

Excerpt from *Not Here, Not Now, Not That! Protest Over Art and Culture in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2011)

Steven J. Tepper



Overview

Tepper makes a strong argument that arts protests are good for democracy and not simply collateral damage from the so-called culture wars. He suggests that the art world has too often tried to silence its critics and that a 21st century approach to arts conflicts requires balancing the needs of artists with the needs of the community. He argues that art is most relevant when people care enough to fight over it. Communities are healthiest when people have avenues for expressing their hopes and fears. Fights over art provide the democratic space to negotiate differing views of community life and community identity.

The Social Nature of Offense

Think about the last time you were offended. Some readers may have to dig deep to come up with an incident. Others might feel routinely surrounded by offensive material, perhaps *Sex and the City* on television, the Dixie Chicks on the radio.

Offense is clearly personal and idiosyncratic; but offense can also be the shared property of a community. After all, the U.S. Supreme Court has defined obscenity as an act of expression that merits government regulation because it is considered patently *offensive* based on “community standards.”

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Throughout America personal offense spills out into the public square when citizens object to some form of expression—books, songs, sculpture, movies, holiday displays, and flags. What is it about where we live, how we relate to our neighbors, our collective hopes and fears, and our local politics that combine to foment disagreement and protest over art?

Artworks often serve as lightning rods, bringing forward and giving voice to underlying tension caused by social change. When communities experience an influx of new populations, new institutions, new types of families, new patterns of leisure, and new technologies, community members fight over symbols such as art and culture as a way to assert themselves.

Because protest over art is at its core about local dynamics, we should not be surprised to find big differences when we compare cities side-by-side. A census of arts conflicts in the late 1990s reveals that Atlanta was the most contentious – experiencing 37 conflicts in 4 years. On the other hand, Buffalo, Oklahoma City, and Norfolk each had fewer than 10 conflicts over the same time span.

Or, if we look at letters of protest sent to the Federal Communications Commission after Janet Jackson exposed her nipple on national television at halftime of the 2004 Super Bowl, we see huge variation – in Phoenix, Nashville, Houston and Fort Worth more than 1,500 people sent letters to Washington; in San Francisco, Tacoma and Albany, fewer than 200 people sent letters. In line with the idea that people fight over art during periods of uncertainty and social change, those cities with the most growth in immigration experienced almost twice as many instances of public protest, as well as considerably more complaint letters to the FCC, as did those cities with the slowest rates of immigration.

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Cities also differ in the types of things they fight over. In *cities of contention* (Denver, Charlotte, Dallas, Fort Worth) we see the highest levels of conflict, with complaints evenly distributed between conservative (e.g., blasphemy, obscenity, violence) and liberal causes (e.g., supporting ethnic and religious minorities, women, and gays and lesbians). In these fast-growing and diversifying cities, both liberal and conservative grievances seem to find a foothold and work side by side to generate above-average levels of conflict over art and culture.

In *cities of cultural regulation* (Dayton, Cincinnati, Kansas City, and Oklahoma City), conservative-based causes dominate the agenda. These protests are less the result of population changes than of residents from fairly homogenous communities striking out against anything that violates community norms. In such cities cultural conflict is more routine, less strident, and quickly resolved. Often offending works are simply removed or restricted in the absence of sustained public protest. Residents enforce agreed upon boundaries of permissible expression and participate in what we might call “rituals of protest.”

Finally, *cities of recognition* are characterized by “identity politics” (San Francisco, Albuquerque, San Jose, and Cleveland). These cities are highly diverse and typically have a disproportionate number of liberal-based conflicts. The profile here is one in which identity politics lies at the root of many disputes as marginalized members of a community (religious and ethnic minorities and women) demand that public symbols—including art and culture—depict them in ways that affirm their value and role in the community...

A 21st Century Approach

Arts conflicts cannot be reduced to complaints over “offensive art,” nor can they be explained fully by a focus on competing worldviews and ideologies. Instead we must recognize the role these protests play in the ongoing negotiation of community life. For arts leaders, this requires moving beyond old assumptions about and approaches to cultural conflict. Our twentieth century approach emphasized the independence and autonomy of the artist; the expertise and professionalism of curators, librarians, artistic directors, and cultural managers; and an absolute and unerring commitment to the First Amendment.

