

Sally Yerkovich

Reflecting Upon Hide/Seek

What happens when a museum treats difficult history? The recent exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* was the first major survey focused upon the influence of gay and lesbian artists on American portraiture. It became the subject of controversy when a video in the exhibition was declared 'anti-Christian' and was removed from the show by the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, the governing body for the Portrait Gallery.

The Institute of Museum Ethics at Seton Hall University in collaboration with the Institute for Ethical Leadership at Rutgers University Business School convened a conversation about the exhibition and the surrounding controversy. It raised a number of questions including: does a museum have the responsibility to take on challenging topics in exhibitions and programs? How did media coverage of the controversy over *Hide/Seek* have an impact upon the controversy? Can open communication be sustained in the face of deeply felt conflicting opinions? How does funding for an exhibition affect its content and its ability to take on difficult subjects? Can conflicts between ethical and practical concerns be resolved? Can museums create exhibitions on topics that challenge their audiences to think in new ways without getting into debates that are counterproductive? How can museums establish a process for civil dialogue?

This paper will treat *Hide/Seek* as a case study and ask if there are lessons that it can provide for the development of exhibitions on difficult subjects for the future.

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Sally Yerkovich is Director of the Institute of Museum Ethics at Seton Hall University and a consultant to numerous non-profit and educational institutions. With a M.A. and Ph.D. in cultural anthropology (ethnography and folklore) from the University of Pennsylvania, she has over twenty-five years of leadership experience in high profile American institutions including the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, New Jersey Historical Society, South Street Seaport Museum, Museum for African Art, and the Tribute Center at the World Trade Center site in New York City. Since 1996, she has also worked with leaders of cultural organizations in Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe sharing best practices, encouraging learning in informal settings, and promoting social justice. She has served on the Board of the American Association of Museums and the U.S. Committee for the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and was President of the Council for Museum Anthropology and the Fund for Arts and Culture.

Sally Yerkovich

Director

Institute of Museum Ethics, Seton Hall University

250 South End Avenue, #9D

New York, NY 10280

USA

Tel: +1-917-543-1750

E-mail: sy@pipeline.com