

Curating An Exhibition Essay

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Introduction

Controversy as defined by the Oxford dictionary is 'public discussion and argument about something that many people strongly disagree about, think is bad, or are shocked by' (OxfordLearnersDictionary, 2023). Other than controversial figures, controversial artwork has been the most popular form of dividing public opinion. Such as Harvey's 'Myra', the portrait of notorious child killer Myra Hindley was curated with hundreds of handprints of children. Sparking world-wide controversy, when it was displayed in London's Royal Academy in 1997. In a world of spectrums, controversy lies deeply rooted into art and the expressions of one's mind, rather than a conclusive based system such as sciences. 'Science progresses from common ground to conclusions according to secure procedures such that there is no place for disagreement nor, therefore, for controversy.' (Freudenthal, 2018).

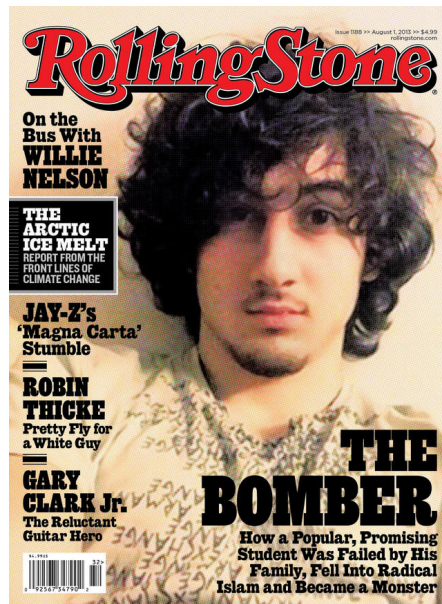


Fig.1: Rolling Stone Issue 1188, 2013

‘There is no term as an “ideal cover page” but there is a need to create an eye-catching cover page because cover page is the epicentre of magnetism which attracts the readers towards the newsstand and if the cover page leaves an unforgettable impression on the minds of the people in just a glance, then it is 100% success.’ (Sharma, 2016). A quote by Sharma in his eloquently written journal about creating the perfect magazine cover perfectly encapsulates my first exhibition piece. The cover of Rolling Stone’s 1188th edition depicts the convicted Boston bombing terrorist Dzhokhar Tsarnaev looking blankly into the lens. It is nothing short of a well thought out marketing device to entice unruliness and distress in public opinion. Critics argued that the cover glamorized Tsarnaev and turned him

into a celebrity, controversy resulted in calls for a boycotting of the magazine with some retailers refusing to sell the issue. The cover also sparked conversation about media ethics and the role of the press in covering disasters. An unforgettable cover piece that combines a brass colour scheme and lacklustre design elements to highlight Tsarnaev, his stare into the potential purchaser of the issue makes you feel that you were there at the scene on April 15, 2013.

Defending their decision 'the fact that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is young, and in the same age group as many of our readers, makes it all the more important for us to examine the complexities of this issue and gain a more complete understanding of how a tragedy like this happens.' (CBS, 2013). An excellently worded response, more than likely drawn up in a board room of middle-aged adults who desperately needed to keep Rolling Stone's reputation up. This isn't to say that the article can't do some good, there just isn't any need to include the suspect of such a heinous act on the cover.

However, why can newspapers include many portraits of convicted criminals on the front cover, but Rolling Stone get backlash? Both are news outlets, just in two different formats. This is what I want to ask my audience when they step into my exhibition. I would place this piece at the start of my exhibition, to have a killer staring at you as soon as you walk through the doors would be chilling, instantly setting up the emotional rollercoaster I will take my audience through.



Fig.2: Pepsi Television Advertisement, 2017

The Washington Post has tracked 8,422 fatal police shootings since 2015. 334 killings on the behalf of the blue and reds side just this year. Steadily the list grows year on year, with individuals of the black race being killed at twice the rate than white people, even though populating only 14% of America (Washington Post, 2023). With this context it is understandable to why Pepsi received so much backlash over the advertising campaign starring Kendall Jenner. The 2017 advert displays a then 22-year-old Jenner walking through a racial injustice protest, eventually handing a police officer a can of Pepsi. Evidentially, elucidating the issue.

Many felt the video trivialised political protests, undermining the value of many people protesting in the streets. The scene depicts a starkly similar imagery of Ieshia Evans, a young black woman defiantly standing her ground in a viral



image. The image in question, displays the young woman standing with one arm slightly stretched due to one of the police officers grabbing her, while the other arm is drawn to her person, a clear representation of resistance amongst these protesters and police force.

(Fig.3: Ieshia Evans Protesting, 2016)

The advertisement created by Pepsi's in house advertising agency, Creators League Studio was spoke of in detail by the company's CEO. 'a brand like Pepsi® needs about 5,000 pieces of content a year. Instead of taking six months to develop an ad, we have six hours or six days. And instead of it costing \$2m, it needs to cost \$20,000.' (Petrin, 2023). This sort of Brand identity Pepsi speaks of surely should raise questions for consumers of the drink brand, why do we need 5,000 pieces of content from Pepsi each year, where many of the adverts will be low cost and not displaying an outside opinion, a third party would have saved Pepsi millions in damages and substitutionally grown their brand.

