





# A MANUAL FOR ART CENSORSHIP



A Publication of  
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*Without censorship, things can get  
terribly confused in the public mind.*

– William Westmoreland, U.S. General



# Ban

\ˈbɑn\ vb **banned**; **ban·ning** [ME *bannen* to summon, curse, fr. OE *banaan* to summon; akin to OHG *bannan* to command] : to prohibit use, performance, or distribution of; forbid, bar, enjoin, interdict, outlaw, prohibit, proscribe

Not so popular today, outright bans on ideas or images used to be practiced widely by such stellar censors as the Inquisition and the Third Reich. In the United States, outright bans were generally reserved for books, plays, or films, which were meant for wide audiences and had the potential to corrupt the morals of the uneducated masses. Art didn't need to be banned, as long as access to it was limited.



**John Cleland's** 1749 novel *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* was one of the first books banned in the U.S. It was the subject of the country's first obscenity trial in 1821. The Supreme Court finally cleared it for publication in 1966.

Engraving from the original corrected edition.  
London, 1766.

Today, the historical discredit brought on 20th century totalitarian regimes that practiced overt censorship has reinforced commitment to the First Amendment and strengthened the popular dedication to free speech as a principle, making outright bans socially unacceptable and thus an impractical method of suppression.

**The Streisand Effect:** the phenomenon whereby an attempt to hide, remove, or censor a piece of information has the consequence of publicizing the information more widely, usually facilitated by the Internet.

"Concepts like censorship or democracy appear to have a fixed meaning, but, in fact, their meaning and ethical implications are always contingent on context: political, religious, cultural, economic... A kind of censorship exists in democratic countries, for instance, that is clearly distinct from the censorship imposed by overtly repressive regimes. Censorship is always context specific, which makes it pointless to talk about some immutable concept of "censorship" that transcends individual circumstances."

**Antoni Muntadas, artist**

# Taboo

\tə-'bū, ta-\ n, pl **taboos**

: a social or religious custom prohibiting or forbidding discussion of a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing on grounds of morality and taste

**Create a taboo** — A taboo is a ban that has the support of the majority of the population. Sometimes taboos are enforced by those in power, but that is rarely necessary. What is taboo changes with culture: pederasty was widely depicted in ancient Greece; today such depictions are generally avoided and, if they feature actual youth, are criminalized. This taboo is expanding to include any images of nude children.



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**Betsy Schneider's** photo grid *Januaries* from her project *Quotidian*, (1997-2009) was removed from an exhibition at the **Kohler Art Center** in Wisconsin hours before the opening due to concerns about the nudity of Schneider's daughter, whose growing up the project documented.

Taboos are so intrinsic to a culture that questioning them is almost impossible. Those who dare question or violate a taboo are either pathologized or criminalized. A taboo appears to embody universal, natural and timeless values; it is only in hindsight that a taboo can be seen as culturally specific: discussions of homosexuality and questioning God, for instance, were both taboo at a certain point and still are in some places.

While a taboo is an effective instrument of censorship, creating a taboo is not something that can be deliberately planned and accomplished. Taboos are complexly determined and have deep roots in cultural anxieties. Nevertheless, consistent attacks on some ideas combined with shaming and moral opprobrium may help create a taboo that reaches far wider than existing legal prohibitions: art institutions today are aware of the potential fallout of an exhibition that may touch upon adolescent sexuality, for instance, and tend to avoid the subject.

# Funding

*\fʌnd•ɪŋ\ n [L fundus country estate]*  
: act of providing resources, usually in the form of money for a project, a person, a business, or any other private or public institution

**Exploit the power of the purse** – The government cannot ban ideas, but does it have to fund their expression? The 1990s campaign against the National Endowment for the Arts was justified with the slogan “this is about sponsorship, not censorship.” In a word, artists are free to create whatever they wish on their own dime, but neither the production nor the display of work that could offend taxpayers should be supported by public money.

