



Risk Assessment and Management for Exhibition Content



This resource has been produced to assist you in developing a risk management strategy for exhibitions that may contain content that could be perceived to be controversial, provocative or have the potential to offend certain members of your community, audience or stakeholder groups.

The resource will assist you in developing a plan for identifying risk, put in place strategies to mitigate potential offence and provide advice on how to manage situations that may arise.

This resource deals exclusively with developing a risk management plan for the content of exhibitions encompassing the artwork included, the themes and concepts addressed and the nature and circumstances of the artists themselves. A risk assessment plan for exhibition content should be used in conjunction with a broader risk management framework that identifies physical, environmental, health and safety hazards of your exhibition and facility.

Likewise, local government authorities may have communication management frameworks in place for managing public affairs, and these can be used in conjunction with your own content risk assessment.

At the end of this document is a standard template which may be used to apply to your specific exhibition context.

This resource has been prepared by Rachel Arndt, Gallery Programs & Touring Exhibitions Manager, Museums & Galleries of NSW and Claire Watson, Director, NETS Victoria with content and examples from Shoalhaven Arts Centre and The University of Queensland Art Museum.

Please note, the content in this document is for the purposes of guidance only and does not constitute legal advice. Every situation is different and requires its own unique process.

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This document is also accompanied by the following editable documents:

- Risk Assessment Template: Exhibitions
- Risk Assessment Template: Artworks

Before the Exhibition Arrives

Complete Risk Assessment

It is important to question and be familiar with the content of each work, the nature of the themes and concepts of the exhibition and the artists included in an exhibition prior to its opening at your gallery or museum.

At the end of this document is a Risk Assessment Template which provides prompts to identify potential issues. Consider forwarding this template to the exhibition curator during the developmental stages of the exhibition – prior to the selection of artworks – as a way to create a discussion about potential concerns that may arise.

In attempting to answer these questions you can consider the artist statements and seek further information from curators, the artists themselves, touring agencies, partners or conduct further research yourself. By considering each work against these questions, you will be able to identify potentially controversial works (or artists) and enable you to identify an appropriate response to minimise potential negative outcomes.

It is encouraged that you complete this process in collaboration with curators and/or artists during the developmental phase of an exhibition. The role and responsibilities of public galleries and museums in managing risk, and valuing the viewpoints of all in the community, should also be communicated to external curators and artists as part of this process.

In a Local Government context, once risk assessment is completed it may be important to seek support and backing from senior management. The risk assessment template could be used to prepare a written proposal or outline with appropriate imagery and explanation for further discussion.

Mitigation Options

Following your pre-assessment, if there are works you deem to be contentious in your exhibition there are a number of steps that can be taken to minimise the impact or possibility of complaints or visitor disturbance.

Prepare a written statement about the exhibition, with short points on each contentious work. This statement should include some general points about the benefits of diverse views and perspectives, freedom of expression etc. It can explain that while the gallery believes it has a responsibility to present confronting work, it ensures that in doing so it complies with all relevant laws and protocols relating to the display of such works.

Then address what each contentious work is attempting to say. Artists and/or the curator/s should be ready and able to prepare such statements if requested. The statement might explain how the artist's ideas have developed, what has prompted the artist's concerns, and how the creative process evolved. Where relevant provide historical and/or social context for the work, details of the artist's background or training and expert opinion.

The statement should articulate that the work was not merely intended to shock but has a serious purpose.

Each statement can form part of a communications plan and front of house and frontline staff can be briefed accordingly.

If particular stakeholder groups are directly identified or likely to be offended, it might be worthwhile to reach out to leaders of such groups and ask for comment in advance. Those views can be incorporated into briefings for staff and volunteers.

Communications Plan

Local government authorities will likely have their own communications team and communications risk management frameworks or protocols in place. Council dictated processes will need to inform the development or implementation of a risk assessment framework for exhibition content described here.

Be proactive in communicating any challenging content in your online promotions. Consider incorporating an appropriate statement as part of the exhibition promotional campaign to notify audiences in advance about particular content.



Where an artwork has been identified for potential controversy, it is a good idea to develop a few recommended phrases that could be used by staff responsible for social media or to explain a situation. Discuss concerns with the relevant touring agency and seek their advice.

For example, for use on social media:

Thanks for your comment (where appropriate provide context to art work / direct person to existing media / commentary). If you'd like to learn more or have a more detailed discussion about this, please email us on gallery@....

Thanks for visiting us, I understand your concerns/ I hear that you feel offended/ let me know if there is anything I can do to help you feel differently. [Comment on other exhibitions coming up, direct to resources about the work etc., then invite them to visit again in future]. If you'd like to give us more detailed feedback or discuss your concerns further, please email us on gallery@....

