

# National Coalition Against Censorship

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## NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association  
American Association of  
School Administrators  
American Association of  
University Professors  
American Association of  
University Women  
American Booksellers Foundation  
for Free Expression  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Ethical Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Federation of Television  
& Radio Artists  
American Jewish Committee  
American Library Association  
American Literary Translators  
Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
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  
Directors Guild of America  
The Dramatists Guild of America  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
International Reading Association  
Lambda Legal  
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National Center for Science Education  
National Communication Association  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of Churches  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
PEN American Center  
People For the American Way  
Planned Parenthood Federation  
of America  
Screen Actors Guild  
Sexuality Information & Education  
Council of the U.S.  
Society of Children's Book Writers  
& Illustrators  
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  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

To:  
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Dear Mr. Rasmussen,

I am writing on behalf of the Arts Advocacy Program (AAP) at the National Coalition Against Censorship, and the College Art Association. As national organizations dedicated to promoting the right to free speech, including freedom of artistic expression, we are concerned to learn of the removal of a sculpture from an outdoor space in front of the American University Museum and the Katzen Arts Center in response to external pressures. We strongly urge the museum to adopt a plan for dealing with controversy that will enable it to stand by its curatorial decisions and the artists whose work it is committed to exhibiting.

It is our understanding that the sculpture, a depiction of incarcerated Native American activist Leonard Peltier, carved in wood by artist Rigo 23, was put on display December 9, 2016 and scheduled to remain through April 30, 2017. However, soon after the sculpture was installed, articles in conservative news outlets began criticizing American University for what they believed to be its support of a cop killer. Seeking to clarify that this was not the case, AU issued disclaimers. Then, on December 29, AU received a letter from the Federal Bureau of Investigation Agents Association that accused the University of making a political statement advocating for clemency for Peltier while presenting a one-sided version of his story. They called for the immediate removal of the sculpture. Shortly after, on January 3, the sculpture was dismantled and removed.

In a public statement, AU justifies the sculpture's removal on the grounds that the nature of the work and its prominent placement "suggested the University has assumed an advocacy position of clemency for Mr. Peltier, when no such institutional position has been taken." AU also cites safety concerns based on credible threats to the integrity of the artwork.

However, security cannot serve as a justification to suppress an artwork; this reasoning results in a kind of self-censorship that endangers cultural life and gives veto power to those who would use such threats—a heckler’s veto. Threats of violence to artworks should be handled in the same way as threats of violence elsewhere on campus and in society at large: by reporting them to law enforcement and upping security.

As to any confusion regarding whether AU is endorsing the artist’s political position, this could have been avoided by accurately framing the display of the work in advance. While that opportunity appears to have been missed, it would still have been possible to resolve the confusion after the fact by providing additional context around the work. Any other response jeopardizes the Katzen Center’s ability to display work with a strong political viewpoint.

The Katzen Center has successfully presented difficult and controversial subjects in the past—just last October it hosted an exhibition about the Black Panther Party. Removing the Peltier sculpture undermines the Katzen Center’s commitment to academic freedom and its support of “human rights, social justice, and political engagement,” and sets a bad precedent for exhibiting political artworks in the future.

The 1990 *Wolf Trap* statement <http://ncac.org/resource/1990-wolf-trap-conference-on-academic-freedom-artistic-expression-statement> on artistic freedom on campus, endorsed by the American Association of University Professors, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, among others, makes clear that academic institutions are not responsible for—and hence do not necessarily endorse—the views or attitudes expressed in specific artistic works they display any more than they would be for the content of other instruction, publication, or invited speeches. The statement also affirms that artistic expression merits the same assurance of academic freedom that is accorded to other scholarly and teaching activities.

It is inevitable that political artworks will offend some viewers. As a result it has become increasingly necessary in our media-fueled environment for institutions to be prepared, so as to avert or defuse potentially volatile situations. There are strategies museums can put in place to resist pressure that go beyond issuing a public statement affirming a commitment to artistic and intellectual freedom of speech. By following deliberate steps designed to create meaningful dialogue, and by developing procedures for addressing the press or complaints from the public after an exhibition opens, museums and academic institutions can chart a course for handling controversy when it arises.

To help draft clear and practical procedures, NCAC offers its *Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy* <http://ncac.org/resource/museum-best-practices-for-managing-controversy>, a non-binding document jointly produced with the American Alliance of Museums, the College Art Association, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries, the Association of Art Museum Curators, among others. This document offers a set of strategies designed to open up space for conversation and learning and to prevent or defuse a potentially volatile situation. It also encourages the institution to address sensitive issues of civic engagement and to help fulfill the museum’s mission as a forum for the exploration of diverse ideas.

AAP and CAA urge the American University Museum and the Katzen Arts Center to develop practical procedures for resisting outside pressures when dealing with controversial art. To exhibit a work of art is not to endorse the work or the vision, ideas, and opinions of the artist; it is to uphold the right of all to experience diverse visions and views. We would be happy to assist you in drafting such procedures.

Sincerely,



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