The counterargument is that US taxpayers are not a homogeneous group and that excluding representations of homosexuality, for instance, may appease some but offend others, and that taxpayers have no direct say in how their money is spent: no one can directly challenge the Pentagon’s budget, for instance, no matter how much

a specific military action might offend them. However, when it comes to artwork, the claim of offense has an emotional power that, so far, has worked very well. Threatening funding was proven to be an effective tool once again in 2010, when the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, G. Wayne Clough, ordered a video work taken out of the National Portrait Gallery in response to threats by Republican leaders in Congress to cut funding.

**Consistent funding threats encourage self-policing:** art institutions are so fearful about their already scarce funding that they would rather live with unconstitutional restrictions,

**Alfonse D'Amato**, U.S. Senator from New York (1981-99):

"...The art work in question is a photograph of the crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. This artist received \$15,000 for his work from the National Endowment for the Arts, through the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. Well, if this is what contemporary art has sunk to, this level, this outrage, this indignity - some may want to sanction

than dare rock the boat and risk their revenue.

Private funders have even more freedom than government to decide how their money is used. In 2017, New York's Public Theater staged a controversial production of *Julius Caesar* with Caesar looking very much like Donald Trump. Two of the Public's largest corporate donors withdrew their funding. The Public recovered the lost funding quickly, but few art institutions have that venerable theater's resources and stature.

that, and that is fine. But not with the use of taxpayers' money. This is not a question of free speech. This is a question of abuse of taxpayers' money. ... [I]f you want free speech, you want to draw dirty pictures, you want to do anything you want, that is your business, but not with taxpayers' money. This is an outrage, and our people's tax dollars should not support this trash..."

*Congressional Record, Senate*  
May 18, 1989



*Survival of the Fittest*, part of *Exhibit B*, created by Brett Bailey. Protesters forced the cancellation of the show, which was scheduled to open at London's Barbican Centre in September 2014. The exhibition was branded "racist" by those opposing it.

# Be creative and subtle.

Always insistently deny that your goal is to censor: in today's advanced democracies censorship is treated as a dirty word and overt attacks on artistic freedom only serve to strengthen it. Banning work is almost impossible, taboos are hard to orchestrate, and funding pressures sometimes fail. That is why it is necessary to be creative and, whatever your intention is, to declare your staunch belief in and support for freedom of speech. In the next pages you will find some trusted methods of suppression, from demanding sensitivity and claiming offense, to warning about trauma triggers and possible harm to immature minds. In applying these methods, use the resources of **social media** and the Internet. Starting a petition or creating a hashtag is easy and effective. Watch a click movement grow.

**Demand sensitivity to the feelings of vulnerable groups** – Claim the material is offensive to the community or to a particular racial/ethnic/religious/gender or other group.

**Offense** \ə-'fen(t)s\ n [ME fr. MF, fr. L *offensa*, fr. fem. of *offensus*]  
: the act of causing anger, resentment, displeasure or  
affront

The advantage of this approach is that it has support on different sides of the political spectrum. Objections to female nudes, for instance, have come from feminists concerned about the “hostile environment” such work supposedly creates and from religious groups averse to the display of human nudity. Outrage over the pain caused by artworks can be used to force institutions to remove and even destroy the work. In 2017 the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis quickly agreed to the dismantling of Sam Durant’s public sculpture after members of the local Dakota community claimed the historical reference in the work was traumatizing.



Sam Durant *Scaffold* (2012), a public sculpture about capital punishment, Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, with protest banner “Take this Down.”

**Demand “civility” and insist you are not penalizing unpopular ideas, only the way they are expressed.**

# Civility

\sə-ˈvi-lə-tē\ n pl -ties : a polite act of expression

When you don't want to deal with the message, attack the manners of the messenger! Condemn challenges to the status quo as uncivil. There are many historical and contemporary examples, from women demanding their rights dismissed as hysterics to professors angrily tweeting about violence in the Middle East or gun control losing their academic positions. Demands for civility, if they gain enough traction, can also help do away with such impolite forms of artistic expression as rap music.

