately from the project.

Because details were communicated almost exclusively over email, the library was unclear about the dimensions, scope, timeline, materiality, and spaces the artists’ group had in mind. The artists’ group was likewise unclear on materials and spaces they would be using, contact information, install or takedown times.

Three days after the request, the letters were installed one day after the originally requested date (Friday, February 17). The letters were hung on the east and west windows instead of the east and south windows, as had originally been proposed. The Sandia Mountains dominate the view from the library’s east windows, while the south windows overlook the bustling urban corridor of Central Avenue (fig. 2).
The Fine Arts and Design Library occupies the top floor of the School of Architecture and Planning, an Antoine Predock building. This is a photograph of the floor-to-ceiling windows that are a feature of this building, and the South-facing side, which overlooks the bustling Central Ave./historic Route 66 corridor. Photo by Stephanie Beene.

The western windows, however, lay just outside the entrance to the library, near a bank of elevators and stairs accessing the remaining three floors of the SAAP building. The western windows represent a part of the building seen by patrons as part of the library, but it is still a part of the SAAP building, thus creating a contested space. In the words of Silas Harrebye (2016), this type of space is a “no-place,” a “space in between,” and perfect for creative activists, who excel in identifying and occupying such thresholds. Creative activists, he alleges, occupy those spaces that “can be... physical... or ... political position[s]. [They] can [act as a] point of departure or a temporary hub where opinions meet” (pp. 18-19).

#ABQArtSpeaks hung a majority of its banners in threshold spaces: walkways, entrances, and “hubs where opinions meet,” whether in library spaces or in other university buildings. (Images of campus installations can be found on the group's public Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/abqARTSPEAKS/) and Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/abqartspeaks/) accounts).
The western windows of the library look toward campus, the UNM bookstore, and the SAAP building’s front steps, where individuals had gathered for protests and rallies over the preceding months. Artistically speaking, this sign provided symmetry and balance to the sign in the eastern windows, being directionally opposite, reaching in toward the campus community as opposed to reaching out to the public. With the two opposite banks of windows bannered in RESIST lettering, the length of the library was visually bracketed in a parenthetical visual protest. The sign on the western-facing windows reflected back on the polished concrete floor and in surrounding glass windows and doors, creating reflections of red and white RESIST lettering (figs 3, 4, and 5).

Fig. 3: The western windows just outside the Fine Arts and Design Library, which look out at the UNM Bookstore and the library’s front steps where many protests had gathered in the months prior. Because of the polished concrete floor, and the glass-structured building, the sign reflected back in a mirrored effect. Photograph by Stephanie Beene.
Red painted letters on white butcher paper were chosen for their visibility. The word RESIST, the rallying cry during protests leading up to the 2016 presidential elections and throughout 2017, was chosen for its call to action and simplicity. Coupled with its hashtag, the artists’ group leveraged social media linguistics for the ubiquity in social life and protest. Each large rectangular letter of the word was hung in one floor-to-ceiling window panel, facing outward from the library. Successful in its visibility, the artwork drew comparisons to a billboard, visible along the busy Central Avenue corridor below, effectively creating a dialogue with the public (figs. 6, 7, and 8). As Phoenix artist Karen Fiorito had described her controversial Trump billboard, “Billboards are perfect because you don’t have to go
to a gallery to see it... You're creating a dialogue with the public [and] reaching people you'd never reach with your artwork” (Janetsky & Borgelt, 2017, para. 3).

Fig. 6: The eastern facing windows look out onto the view of Central Ave/historic Route 66 leading straight into the dominant Sandia Mountain Range. This photograph depicts the Fine Arts and Design Library from near the entrance looking down to the eastern bank of windows. Photograph by Stephanie Beene.

Fig. 7: Seen from below and outside, looking up from Central Ave/historic Route 66: “The billboard effect.” Photograph by Stephanie Beene.
The letters were installed Friday evening, February 17, 2017. While librarians and staff at the FADL were under the impression that they would be up for about one week, the artists thought that the timeline was negotiable and that the work could potentially remain up until the end of the spring semester, in mid-May.