If commenting on social media needs to be blocked

Due to the number of comments received on our present exhibition, we are suspending commenting on this page until xxxx. If you want to get in touch please contact us via phone, email or DM.

If the gallery/museum has to close

Due to [concisely explain incident – a protest at the gallery, a threat received], and in the interests of keeping visitors and staff safe, we have had to close the gallery. We are working with [police / rangers / council staff] to resolve the situation and hope to reopen again shortly. We'll update you here when we reopen.

Potential options for general media points are listed in Media Point Examples at the end of this document.

Considerations for Installation

You can consider your exhibition layout and design and place possibly contentious work away from main sight lines or entrance ways or in separate rooms. Works containing swearing can for instance be placed above the eye height of young children, or works with nudity out of view from the café.

This will allow you to display warning signs on walls prior to audience interaction with works. Warning signs can also be placed at the entrance to an exhibition space.

Warning signage can be prepared and displayed at an appropriate distance, allowing visitors to choose to enter or not. Also consider signage that adheres to First Nations protocols (warning for images of deceased etc.).

Work placement should also consider access and viewing by different groups, including children, the vision impaired, wheelchair users etc.

Examples of warning signage are available at the end of this document.

Once the Exhibition is Open

For Staff & Volunteers

Once the exhibition is installed, but before the exhibition is due to open to the public, it is important to brief your staff and volunteers. Curatorial walkthroughs can be used to address the exhibition themes and content, as well as identify particular works that may cause concern.

Provide staff and volunteers with the notes you have prepared on each work and as much contextual information on the exhibition themes and concepts as possible.

It is also important that staff and volunteers feel that the gallery space is a culturally and socially safe environment for themselves. If they are being disproportionately targeted regarding a contentious artwork/exhibition, or find content challenging themselves, ensuring that there is a platform or forum for them to openly express their concern is essential.

Cultural Mediation

M&G NSW have been investigating the model of cultural mediation, which aims to deepen the interest and participation of existing audiences, whilst also creating unique pathways to develop new audiences.

The term cultural mediation first developed in the 1980s in Europe and North America. Initially associated with the transfer or transmission of knowledge, it has since become known more as an act of forming relationships of mutual exchange between the visiting public, artists, works, objects and the institutions charged with the collection, preservation, interpretation or presentation of cultural objects and material. Today cultural mediation is widespread across continental Europe. France, in particular, has incorporated it into their tertiary studies and mediators are used in large institutions like Palais de Tokyo and the Pompidou Centre.

Cultural mediation can enable front of house staff and volunteers to play an active role in engaging visitors in conversations about exhibitions, artworks and artists. Staff and volunteers can encourage visitor inquiry through conversations that promote critical thinking about art and enrich the visitor's experience of a gallery or museum's programming. A cultural mediation program can break down perceived barriers to engagement with art and institutions, and allow for further reflection and awareness around potential contentious or challenging topics.

For more information see M&G NSW cultural mediation resources here:

mgnsw.org.au/sector/support/programs/cultural-mediation/

mgnsw.org.au/sector/programs/cultural-mediation/resources/

Written statements prepared on potentially challenging or contentious works can also be incorporated in to cultural mediation handbooks or training packs developed for each exhibition. Such packs can compile stories, reading lists, interviews, television episodes, movies, excursion suggestions, and other threads of information that have informed artist's practices, and may form interest areas for the staff and volunteers to research, watch and learn from. This could also include helping galleries find specialists with unique interests to speak to staff and audiences, as well as seeking experiences outside the gallery to transport the ideas within an exhibition into the architecture of and environment surrounding a community. All these additional resources can equip staff and volunteers with the tools and confidence when speaking to visitors about more challenging topic areas.



Handling conflict or negativity

Part of your staff briefing can also include tips on how to handle negativity or conflict when interacting with visitors. There may be times where visitors express unfavourable, biased or discriminatory views. These situations can be challenging and confronting.

Some suggestions that may help staff and volunteers to navigate these situations include:

- Remain calm and don't mimic their behaviour. Arguing back will escalate the situation.
- Acknowledge that everyone has different views and perspectives.
- Take the conversation back to what the artist is intending to say/question. If that doesn't work, move the conversation to another artwork or non-conceptual element of the artwork (e.g. what it is made from, how it was made, texture, etc.)
- Agree to disagree and move on.
- For those who argue a different perspective: "I appreciate your perspective. In [artist's name] case, she/he/they were approaching the topic from [this] perspective. I think it's great that art can be used as a vehicle for us to have conversations about the different ways we all view the world."
- If someone asks for your personal opinion on something: give it, but only if you feel safe to do so and can do so without controversy. If not, you could simply say, "I'm not sure what I think about it at the moment" and guide the conversation

back to something less contentious. Staff members and volunteers should feel comfortable to be able to express their own likes or dislikes for a particular works, but they also need to uphold the rights to freedom of expression for artists and be able to express the motivations behind a work to visitors regardless of their personal opinions.