**Warning:** Only consider this method of censorship if you are part of the dominant power structure. The norms of civility and respect are always set by those in power.

"...it is important that we recognize the broader social context required in order for free speech to thrive. Specifically, we can only exercise our right to free speech insofar as we feel safe and respected in doing so, and this in turn requires that people treat each other with civility. Simply put, courteousness and respect in words and deeds are basic preconditions to any meaningful exchange of ideas."

University of California at Berkeley Chancellor Nicholas Dirks in an email to faculty and students asking them to honor the 50th anniversary of the free speech movement on campus. (September 5, 2014)

## Insist on “balance” in political critique.

# Balance

\`ba-lən(t)s\ n [ME, fr. OF (assumed) VL *bilancia*  
: a counterbalancing weight, force, or influence  
: equipoise between contrasting, opposing, or interacting elements;  
counterpoise, equilibration, equilibrium, equipoise,  
poise, stasis

Demands for balance – a fair and equal representation of both sides – have been successfully deployed to silence political critique. Balance can be used to soften the impact of politically charged art exhibitions and is equally effective in conservative attacks on liberal academia or the liberal press. When balance cannot be achieved by adding material to an exhibition (thus shifting the message), insist that something so one-sided should be canceled (the show, the talk, whatever the case may be).



In 2004, Arizona State University required that an exhibition of political art “balance” every work critical of the G. W. Bush administration with a work that criticized Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. Some work that was seen as critical of the current administration, like Ryan McNamara’s *Angry Americans* (above), had to be eliminated.

In 2006, Brandeis University removed an exhibition of artwork by teens from Palestinian refugee camps, citing “the lack of a balancing perspective.” The show’s curator, an Israeli student, had conceived the exhibition as compensation for what she perceived as a dearth of Palestinian voices on a campus where the Israeli perspective was dominant.



Use the language of trauma.

# (Trauma) Trigger

*\*'tri-gər\ *n* [alter. of earlier *tricker*, fr. D *trekker* fr. MD *trecker* one that pulls]

: a trigger is something that sets off a memory or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma

Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. The survivor may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that she/he thinks triggered the flashback. She/he will react to this flashback trigger with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

Anything can be a trigger. Insist a work you object to may be triggering traumatic recollections. Your desire to control the public environment will then attain the moral status of care for the victims of violence and injustice.

“No person of color or Jewish person needs to sit in a room with a reminder of the legacy of white or anti-Semitic violence.”

*– Comment by a supporter of a 2017 student petition for the removal of a Thomas Hart Benton historical mural featuring images of the KKK from an auditorium at Indiana University.*

“I just want to apologize for the trauma and suffering that my work has caused.”

*– Artist Sam Durant, agreeing to have his public sculpture about capital punishment, Scaffold, destroyed in Minneapolis in 2017.*

“Even if Schutz has not been gifted with any real sensitivity to history, if black people are telling her that the painting has caused unnecessary hurt, she and you must accept the truth of this. The painting must go.”

*– Artist Hannah Black, in an open letter to the curators and staff of the 2017 Whitney Biennial demanding the removal and destruction of Dana Schutz’s painting Open Casket.*

## Threaten the institution with violence.

# Threaten

\ˈθre-tən\ *vb* **threat-ened; threat-en-ing**

: to say that you will harm someone or do something unpleasant or unwanted especially in order to make someone do what you want

: to cause to feel insecure or anxious

: to announce as intended or possible

# Violence

\ˈvi-ələns(t)s\ *n*

: the use of physical force to harm someone, to damage property

An institution can be intimidated into cancelling a show when it fears it will put the physical safety of its staff and audience at risk.

Warning: outright threats can get you in trouble with the law.

After resisting calls for the removal of three historical works using animals from *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (2017), New York's Guggenheim Museum pulled the works from the exhibition in response to “repeated threats of violence” and “concern for the safety of its staff, visitors and participating artists.”