Over the weekend of February 18 and 19, actor Shia LaBeouf’s livestreamed protest performative artwork was relocated from New York City to Albuquerque, with the message “He Will Not Divide Us” (Fingas, 2017, Perlson, 2017). The installation was short-lived, with vandalism occurring four days after installation (Gomez, 2017) and removal by the artist on February 23, 2017, after reports of gunfire (Deerwester, 2017), for a total installation of only six days. Likewise, FADL staff raised concerns about vandalism of the new RESIST installation. BB guns through the fall 2016 semester had damaged the library’s north windows, including windows in several staff offices and a break room. Due to the double-pane storm windows, damage was confined to the exterior panes of glass, but student and staff employees were understandably wary of controversy when previous vandalism had threatened the safety of staff and patrons -- and when a public art installation had led to gunfire the same week within blocks of UNM. Additional discomfort arose from the lack of description or ownership surrounding the signs, the lack of structured programming and outreach, and the gap in policies governing displays and exhibitions in a fraught political atmosphere.

The following week, #ABQArtSpeaks representatives made a second request of the University Libraries to post banners at UNM’s Zimmerman Library, with the goal of expressing support to vulnerable students. The University Libraries, as a unit, had already begun considering how it could convey a welcoming message to library users and was settling on a campaign based on the creative work of Nebraska
librarian Rebecca McCorkindale. The libraries adapted McCorkindale’s “Libraries Are For Everyone” graphics, message, and translations, and added to it the tagline from the UNM Global Education Office’s campaign, #YouAreWelcomeHere. With the University Libraries establishing its own message of support and solidarity, #ABQArtSpeaks’ request was declined.

Throughout the week of February 17-24, tensions over the art installation at the FADL grew. Installed Friday evening, reactions began Saturday morning and did not cease until de-installation. Concerns circled around the nature and placement of the signs, the perceived political statement, their provenance, and the installation timeline. One conservative group wanted to erect their own controversial display, countering what they saw as an overt leftist, political agenda, creating confusion and frustration among library employees as to how to handle such requests.

In an effort to alleviate internal tensions and to direct patron and community concerns, art librarians requested contact information and/or an artists’ statement or both from the group on Monday, February 20, 2017. In response, the collective provided the following statement on Tuesday afternoon:

#ARTSPEAKS uses visual signage to express solidarity with people who may feel marginalized or even threatened on and off our campus. In response to alternate facts, the demonization of the free press, unconstitutional bans on immigration, xenophobia and the rise of bigoted hate, #ARTSPEAKS offers a one word response, request or command (#ARTSPEAKS, personal communication, February 21, 2017).

Library staff removed the RESIST signs on Thursday, February 23, 2017. Following a total installation period of one week, the signs were removed due to mounting pressures and significant concerns. With no written agreement or timeline, and with no procedures or policies in place, all parties were at a loss on the best ways to proceed.

Key to the temporality of the protest piece was the ambiguity and linguistics of their artists’ statement. Recalling Harrebye, a defining trait from the outset was the role of social/new media in the organization and performance of #ABQArtSpeaks. The hashtag, often taken for granted in contemporary communication and culture, is “a complicated visual phenomenon that links typography, text, and an interactive invitation to share, respond, and contest using social media,” (Bryan-Wilson et al., 2016, p. 15). Hashtags are used to call attention to phrases, tag, and label; they are used as tools of aggregation and connection, and are especially noted for their usefulness in protests and social-political movements. The group created an official social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in early March 2017, devoted to documenting local creative activist interventions, rallying group members, and providing inspiration. Prior to March,
the collective interacted *ad hoc* through personal Facebook pages and Instagram feeds via #ArtSpeaks and later, #ABQArtSpeaks. Photos and documentation of the RESIST installations across campus and at the FADL were shared via these methods.

Social media was used in Albuquerque as elsewhere for protest as well as documentation. With the political art world on “perpetual boil,” (Swanson, 2017, para. 8) the de-installation of the RESIST signs at the FADL triggered divisiveness on social media mirroring on-the-ground reality. Over the next few weeks, the artists’ group and its supporters protested UNM’s policies on free speech, academic freedom, and freedom of expression. Comments juxtaposed Yiannoupoulos’ speech and the de-installation of the RESIST signs, questioning UNM’s policies. On the opposite end, a student on Twitter questioned the University’s apparent endorsement of the collective’s political message through the perpetual display of the RESIST banner hung at the entrance of UNM’s Popejoy Theatre (which included the messages “#heretostay” and “No Human is Illegal”).