I am sympathetic to the old arguments and believe they have served the arts community well over the past one hundred years. But it is worth asking whether we need a new approach to cultural conflict and protest in the twenty-first century. We

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are in the midst of a significant transformation in America’s cultural life. This transformation includes the explosion of cultural choice, the breakdown of boundaries between high and popular culture, the rise of participatory art making, the decline of

cultural authority, and the abundance of “anytime, anyplace” mobile culture. As a result, our cultural landscape is getting a lot noisier – more voices, more diversity, and more opportunities for more people to express themselves. In theory this should lead to greater conflict and protest as everybody’s lifestyle and cultural tastes will be threatened by someone, somewhere. Yet this multimedia and multimediated environment also makes it more difficult to silence voices. We are no longer limited to three broadcast stations, a handful of local radio channels, one dominant news source in every city, and limited shelf space at the local bookstore. In a YouTube world, we must question whether it is necessary to defend every artwork by standing behind the impenetrable shield of the First Amendment. Rather than threatening litigation and lawsuits, arts leaders and advocates could embrace conflict, engage with protesters, and when necessary spend their creative energy finding alternative means to distribute and disseminate challenged artworks.

Today, our communities are experiencing demographic changes like never before, and globalization challenges us to reconsider the importance of localism. The evidence from this book suggests that people fight over art as a way to confront these changes, to negotiate norms and shared values, and to articulate a vision for their communities. To be clear, I do not think that arts protest necessarily brings people together to ultimately affirm some romantic conception of community life nor necessarily concludes with a satisfying compromise for all citizens. Such protests are not necessarily models of deliberative democracy. But for those citizens who are actively protesting or defending an artwork—including books, films, plays, exhibits, songs, sculpture—these conflicts are critical arenas for exercising voice and for taking part in public life.

Acts of creative expression help define community life; *reactions* to creative expression are equally defining and consequential. Rather than only, or even primarily, considering the interests of artists, arts professionals, and the First Amendment, arts leaders must place equal weight and emphasis on the democratic value of arts protest in helping communities negotiate social change if we wish to see the arts and community life flourish together.

We need a serious and sustained discussion about what a twenty-first-century approach to cultural conflict might look like. Arts conflicts seem trapped in an outdated mold: free speech versus censorship, permissiveness versus community standards, restrictions versus full access, the artist versus the general public, experts versus the great unwashed. But we don't live in an either/or world—new technology, changing demographics, and globalization contribute to a “more and more” world. Perhaps we can have more art, more controversy, more protest, more conversation, more obstacles, more alternatives, more community, and more democracy.

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This book also raises fundamental issues that sociologists and political philosophers have struggled to understand since the beginning of the modern era. How do we balance our rights as individuals with our responsibilities as members of a community? Are there reasonable limits on expression? Can communities establish and enforce standards that may restrict individual freedom in an attempt to promote other potentially worthy public interest goals (like promoting civility, decency, respect, and public health)?

Movies, films, books, sculptures, and flags are part of our shared culture. They constitute our collective identity and comprise our common story, they embody our values and our vision, and they reflect our ideas about beauty and truth. Moreover, these cultural objects often occupy public spaces, and they circulate through public or quasi-public institutions like schools, libraries, museums, and theaters. Because culture is shared and because our shared institutions make decisions about culture, debates about art and media are almost always debates about community, identity, and democratic life.

I believe that free expression and social responsibility need to be more forcefully integrated. Artists, educators, librarians, curators, filmmakers, and producers should continue to challenge and push audiences to see the world differently. They should use their venues and voices to open up dialogue, present diverse points of view, and celebrate culture from the margins. Artists and arts leaders should also be accountable for their decisions through democratic means. Citizens must feel free to brazenly challenge the decisions of curators, producers, and artists. At the same time, cultural leaders must tirelessly defend their choices. Over time the vigorous defense of art will guarantee its relevance in public life.