- If a visitor finds something confronting: you could say "sometimes art does makes us feel uncomfortable. But it encourages us consider the world from a different perspective".
- If you feel uncomfortable with the conversation: leave the conversation. You could say "well, thanks for chatting. I'll give you some time to explore the exhibition on your own."
- Offering a feedback form to visitors, enables the visitor to capture their experience and ensure it is captured and reviewed by management.

Complaints Procedure and Process

It is important that staff and volunteers are aware of the complaints and the crisis management response of the gallery or museum (and its operating Council, as appropriate).

A complaint or incident response framework should address how complaints are managed, who is responsible for handling what and the steps taken.

Example: Incident Response Framework (within a local government setting):

Example: Incident Response Framework

Phase 1: ALERT

Issues will become apparent through social media, in-person interaction, the media or Local Government systems and processes. Any member of the gallery or museum staff, or the volunteers may be alerted to an issue.

Once alerted to issue, the person who has received the alert should pass the information on to other staff / volunteers working as required for safety and response.

Phase 2: ASSESS

Once alerted, the person who receives the alert can make a reasonable decision on which level the issue is at and whether they are the appropriate person to make the response, or who to pass the information on to for actioning. For higher level issues, the person receiving the alert can help ensure a strong response by considering the below questions as additional information to be passed on.

- What happened?
- Where and when?
- Who was affected?
- Who was involved?
- When did we learn about the incident?
- What is the impact/likely impact?
- Is there any immediate danger?
- Do we understand the entire issue?

Phase 3: ACTIVATE

Responses are activated according to the following flowchart of roles and responsibilities:

Staff/ Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • immediate response to in-person complaints • use FAQs provided to respond and call on Gallery/Museum Manager/Director for escalation.
Officer/ Coordinator / Curator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitors and responds to social media • responds to in-person complaints • first responder to threats of violence - call 000 if required • escalates social media and in person issues to Manager/Director or Council Comms team, if relevant
Manager/ Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • authorised media spokesperson • WHS and First Aid officer - responds to immediate threats at gallery/museum • responds to email and written complaints • authorises 48 hour shutdown of social media • works with artists where they are directly targeted • alerts Section Manager / Group Director / CEO and corporate comms team as appropriate

Corporate Comms Team (Local Government)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • issues media releases as required - coordinates response from CEO / Mayor etc • authorised media spokesperson • support for management of social media
Director / CEO / Mayor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responds to media enquiries as appropriate (statements and FAQs supplied in advance) • responds to written correspondence as appropriate • responds to council Notices of Motion or other issues as appropriate

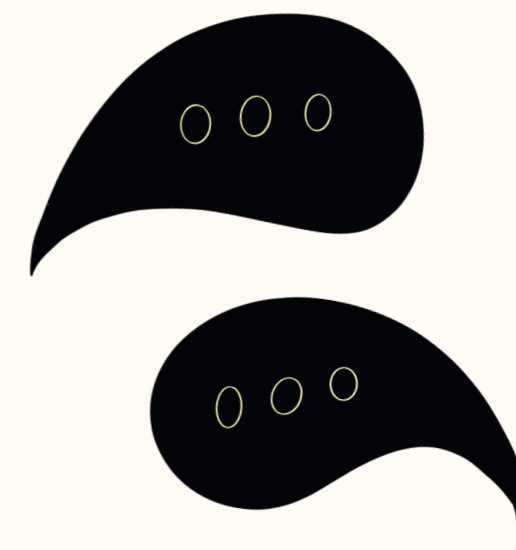
If a situation sits outside the framework and flowchart the Manager/Director will immediately coordinate with their direct manager on appropriate action.

A record of all correspondence / incidents should be kept. For social media screenshots should be taken and entered into the appropriate records management system. Emails and responses should also be entered into the records management system, and in person issues should be noted in a log/diary or through a WHS incident report form.

Phase 4: REVIEW

Once the situation has been addressed and resolved, all those involved in the response will gather to share their experience and review the response and the outcomes. The Crisis Communication Plan should be updated as needed based on the review.

If there are any outstanding issues that need to be addressed, or if further monitoring of communication/media is necessary, the review process will highlight these and designate final tasks / responses as appropriate.