#ABQArtSpeaks posted images of their video art projection piece the week following de-installation of the RESIST signs at the FADL (February 27-March 1). #ABQArtSpeaks projected the video, sound, and media piece onto the south side of the SAAP building in coordination with the SAAP’s Teach Week and contained the messages, “RESIST Racism, RESIST Colonialism” (fig. 11). Social media messages from the collective compared the RESIST signage display from the previous week to the video projection, asking viewers “which was more political” and blaming the removal of the RESIST signage from FADL on the political “right-wing.” Recalling T.J. Demos, #ABQArtSpeaks’ performative protest stretched beyond the bounds of UNM, and into the interactive social media realms of the internet, creating a living archive and a document of protest alongside the very real public one.

In the months following the RESIST display, the University Libraries have worked to address some of the questions that it provoked. New guidelines for displays have been drafted, which include considerations for review and approval of displays by library staff, as well as opportunities for feedback by the campus and community. Procedures are currently under revision. The campus and library also continue to grapple with questions surrounding public art and representation, including questions surrounding prominent historic murals in Zimmerman Library, which have sparked protest for many years (Whitt, 2018). As of this writing, those questions have not been resolved.

**Libraries and Exhibits: Values and Challenges**

The American Library Association’s (ALA) Library Bill of Rights “affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas” and that “books and other library
resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people the community serves” (rev. 1980). Library exhibits and displays offer opportunities for outreach, as well as the ability to highlight library or community collections (Saidenberg, 1991; Simor, 1991).

A 2010 survey conducted by the Association of Research Libraries found exhibits to be important and widely used among libraries’ special collections and archives (Berenbak et al., 2010). A 2015 survey of 170 U.S. academic library strategic plans found that 38% discussed programs and exhibits as a means of community engagement (Saunders, 2015, p. 289).

Since 2010, a number of case studies and related literature have discussed ideas for, and experiences with, hosting exhibits and displays in academic libraries (Cirasella & Deutsch, 2012; Swanick, Sharon, & Reinhart, 2015; Maloney, 2012). A strategy for exhibiting collections is to collaborate with campus organizations or students in the curation and management of exhibitions. Some libraries have discussed displays as a powerful means of promoting university research or faculty and student work (Bronars and Crowley, 2014; Sorrell et al., 2017). Other libraries have sought student assistance in planning the physical spaces in which work is exhibited, including student-led design projects (Fox, Carpenter, & Doshi, 2011; Leousis and Sproull, 2016). Libraries have increasingly used technology to enhance or expand the reach of their exhibits and displays, experimenting with social media, image boards, virtual bookshelves, or mobile tags (Baker, 2010; Maloney, 2012; Mikos, Horne, & Weaver, 2015; Severson, 2014).

Nearly all of these cases include discussion of the benefits experienced by those who interact with the exhibits and displays (Chen, Pickle, & Waldroup, 2015). Community engagement is typically assessed by informal methods, such as counting attendees and/or reviewing comments in guest books. The Community Engagement Engine developed by the University of Florida has extended this concept by developing an open source tool designed to enhance interactions between exhibit attendees and the library staff who curated those exhibits (Keith, Taylor, & Santamaría-Wheeler, 2017).

None of these cases include discussion of managing exhibits or displays that provoke controversy, though guidelines put forth by the ALA do speak to this. ALA’s Statement on Exhibit Spaces and Bulletin Boards (2014) directs libraries to “not shrink from developing exhibits because of controversial content or because of the beliefs or affiliations of those whose work is represented.” ALA’s Statement on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (2017) also includes language on exhibits:

“Libraries should welcome diverse content in their exhibit spaces and diverse ideas, individuals, and groups in their meeting rooms, even if some members of the community may object or be offended.” These statements, which serve as interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights, align with the idea captured in the broader document that “materials should not be excluded because of the origin,
background, or views of those contributing to their creation” (American Library Association, amended 1980).

Accounts from libraries that have hosted controversial exhibits have generally affirmed support for the library’s continued involvement with exhibits and displays. They also provide recommendations, including: 1) libraries should maintain clearly defined policies for their exhibits; 2) libraries should enlist support from their parent institutions; 3) exhibits should include written statements from the creators or curators about any included materials; and 4) there should be opportunities for others to provide feedback and perspective (Fitchett, 2002; Flag flap..., 2002; Madison, 2015; Suarez, 2016; Walker, Teaster, & Kelly, 1998).