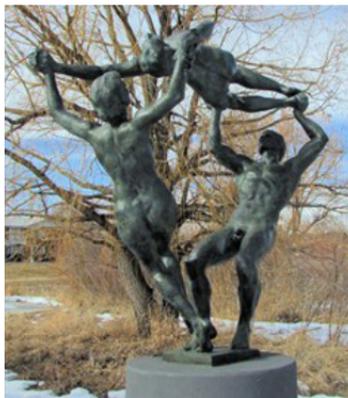


Sun Yuan and Peng Yu: “Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other” (2003), a 7-minute video documentation of a performance with eight American pit bulls on eight treadmills. The work was one of three pulled from a show at the Guggenheim. The other two included the documentation of a 1994 performance and a sculpture replicating a 1993 work including live insects, snakes and lizards.

## Invoke the innocence of children.

**Child** \ˈchi(ə)ld\ *n pl chil-dren* [ME fr. OE *cild* akin to Goth *kilthei* womb]  
: a person between birth and puberty.  
: a person who has not attained maturity or the age of legal majority.

When all else fails, invoking the welfare of children often succeeds in closing the conversation. Children are not trusted to speak for themselves, freeing adults to project upon them their own shame, embarrassment and anxiety over sex, death or violence. Few adults have the political capital to dare oppose an argument made in the name of “protecting the children.”



In 2006, attacks on Kristen Kokkin's sculpture *Triangle* led to its move to a less visible location after the Loveland, CO City Council overruled the Visual Arts Commission. According to the artist, the image symbolizes "that in order to survive... with our many beliefs and values, we have to rely on each other's support to succeed." According to its critics, the sculpture was intended to be all about sex and children should not have to see it.

## Destroy the work.

# Destroy

\di-'stròì. dē-\ vb [ME, fr. OF *destruire*, fr. VL *destrugere*]  
: to ruin the structure, organic existence, or condition of  
: to put out of existence  
annihilate, demolish, devastate, pull down, rub out, ruin,  
shatter, smash, tear down, total, wreck

When you can't prevail in convincing the powers that be to remove an offending piece, you may have to take matters into your own hands and destroy the work. This is likely to put you in trouble with the law, but like-minded people may cover the fines you have to pay. Watch out for the criminal penalties however.

Condemned as the crime of vandalism when practiced by individuals, the destruction of statues or temples of older gods has been an important weapon of ideological domination. The Christian Church tore down many an ancient temple and freely

castrated Roman statues before adding fig leaves to their loins. In turn the Reformation smashed Catholic imagery, Stalin destroyed Orthodox Churches, and the Taliban dynamited the Buddhas of Bamiyan (the full list of destruction is enlightening but far too long).



A disgruntled woman ripped into Enrique Chagoya's lithograph *The Misadventures of the Romantic Cannibals* after she busted the artwork's plexiglass case with a crowbar. City council members, religious groups and individuals had failed to force the government-funded Loveland Museum in Colorado into removing the piece. Part of the lithograph appears to depict a Jesus Christ face on a cartoon female body receiving oral sex. The restitution that the vandal had to pay came to under \$3000.



• Visitors may choose to avoid these works by exiting the door to the left • The work within these walls may **upset** or offend viewers. Use your best judgment in deciding if you wish to view them •

• Please Note: This posting contains art photographs of **male nudity** – if you do not like please **do not look**, fair warning has been given •

• The contents of this exhibition may cause **shock**, vomiting, confusion, **panic**, euphoria and **anxiety** •

• Some of the paintings in this exhibition may be **disturbing** to some audiences •

**Persuade your art institution to use the *Best Practices for Museums Handling Controversy*.** Available through the NAC website, the *Best Practices* are a set of guidelines aiming to prepare institutions to meaningfully confront potential controversy and use it to fulfill their mission as cultural centers – rather than try to avoid controversy by shunning potentially contentious material. The guidelines have been endorsed by major national arts organizations like Americans for the Arts, the American Alliance of Museums, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries, the Association of Art Museum Curators, the College Art Association, and the Vera List Center for Art and Politics.