Escalation Framework

The gallery or museum should also consider developing an Escalation Framework so that staff and volunteers can determine the severity of an incident or crisis.

The following is an example of a framework used in a local government context:

The “description” column describes what constitutes a definition of a crisis and what actions must be taken in response. It also includes a few examples of what that crisis would look like.

The “action” column indicates teams or individuals who may take action.

Level	Description	Actions
Level 1	<p>This is the highest level of crisis escalation and should involve an all-hands-on-deck approach. Describe this situation as immediate to your customers, partners, employees, and/or all stakeholders.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Threat of violence to gallery/museum, staff, artists or Council. Aggressive / angry responses to exhibition directed at staff / volunteers Protests / picketing at entrance to gallery Petition/s to government officials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where immediate threat to life or safety exists call 000 Refer to standard operating procedures/complaints procedures and WHS assessment for managing angry visitors Ensure all volunteers have personal safety alarm on them Alert management immediately Alert comms team – where suitable issue press release and review whether warning signage is accurate Where closure of gallery required, update socials with information Seek support from industry support bodies such as NAVA or Arts Law Turn off comments on social media for 48 hours with a clear and concise explanation as to why Use written statements to media only – do not respond to questions on the phone. ‘Can you please send me your questions and the deadline, so I can respond appropriately’ or ‘I am not able to comment on this matter, please send questions to ... who is authorised to comment’ Explain situation to touring agency (where applicable, the touring agency would inform the artists and curators), artists/curators involved and advise them of steps being taken
Level 2	<p>Level 2 presents a moderate potential risk or impact on business operations, customer success, and/or company reputation.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National news story with negative response to exhibition Concerted social media attack on gallery’s, artist’s or council’s pages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek support from industry support bodies such as NAVA or Arts Law Turn off comments on social media for 48 hours with a clear and concise explanation as to why Use written statements to media only – do not respond to questions on the phone. ‘Can you please send me your questions and the deadline, so I can respond appropriately’ or ‘I am not able to comment on this matter, please send questions to ... who is authorised to comment’ Seek friendly media to publish alternate angle Explain situation to touring agency (where applicable, the touring agency would inform the artists and curators), artists/curators involved and advise them of steps being taken. Where appropriate, explore their ideas for potential approaches to support better interpretation

Level 3	<p>This is unlikely to pose a long-term risk to or impact business operations, customer success, and/or company reputation, but the team should still be on the same page for responding.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local news story with negative slant Multiple negative responses on social media Complaint to State / Federal MPs Complaint from local elected representative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Response on social media Alert comms team and management to news story / social media issues Use written responses to media Encourage friendly media to publish alternate story. Repost links on social media of pre-opening media that provides context and responses to issues raised (where appropriate) Ensure volunteers and staff aware of issues and how to respond if raised in person Explain situation to touring agency (where applicable, the touring agency would inform the artists and curators), artists/curators involved and advise them of steps being taken. Where appropriate, explore their ideas for potential approaches to support better interpretation
Level 4	<p>This is where most “crises” will fall into. They tend to be slightly bigger versions of day-to-day issues that may need a bit of extra effort to be fully resolved or addressed.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative social media posts by individuals Negative feedback in person at gallery Letter of complaint to council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Response on social media Customer service-based management of feedback in gallery/museum – invite to submit feedback in writing if customer is not content with verbal acknowledgement. Complaints to Council managed through Records system Explain situation to touring agency (where applicable, the touring agency would inform the artists and curators), artists/curators involved and advise them of steps being taken. Where appropriate, explore their ideas for potential approaches to support better interpretation

Include the after-hours and emergency contact details for the appropriate people as part of your framework.

Note: The gallery/museum has a Duty of Care to artists and curators that are experiencing bullying online. They should be checked in with regularly and offered support in the ways that best meet their needs. This can be through offering appropriate connections to counselling services, connecting them to Arts Law and/or NAVA, or providing expert counsel towards them developing a media statement, should this be the best outcome for the situation. Maintaining this relationship is important to demonstrate the commitment the gallery and museum holds towards freedom of expression and to valuing different viewpoints in the community.



Post Incident or Crisis Review

Once the exhibition has concluded it is important to review your processes and procedures and reflect on how your staff, volunteers and management handled the incident or crisis and what could be done next time to improve. This could be instituting a regular feedback/sharing mechanism for staff/volunteers, undertaking further training for staff/volunteers or reaching out to, or designing future programs for particular groups in your community that may have been affected, indirectly or directly.

A debriefing meeting can also be arranged to allow staff and/or volunteers to share outcomes in a safe, collegiate manner.

Warning Signage Examples

Exhibition

Explain the need for signage to the artist/curator involved and collaborate where possible towards an agreed style of communication.