A particularly strong defense for exhibits on challenging topics is mounted by Barbara Jones, former University Librarian at Wesleyan University’s Olin Library, who authored Protecting Intellectual Freedom in Your Academic Library (2009) and whose library participated in a variety of performance and studio art endeavors including an art installation consisting of two wooden closets with doors marked “blacks only” and “whites only” in which library visitors could enter, sit, and then reflect upon and record their feelings about race. According to Jones, these undertakings were part of an intentional positioning of the library:

> Wesleyan’s library, though private, has decided to be an *agora* – the Greek word for marketplace. The library is a marketplace of ideas. Though private, it functions like a designated public forum, where visitors have the right to receive ideas. And they are given all sorts of ways to receive them. (p. 129)

In other cases, prominent libraries including Doe Library at the University of California Berkeley, the Art Library at Rutgers University, and the Library of Congress, have relocated and removed artwork, taken items out of an exhibition, or closed entire exhibitions when they met with backlash sparked by either the campus community, the broader community, or—in the case of the Library of Congress—library staff (De Witt, 1995; Dougherty defends..., 1978; Heybour, 2016).

Still other libraries appear to position themselves so as to prevent or preempt controversy. Kandiuk’s (2017) review of the exhibit policies of 77 North American academic libraries found that many included criteria that would appear to restrict academic and intellectual freedom, such as: prohibiting the promotion of personal or organizational positions; disallowing controversial content, or allowing it only if presented from a neutral or nonpartisan point of view; discouraging exhibits containing explicit imagery, nudity, or graphical displays of violence; and requiring that displays be “suitable for view by the broad community of people who visit the library” (p. 103).

Libraries face challenges in promoting expression and maintaining impartiality with displays, reflecting broader debates over the role of intellectual freedom and
library neutrality within the profession. Exhibits, like library collections, invariably involve representations and, as Gwendolyn Reece has noted:

The conflict about representation is not limited to the specific content ascribed to one group or another, but also requires many questions to be asked of any representation. Who has the power to make a representation? Who is silenced? How does a representation function to naturalize a commonsense understanding of the world that sustains existing power relations? Does the representation challenge existing power relations? (2005, p. 366).

Some argue that the construct of the library as a neutral space for displays, much like the idea of librarianship as a neutral profession, is illusory. Robert Jensen (2008) has argued that the stance of neutrality falsely implies that library decision-making is not influenced by values:

Given limited resources and physical space, no library can acquire all possible publications and display them in the same fashion. Obviously, choices are inevitable. Those choices should be made on sound professional grounds...But we also should not ignore that all these decisions have a politics to them. That does not mean they are purely political judgments, but that political and moral values—and the judgments that flow from them—inevitably affect the judgments. (p. 96).

Others assert that maintaining neutrality can impede the ability of libraries to engage their communities. Communities may have greater needs for information and discussion during times of conflict or crisis. Libraries that do not engage with controversial issues for fear of inciting controversy or being seen as biased may lose the opportunity to serve as both a resource and forum for exploration of different perspectives. Such a stance may be particularly problematic for libraries whose communities include marginalized individuals and groups: “From this perspective, choosing neutrality (or disengagement) in time of conflict is choosing to maintain status quo at the expense of one portion of the community.” (Gibson et al., 2017, p. 754).

Librarianship is not the only profession to grapple with controversy or with the dilemmas that surround professional objectivity and neutrality. These topics have received increased attention from the museum community during the past few decades and is reviewed in the next section.
Exhibiting Controversy: Lessons from Museums

Writing in 1992, curator Lonnie Bunch exhorted museums to embrace controversy as a means of transcending their traditional risk-averse role as “temples of truth,” shifting instead to offer “forums that stimulate debate and understanding, arenas that allow audiences to better comprehend the complexity and ambiguity of the past and help them wrestle with difficult issues of race, class, and gender” (pp. 63-65).