### **Create against the grain.**

Self-censorship on the personal level is an even greater challenge than institutional self-policing. Received habits of thinking, unquestioned assumptions, and a desire to please our peers all constrain the imagination, they shape the contours of our thinking. To be free may require us to transgress – so as to test – those boundaries we have set ourselves by complying to expectations. We are often our own censors.



## 6) Negotiate while also mobilizing public pressure.

Both are often successful, especially as art censorship is increasingly a private endeavor and not subject to First Amendment arguments. Many exhibition spaces are privately owned, as are the platforms that we use to communicate online.



Facebook bans all photographs of nude bodies and even removes drawings, paintings and sculptures of nudes (whatever bots or humans make the decisions, they apparently fail to tell the difference). Negotiation – and public pressure – in these cases is the best approach: after intervention by the Arts Advocacy Project and Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) in 2010, YouTube changed their terms of service to allow artistic nudity.

**Artistrights.info** provides information to help answer questions about the law and artistic freedom. The Q & A forum on [artistrights.info](http://artistrights.info) puts you directly in touch with Arts Advocacy Project staff, who can guide you in your research.



Going to court to protect your right to display a work takes time and money and does not guarantee success. Persuasion – while reminding public officials of their First Amendment responsibilities – can assist in finding a peaceful and productive resolution. The Arts Advocacy Project has successfully campaigned with administrators to keep art on display. The Project also assists artists and curators directly, helping them decide on a course of action.

## 5) Know your first amendment rights, but consider litigation only as a last option.

*Can my painting be excluded from a show because it features a nude? How open to artistic expression is public space? If my work satirizes a political figure, will I have problems posting it online?*

Artists are not always clear about the answers to these questions and may needlessly defer to censorious administrators or web platforms. Knowing your rights will help you stand your ground. **The Arts Advocacy Project** has teamed with the Center for Democracy and Technology to provide artists, reporters and researchers with an accessible guide to laws and regulations governing artistic expression.

**People for the American Way's Artsave** project was the brainchild of a set of foundations who felt there was a void to fill when it came to addressing "the culture war." Even though the project was based in Washington, D.C., it worked with artists and arts organizations all over the country.



NCFE published the *Handbook to Understanding, Preparing for, and Responding to Challenges to Your Freedom of Artistic Expression* (available through NCAC's website). In 2000 NCFE ceased operations and transferred its mailing list to the National Coalition Against Censorship and its new Arts Advocacy Project.

Article 19, Freemuse – the World Forum on Music & Censorship, Index on Censorship, International Committee For Artists' Freedom, International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, International PEN and many others. When national and international allies join our statements and letters in support of artistic freedom, global media attention follows.

## 4) Know your allies.

Finding allies – both among other artists and among free speech and arts organizations – makes rapid publicity easier and helps put mass pressure on the censor. **The Arts Advocacy Project** can mobilize NCAC partners, members of the **Free Expression Network**, international human rights organizations, and others on your behalf.

In 2012, NCAC was one of 21 organizations to launch **ARTSFEX**, the first international civil society network actively concerned with the right of artists to freedom of expression. Artsfex is a hub for international information exchange, joint action in support of artistic freedom and trans-border collaboration. Members include Africa's Arterial Network,

**The National Campaign for Freedom of Expression (NCFE)** started in 1989 as a group telephone call including artists and arts activists, mostly representing alternative arts spaces and small arts organizations, who were concerned that mainstream and established arts communities were hesitant to defend the arts against political challenges that arose from the culture wars. NCFE's primary programs were educational and advocacy. The organization publicized incidents of censorship; it operated a telephone hotline to provide advice to artists facing threats; it assisted artists who had work removed from public gallery walls; it mobilized an on-the-ground and national response to the efforts of Oklahoma City prosecutors to declare the award-winning film *The Tin Drum* obscene and it mobilized national coalition efforts to protest the rejection of a public mural in Southern California because it was deemed to carry an

Congress passed a law requiring the NEA to consider "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public" in awarding grants. The lawsuit challenged both the individual grant denials and the constitutionality of the "decency and respect" law.

