

National
Coalition
Against
Censorship

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Christopher M. Finan
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**NCAC PARTICIPATING
ORGANIZATIONS**

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of
School Administrators (The School
Superintendents Association)
American Association of
University Professors
American Association of
University Women
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Orthopsychiatric Association (Global
Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social
Justice)
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of
Church & State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
International Literacy Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches (of Christ in
the USA)
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The Newspaper Guild/CWA
PEN American Center (PEN America)
People For the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation
of America
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council of
the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers
& Illustrators
Speech Communication Association
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ
Office of Communication
United Methodist Church,
United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Freedom Foundation
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

August 23, 2017

To:
Julie Alexander, Asset Manager
Artspace
250 Third Avenue North, Suite 400
Minneapolis, MN 55401
Email: julie.alexander@artspace.org
Phone: 612.333.9012
Cell Phone: 206.355.7194

Dear Ms. Alexander,

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), founded in 1974, is an alliance of over 50 national nonprofit organizations, including literary, artistic, religious, educational, professional, labor, and civil liberties groups. As an organization dedicated to promoting free speech, including freedom of artistic expression, we were deeply concerned to learn that Artspace demanded the removal of artworks by resident artist Steven Leyba over his use of the swastika symbol. The artworks were on display in the lobby of the Artspace Everett Lofts, where Leyba lives and works. In demanding that the artworks be removed, Artspace has violated the core values of artistic freedom as well as their own mission to foster the creative well-being of artists who live, work and exhibit in their lofts. We strongly urge Artspace to allow Leyba to redisplay his work and keep it on display for as long as originally intended.

It is our understanding that soon after the exhibition opened to the public, you sent Leyba a letter demanding that he take down the work. While you acknowledged that his use of the swastika was a reference to its ancient religious significance, you contended that today, and especially after the recent incidents in Charlottesville, any use of the swastika can only be seen as a symbol of discrimination and mass murder. You then concluded that in order to comply with the anti-discriminatory policies of the Federal Fair Housing Act, Artspace and Quantum Management cannot allow Leyba's artworks incorporating swastikas to be displayed in their lobby.

Artworks, no matter what their content, are not acts of discrimination, they are an expression of ideas. For almost 30 years, Leyba, who is Native American and Jewish, has beaded and collaged swastikas into his work as an act of reclamation. His paintings and artist books have been exhibited widely and collected by museums in the U.S. and internationally. Through his essays and exhibition statements, he has made clear his intentions: “As a Native American, I have used the symbol in rituals and ceremonies and creations to signify healing powers. Being part Jewish, for me it has been healing and has inspired me to give it new positive life. I seek to educate and take away the ignorance and negativity; I also seek to invalidate its use by hate groups.”

As your letter acknowledges, the swastika is a traditional symbol. Its use was widespread in ancient religions and cultures, in Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. It is also present in Native American art and iconography and is used by southwestern tribes, including the Navajo, and by plains nations such as the Dakota. For the Hopi, the swastika is a symbol of the wandering Hopi clan, to the Navajo it is a sacred symbol in healing rituals, and in Kuna cosmology it represents the octopus that created the world.

While we recognize your concerns over swastika representations were exacerbated by the recent violence in Charlottesville, removing Leyba’s work does nothing to stand up to white supremacy or neo-Nazism. On the contrary, in demanding the removal of the work, Artspace is silencing an artist from a minority culture by preventing him from displaying work for the sole reason that the Nazis abused the age-old symbols belonging to his own culture.

Artspace is a wonderful national program for artists, advocating for their needs by developing affordable spaces in a world where such spaces are rapidly disappearing. It would serve no positive purpose for Artspace to be associated with the silencing of a minority artist who is living, working and exhibiting on their premises. Hence, we strongly urge Artspace to issue a public apology to Steven Leyba and to restore his work to the exhibition as soon as possible, no later than Monday, August 28th. Artspace must also extend the exhibition for the amount of time that the works were censored in order to reverse the harm caused.

We are looking forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'JAG' with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Arts Advocacy Associate
National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc:

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