The difficult issues noted by Bunch—along with many other conflicting values—were a clear backdrop for a number of controversial exhibits at American museums during the 1990s, including the *Enola Gay* and *Sensation* (Kaplan, 2017; Dubin, 1999; Yakel, 2000). Some, such as the *Enola Gay*, were ultimately curtailed or revised in response to the outrage they provoked (Dubin, 1999). Others, such as *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: a Dialogue on American Sweatshops, 1820-Present*, stand out for their success in using controversial subject matter to promote reflection and discourse (Yakel, 2000). The *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* exhibit, which was staged at the National Museum of American History, incorporated multiple perspectives on the topic of sweatshops and offered visitors the opportunity to provide their own reactions. Alexander’s (2000) study of the exhibit comments book found that “visitors used the exhibit as a starting point for their own intellectual musings. They moved beyond personal stories to serious discussions of the exhibit... In a most intriguing way, the exhibit engaged and empowered the visitors” (p. 89). An additional noteworthy effort was the public introduction to the exhibit provided by the museums’ curators and directors, which shared with visitors the rationale for addressing a sensitive topic:

> Museums make the greatest contribution to public education when they provide audiences with tools to both celebrate and critically analyze American history. Ultimately, museums mount these kinds of exhibitions because they have confidence in the American public's tolerance for candor and its appreciation for important historical stories. (Liebhold, 2000, p. 67).

As museums responded to Bunch’s call to stimulate debate and understanding through provocative programming, they also began to develop best practices for anticipating and managing controversy. Cooks (1998) identified five strategies that helped host a traveling exhibition on AIDS in the late 1980s: 1) believe in what you are doing, 2) prepare your museums, 3) reach out to your community, 4) host a preview and invite potential enemies, and 5) learn from the stories of people who have already hosted the exhibit (pp. 18-19). Cooks’ examples of how her institution employed these guidelines offer insight into how an organization can engage and prepare their staff, who may themselves be opposed to or afraid of the exhibition’s content. They also speak to the benefits of consulting the broader community, including community members who may hold divergent views on the exhibit. Finally, they emphasize providing opportunity for exhibit participants to share their responses, whether negative or positive.
The National Coalition Against Censorship has also developed strategies in their *Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy*, with the intent of encouraging resistance to censorship that may be either encouraged by external parties, or imposed internally. They recommend three best practices: 1) developing a public statement affirming a commitment to artistic and intellectual freedom of speech; 2) making preparations in advance of upcoming programs and potential controversy; and 3) creating procedures for addressing the press or complaints from the public after the exhibit opens. Institutional statements committing to free speech stand apart from any specific exhibit, and are intended as a platform, which supports everything from selection and curation processes and procedures, to how concerns are addressed as they arise. The preparatory work includes documenting selection/curation criteria and defining roles and responsibilities for exhibits, as well as planning ways to engage with audiences, including seeking input in advance of the exhibit. Procedures should be developed for receiving and responding to complaints, which might include appointing or hiring spokespersons (potentially crisis response personnel). Institutions may also choose to address complaints by expanding exhibit programming to offer additional venues where conflicting points of view can be expressed.

Museums have also grappled with exhibiting difficult histories: narratives and sources that represent injustice, violence, trauma, and oppression and that may involve topics such as racism and violence. These exhibits may challenge visitors’ identities, their broader understanding of the world, and their ability to understand the motivations and actions of those whose realities may be very different from their own (Rose, 2016). By supporting learners to engage difficult content through dialogue, museum professionals can assist with acknowledgement of a challenging past in a conscientious and ethical manner. Although interpreting topics such as slavery and war presents significant challenges, any risks associated with engaging this material are outweighed by the damage that is done when difficult histories are suppressed or silenced in an effort to be neutral (Gallas & DeWolf Perry, 2015).

Pathways for the Engaged Library:  
Intersections between Libraries and Museums

“The act of showing brings with it an inherent dialectic between the intentions of the presenter and the experiences of the spectator.” - Kathleen McLean, 1999

Libraries and museums are sometimes collectively referred to as cultural heritage institutions with shared missions to collect, organize, and preserve knowledge. Museums, with their histories of acquiring objects for display, have a history of placing an emphasis on education and exhibition, which has only recently begun to shift into a more dynamic exchange between communities and curators (Karp &
Levine, 1991; McLean, 1999; Boyd, 1999; Black, 2010; Cameron, 2010; Cooks, 2011; Lau, Scott, & Seriff., 2017). Libraries similarly emphasize the careful acquisition, preservation, and cataloging of materials, to somewhat different ends, with exhibitions and educational programming entering praxis within the last several decades. Both professions, since at least the 1960s, have been concerned with questions of multiculturalism and diversity, community engagement, and inclusive collections. Both have grappled with exhibitions, and with questions of how to engage controversial issues, materials, and/or conversations that arise from exhibitions.

