

National
Coalition
Against
Censorship



The Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art Falls Short of its Mission by Cancelling Site-Specific Installation about the Environment

On June 15, 2016 the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) halted the completion of a public artwork that addresses ocean conservation and human impact on the environment. The partially installed, site-specific piece by internationally known activist artist Olek, was taken down while she and the many volunteers who had worked on the piece watched in dismay. MOCA, which recently stood firm in the face of politically motivated attacks on a painting in one of its shows, this time fell short of its mission to foster dialogue about key socio-political issues.

According to MOCA, the reason for the removal of the work was the last minute addition of a gasmask to the piece, which initially consisted only of a crocheted covering for *King Neptune*, a monumental landmark that presides over the Virginia Beach boardwalk. Olek, who creates large-scale crocheted (and sometimes controversial) artworks, added the gasmask to drive home the message that human pollution has put our oceans and the future of the planet in jeopardy.

MOCA officials claim that the addition of the aluminum and rubber gasmask, a structural base for additional crochet, was a breach of Olek's contract, which specifies the use of environmentally friendly and recycled materials as a symbolic "testament to [the artist's] commitment to the health of our planet's water."

It is disturbing that, standing on a technicality, MOCA refuses to consider any compromise that would allow the display of a work that raises urgent environmental issues and which took many months of volunteer labor to create.

The continuous toll of human-produced pollutants on our environment is an urgent issue, but it is also a highly contentious one. Public artworks that engage the environment often face opposition and even censorship, and so we depend on cultural and educational institutions to stand up to pressure and safeguard the much-needed public dialogue such works may generate.

Going forward, we urge the Museum to hold firm to its mission to stimulate "critical thinking and dialogue throughout the Hampton Roads community." While being true to this mission may require hard work and complex negotiations with both artists and public officials, such dialogue is essential to the vibrancy of our culture and the strength of our democracy.