The question I would like to ask my exhibition attendees would be: If a young, black model were to step into Jenner's role for the advert, would there be as much backlash?



Fig.4: Marcus Harvey's 'Myra' (1997)

Ending the life of 5 children comes with some serious repercussions. A painting of yourself hung up in London's Royal Academy is not in the thoughts of many after these heinous crimes. However, that is exactly what Harvey curated in his piece titled 'Myra'. A portrait displaying the mugshot of convicted child killer using only children's handprints. Mass outrage over the piece was seen across the country in the late 90's, and two attempts to vandalise the artwork were taken place. The public was not happy with this piece.

'Windows were smashed, and eggs and ink thrown at the painting, damaging it. Myra Hindley herself wrote to the Guardian newspaper pleading for its removal, it was condemned in the press, and caused resignations within the Royal Academy itself.' (Portmann, 2012). Public opinion of the work was disgusted and outraged against Harvey

and the Royal Academy, although the piece after being damaged was restored and placed behind plexiglass with security standing guard.

The controversial portrait had a profound impact on the world of art as a whole, with heated debates arising about the role of art in society. Those in favour of Harvey's work claimed that it was a form of expression that should be seen as a disposition of free speech amongst creativity, while those on the flip side would argue that it is deeply unempathetic and downright insulting to the victims.

All of this just goes to show how the 'Sensation' exhibition wanted to be perceived. To provoke emotion, playing on the mind of the viewer to what they are witnessing can be very lachrymose or contentious. Very similar to the idea of my exhibition, controversy is what breaks someone, or builds them. In the case of previously spoken about Pepsi, it damaged the company massively. In Harvey's case, he reached celebrity status after his work was displayed, even in bad taste, his name was known. Which begs the question I'd like to ask my audience, is bad publicity actually beneficial?



Fig.5: Nirvana – 'Nevermind' (1991)

'Caused him "Permanent harm" and "lifelong loss of income-earning capacity."' (Snapes, 2022). Two quotations to kick this controversial album cover off. Quoted from Spencer Elden. The child photographed in the cover, who appeared on Nirvana's Nevermind album of 1991. Elden lost a lawsuit against the multiple defending parties, where he claimed the band's most popular album cover had produced child pornography.

Suing for £130,000 in damages, Elden concluded that he had no consent in the matter. Which brings me to my first point, the sexualisation of the cover, the \$1 bill hung by a string in front of the baby is seemed to be a deliberate sexual reference, which people could find offensive. A sexualisation of the baby was shot down by Nirvana's late lead singer Kurt Cobain in 1991, when he said, 'If you're offended by this you must be a closet paedophile.' (Asia, 2021). His defence towards some of the publics point of view would show how frustrated the band was with accusations that the cover was used in any exploitative way.

Intended to be exposition on the commercialisation of popular culture, it could be argued that the cover is explanation of the band's anti-establishment character. Nirvana's

punk-rock genre thrives off the anti-establishment attitude and many people with closed minds don't understand their music or messages, the mix of a head-banging beats and lyrics that resonate with millions of Nirvana fans is why they still have such a cult following some 20 years after the death of Cobain. Concluding this final piece, I want to piece together my exhibition, the Nevermind album cover expands the horizon for so much political debate amongst children in art, and like my other 4 pieces, it asks another thought-provoking question. Who has the consent when it comes to children in art? Does there need to be laws in place to protect these youngsters, or if in good taste, is it free speech?

Concluding this essay, I believe in 2023 there needs to be another exhibition like 'sensation' to shock audiences and offer questions to leave the space with a broader mind, something that challenges the status quo. We haven't seen a piece of art work that entices questions, thoughts or emotions worldwide for years. Controversial art continuous to exist because ones thoughts and emotions are bellowed onto the canvas, screen, paper. No matter what medium you create you can always create that controversial piece of artwork that will divide opinions. It's up to the audience to think and discuss these societal issues that have plagued the art world for decades, so that we can ensure the art that is created is to expand growth and acceptance for everybody.

My Exhibition Space

I have one space in mind for my exhibition space. That location being Hybrid Gallery in Devon. Why have I picked this place in particular? Because of East Devon's long history of Conservative held seats in parliament. The seat in the the south-western county has been held for 186 years. The longest of any party and anywhere in the UK. I believe this space would be a perfect fit for the provocative nature of my exhibition, because stereotypically right-wing voters *tend* to be of the older generation. It is fact (Grafton-Green, 2019) that the younger population in the UK have been voting Labour an astoundingly greater rate than that of the Conservatives. This in turn, typically means that the greater reaction to controversial artwork will come from those who are a little bit older, and the deep-rooted systematic belief in the Conservatives in East Devon is why I think Hybrid Gallery is a prime location for an exhibition of my nature.

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