The Arts Censorship Project worked on many other issues, but by the mid-1990s, one issue came to dominate all others: censorship of a new medium called the Internet. In the 1996 Communications Decency Act, Congress criminalized any "indecent" speech online that might be available to minors. The Supreme Court struck down the CDA in 1997, but more Internet censorship laws followed. By this time, the Arts Censorship Project had been absorbed into the ACLU legal department.

collection to the National Gallery and other public institutions. Poetic justice or a logical chain of events? Perhaps both, or perhaps otherwise factors precipitated the Corcoran's decline. However, the Gallery's reputation was permanently damaged by its rejection of *The Perfect Moment*.

**The history of censorship has valuable lessons for the future:** For instance, an act of censorship may mollify immediate pressures but, in the long term, can undermine an institution. The Corcoran Gallery of Art never fully recovered from the cancellation of *The Perfect Moment*, the controversial Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition that subsequently went on to The Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) and to Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center. The latter survived obscenity charges and the institution is thriving today. The Corcoran, on the other hand, did not fare well. Immediately after the cancellation, it faced a backlash from exhibiting artists and its director, Christina Orr-Cahall, resigned. Today, the venerable 140-year-old gallery has dissolved and ceded its

Wherever we are today, the ground was laid by groups who relentlessly defended artistic freedom before us. Here are some of the organizations on the front lines of the culture wars: **The American Civil Liberties Union** began its **Arts Censorship Project** in 1991 in response to attacks by politicians against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and criminal prosecutions for obscenity against the rap music group 2 Live Crew and against a Cincinnati art museum for showing the works of Robert Mapplethorpe.

The Arts Censorship Project provided co-counsel in the major court case to emerge from the NEA controversy: *Karen Finley et al. v. National Endowment for the Arts*. The NEA, under political pressure, had denied grants to Finley and three other performance artists; shortly afterward,

### 3) Speak up: share information about censorship.

Getting the word out about censorship means half the battle is won: the censor wants to suppress a work, but publicity gives it exposure and opens up the opportunity for conversation.



Contribute to **Censorpedia**: Launched by NCAC in 2013, *Censorpedia* is a special *wiki* that makes visible individual instances of censorship and contextualizes them with other historical and ongoing cases around the world. *Censorpedia* lets users search for, add cases, and modify content in collaboration with others. *Censorpedia*, invites submissions from users, dispensing with the gatekeeper. For who should be the arbiter of what constitutes censorship, and wouldn't such an arbiter function as a censor?

Spreading information foils the censor by making visible what censorship seeks to suppress.

2) Turn lemons into lemonade: use censorship incidents as opportunities to open up a conversation about sensitive issues as well as about free speech.



When calls to remove and destroy Dana Schutz's painting of the mutilated body of Emmett Till in his casket inundated its 2017 Biennial, the Whitney took the opportunity to start a conversation: they allowed a protester to stand in front of the painting and held a public forum at the Museum.

"One thing I learned since the MacArthur award and the controversy that erupted around it was to consider the censor an opportunity as opposed to an enemy. Censors present artists with an opportunity for the great African-American tradition of call and response: we put something out there, they say something back. We have an opportunity to have a dialogue. Art wants to engage, it wants to be seen, heard, read and understood and when it isn't this is just a call to make more meaning, to make more communication happen."

**Kara Walker, artist**

Remarks given at the 2013 NCAC Benefit honoring Newark Public Library Director Wilma Grey

Protecting speech you find appalling gives you credibility to defend speech you agree with (and which others may find appalling).