Important differences distinguish libraries and museums, particularly the ways in which each institution acquires, organizes and presents materials from their collections. Libraries collect materials meant for circulation and access, and work to organize their collections to allow connections to be made between materials. Museums acquire materials through a complex system of curatorial and education departments: a self-conscious selection of pieces is often identified for display under a unifying theme or artists’ retrospectives. Curators build connections between items through curation and interpretation. Libraries often allow patrons to make connections on their own (Robbins, 2012, p. 425). Special collections and archives often present a third space, which includes aspects of both libraries and museums.

Despite these differences, museums and libraries can assist each other with thoughtful, shared guidelines for addressing controversy. During a 2017 forum featuring librarian and intellectual freedom activist James LaRue with arts advocate and intellectual freedom activist Svetlana Mintcheva, the two activists discussed the complementary roles of libraries and museums, and emphasized the unique approaches that each profession might share with the other to strengthen intellectual freedom and resist censorship. LaRue argued that intellectual freedom is a shared core value for librarianship and museums, but has only been incorporated into professional guidelines and statements for libraries. Individual librarians and libraries differ in how this value informs collection development, programming, and exhibitions, but all share foundational principles. LaRue noted that the museum profession could adopt such an approach from librarianship to provide support and guidance to museum practitioners. Mintcheva highlighted the preparatory work that museums often engage in before hosting exhibitions, suggesting that these efforts—creating educational materials and programs to complement exhibit content, promoting conversations between curators, audiences, and museum administrators or advisory boards—could also benefit libraries. Both spoke to the importance of anticipating and providing a thoughtful response to, as well as a forum for, challenges and controversy surrounding exhibits (LaRue, 2017; U-M museum studies program presents: Aspiration/Obligation? Imagining intellectual freedom in museums, 2017).

At a time when the American public arena seems consumed by polarization, museums and libraries may play a particularly important role. Surveys conducted by MuseumNext (2017) and the Pew Research Center (Horrigan, 2016) indicate that
both institutions are regarded as trustworthy and credible. Fifty-eight percent of respondents to the Pew survey saw their libraries as contributing “a lot” to creating educational opportunities for their communities, and roughly one third indicated that their libraries contributed “a lot” to helping them decide which information to trust. Slightly less than one-third of the respondents to the MuseumNext survey indicated that museums should have something to say about social issues, but this percentage increased when cross-referenced with those respondents who said they frequently visited museums. In addition, 44% of respondents under the age of 30 said that museums that speak to social issues would be more relevant to them.

The authors found much in the literature to inform improved practice for librarians and museum professionals interested in engaging their communities through exhibits and displays. Even difficult local experiences with controversial displays, such as the RESIST case study, offer an occasion for learning and growth. In addition to the case studies and guidelines presented in this article, the authors see several other possibilities for further work. One example may be to incorporate displays into civic engagement initiatives such as The Conversation Continues @ your library: The Place Where Democracy Happens (ALA offers free webinars about convening, moderating, naming and framing deliberative forums, n.d.) produced by the American Library Association Center for Civic Life. Another possibility may be to undertake interactive and participatory displays that document social movements (Rhodes, 2014).

Additional areas for research include investigating attitudes of library and museum professionals towards displays as a means of civic engagement, or exploring community responses to library exhibits or displays involving controversial material (Cameron, 2003; Russo, 2011; Harris et al, 1995; Lau et al., 2017). If libraries wish to engage communities with activities such as co-curating displays, how might this type of collaboration be achieved? Are librarians comfortable or capable of acting as curators? Research by Fouracre (2015) suggests that few librarians feel prepared to take on such a role. Lastly, it would be interesting to see continuing evolution of guidelines employed by libraries and museums to promote critical discourse within these spaces (such as Cameron, 2010; Cooks, 2011; Lau et al, 2017).
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