- This exhibition contains XXXX. Viewer discretion is advised.
- This exhibition represents viewpoints that some may find sensitive. Viewer discretion is advised.
- Please be advised that this exhibition contains strong language. The use of this language is intended to reflect the everyday, lived experiences of Australians represented in the exhibition.

Artwork Specific

Explain the need for signage to the artist/curator involved and collaborate where possible towards an agreed style of communication.

- Please be advised, this artwork presents (sexual / violent) content, that some may deem sensitive. Parental supervision or discretion is recommended
- Please be advised, this artwork presents violent content. Viewer discretion is advised.

See accompanying documents:

Risk Assessment Template: Exhibition

Risk Assessment Template: Artworks

Media Points Examples

The following points can be used in media releases or social media to explain the decision making behind the exhibition, choice or artwork on display or themes discussed:

- The role of galleries is to present a diverse range of viewpoints representing diverse members of the community.
- Art can and will generate conversation in the community and this is an integral and important part of its role.
- It is important that community members can access different viewpoints to support more understanding and respect of different cultures, religion, sexual preferences other than their own.

This document is intended to be updated and to be an ongoing resource. If you have ideas to improve this resource please contact M&G NSW on <https://mgsw.org.au/sector/about-us/contact-us/>

Risk Assessment Template: Exhibitions

Exhibition Statement _____

What is the exhibition about? What are the themes and concepts addressed by the artist/s? _____

Is there more information available on the exhibition? Please list, including any links. _____

Statement on each work _____

Risk Assessment Template: Artworks

This is ideally used during the development of an exhibition with the curator, providing the details necessary. In some cases, it may help inform the curatorship of an exhibition.

Artwork title The title itself may be deemed to be contentious if swearing or aggressive statements are included, for example.	
Artwork date, medium and dimensions The date, medium and dimensions can also give rise for concern. For example, if the work contains human or animal excrement, blood or urine.	
Artist Does the artist already have a history of controversy? Are they a household name or regarded in the media as controversial?	
Lender This may be relevant if the work is on loan from a major institution or a collector	
Key details about the work/subject of the work	
Key details about the artist Include details about the artist's training, background that may give more information or indication of their motivation and direction	

Assessment Questions It is important to question and be familiar with the content of each work, the nature of the themes and concepts of the exhibition and the artists included in an exhibition prior its opening at your gallery or museum. The following questions can be used as a prompt to identify potential issues.	Responses In attempting to answer these questions you can consider the artist statements and seek further information from curator/s, the artist's themselves, touring agencies, partners or conduct further research yourself. By considering each work against these criteria you will be able to identify potentially controversial works (or artists).	Mitigation Identify an appropriate response to minimise potential negative outcomes.
Consider what some audience members might have to say about this work, potentially react to? Describe elements		
Is the work culturally insensitive?		
Is there cultural appropriation? Does the work draw from cultures other than the artist's own? If so, to what extent? What is the background of the artist? What does their artist statement reveal about this approach? What is the curator's thoughts on the appropriateness of the work? Should a cultural advisor be appointed to provide recommendations? Should consultation occur with local cultural groups to determine appropriateness, such as local Elders?		
Is there an inherently unknown aspect to the work that requires controls or an independent consultant to confirm the work presents no risk?		

Does it comply with Australia Council's Protocols for Child Safety, First Nations Protocols ?		
Does it present views which may be perceived racist, homophobic, transphobic, biphobic, sexist? If so, what is your organisation's position on presenting these views? Are these viewpoints intended for critique and more nuanced than outright celebration/endorsement?		
Does it concern religion?		
Does it concern ANZACs or current or previous members of the Australian Defence Force?		
Does the work contain nudity or sexual references?		
Does the work depict graphic violence or contain scenes that may inspire violence?		

Does the work contain material that could trigger trauma experiences or psychologically impact visitors? i.e. war, rape, torture, suicide		
Does the work contain swearing?		
Are there copyright issues inherent in the work, that need to be cleared? This may be especially relevant for video works involving sound, or works featuring company logos.		
Can people in a wheelchair experience the work?		
Could people with sensory sensitivities have an adverse reaction to the work?		
Does the work involve performance and physical aspects that need control measures? i.e. physical exertion, disengagement with healthy lifestyle practices		

Does the artwork pose a physical risk or potential impact to audiences? i.e. flashing lights/epilepsy, electrical currents/pacemakers, enclosed or dark spaces, VR headset safety etc.		
Is the artist gaining negative attention in either traditional media or social media for their behaviours/personal life?		
Does the artist statement outline rationale for any of the identified concerns?		