In December 2017, 10,000 people signed an online petition questioning the display of *Thérèse Dreaming*, a 1938 painting by Balthus, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Critics objected to its “sexualization of a child,” which they connected to widespread revelations of sexual harassment in the world of art and culture.



## I) Reveal censorship for what it is: a desire for control.

People who want to remove a work because they consider it offensive do not see themselves as censors. The Catholic Inquisition was a censor, Stalin was a censor, but those concerned about protecting the feelings of vulnerable individuals are not, right?

Wrong. You may agree or disagree with it, but taking “offensive” images and ideas out of public space is censorship, whatever the motivations.

**A word of warning:** Censorship coming from one’s own political and social perspective often appears as no more than concern for others and sometimes as just common sense. When we ourselves wield it, control is invisible – it is just the correct order of things. The other side, however, is quick to see it as “free speech for me but not for thee.”

Any suppression of ideas because of disagreement with the viewpoint they express is censorship: the motives may be base or noble, you may agree with it or not, but it is censorship. What drives it is the effort to impose one’s views forcibly on everyone else.

NCAC's **Arts Advocacy Project (AAP)** was launched in 2000 at a moment when many free speech initiatives fighting against the 1990s massive conservative assault on the arts were no longer active. Today AAP is the only national initiative uniquely dedicated to artistic freedom. AAP serves as a resource, as well as an activity and information hub. AAP is your ally in every censorship incident, whether we offer behind-the-scenes counsel or intervene directly on your behalf.

In this manual, we share some of what we have learned in our years of work in support of artistic freedom. Fighting for free expression is not a task to be accomplished by one organization on its own. We need your participation!

Censors always find new and creative approaches, and those who oppose them must do so as well. Compared to the multiple disguises the effort to control public discourse assumes in advanced democracies, old style repressive censorship is clunky and even self-subverting. Repression produces free speech martyrs and heroes – Galileo, Solzhenitsyn, Havel, Ai Weiwei, Pussy Riot; in democratic societies artists fight more complex and less heroic battles. The whims of demand and the Midas touch of money can control art's circulation and reception quite effectively – but less visibly. Added to this are the evergreen mechanisms of moral outrage and what John Stuart Mill called the “tyranny of the majority.” But creative freedom is not only constrained by external forces: in the relatively new and internet-enhanced echo chambers on the right and left, all of those with their entrenched mechanisms of peer control and ostracism, imagining freely is riskier than it seems.

**Artistic freedom does not just concern artists –**  
the target of censorship appears to be the artist, but it is really the audience and the culture at large. Many poets, composers, and artists targeted through history still went on writing, composing and painting, but their contemporaries never saw or heard their work.

Artistic freedom is about access to images and ideas, about the possibility to walk down the street or wander into an exhibition and be surprised, perhaps disturbed, to begin to think perhaps a little differently, to be confronted with something that makes it possible to break through the limitations of received opinion.

And, yes, this is dangerous for any kind of rote dogma, whether it is religious or political, and that is why censors will continue to come from right, left, and center and try to control the imagination.

“Recently when I’ve considered art censorship, I’ve thought of Ai Wei Wei, whose work has been censored by the Chinese government. As a sculptor and professor working for an American university, I never thought my own work would be censored. And then it happened. My experience was a wake up call alerting me to the fact that many otherwise intelligent, educated people have no idea how to evaluate art. And I learned that censorship for the individual artist is stressful and shocking, but the larger impact is on arts institutions and their ability to present a diversity of thoughts and ideas. With arts funding so scarce and uncertain it is hard to think that

**Ruth Stanford**, Georgia State University Associate Professor. Her work *A Walk in the Valley* was removed from the inaugural exhibition of Kennesaw State University’s Zuckerman Museum two days before the opening, because a historical document included in the installation was racially offensive.”

– Oscar Wilde

*An idea that is not dangerous  
is unworthy of being called an idea at all.*

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