

National Coalition Against Censorship

May 1, 2018

Daisy Porter-Reynolds
Director, Aurora Library Board

Dear Ms. Porter-Reynolds:

Our coalition of literary, artistic and educational organizations was deeply concerned by Aurora Public Library's premature removal of the George Miller poem "Hijab Means Jihad," which was displayed as part of a 20-panel exhibit called, "Placeholders: Photo-Poems."

We sympathize with the challenge the library faced when viewers interpreted the work as a straightforward expression of hatred and a call to discrimination and violence. We also fully recognize that a library needs to be a place welcoming a diverse group of patrons. However, removing a publicly displayed work simply because it expresses unpopular views dangerously undermines free expression rights under the First Amendment and the library's own commitment to viewpoint neutrality.

We understand that the poem was originally approved for display by library management but subsequently drew intense backlash from patrons and was removed. We have since also learned of your intention to revise the library's policy in order to better manage future controversies.

As organizations dedicated to promoting freedom of expression, we routinely advise public institutions that are in the process of developing such policies and best practices to ensure they are in keeping with First Amendment principles. To that end, we offer you the attached set of questions and answers that NCAC and American Library Association drafted jointly.* The text can be used in developing general display policies and offer useful advice for handling controversies.

*Please note: the ALA has subsequently adopted an official Visual and Performing Arts in Libraries: an Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, which can be found at: <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/arts>. The attached piece should not be treated as ALA's official position.

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Christopher Finan
Executive Director

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of School Administrators
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
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
Dramatists Guild of America
First Amendment Lawyers Association
International Reading Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
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
National Youth Rights Association
The Newspaper Guild/CWA
PEN American Center
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
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 Sexual Freedom Alliance
Writers Guild of America, East

When a display expressing a controversial viewpoint is removed to placate popular demands, it suppresses a free exchange of ideas. Instead, as public institutions, libraries should protect freedom of expression through a clear, transparent process for selecting and reviewing displays based on objective and viewpoint neutral criteria, as suggested in the resource below (and as specified in your existing policy).

Instead of removing offending material – and thus becoming vulnerable to future demands to take down displays because of hostility to the viewpoint they express – libraries should contextualize artwork and make clear the artist's intentions. Such contextualization would have helped audiences understand George Miller's poem as a powerful representation of a problem our society is facing, not as itself a manifestation of that problem.

We hope you find our guidelines useful in developing your procedures. Please do not hesitate to contact us for further guidance or clarification.

Sincerely,



Chris Finan, Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship



James LaRue, Executive Director
ALA - Office of Intellectual Freedom

Cc: John Savage
Aurora Library Board President

NCAC Guidelines for Developing Library Policies on Displays of Visual and Performing Arts

Questions and Answers

1. How do I write a good library policy that can guide the display of visual and performing arts and prepare the library to respond to potential complaints?

When libraries display art, they are functioning as exhibitors or curators. Libraries should have written policies specifically applying to visual collections, exhibits, and performances. The *ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual*, Part One, Chapter Three, “Creating Intellectual Freedom Policies for Your Library” policy checklist regarding Meeting Rooms and Exhibit Space has suggestions for specific points to be included in such policies.

In addition to the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* checklist, when exhibiting art a library should:

- Specify clear selection procedures. Such procedures help libraries respond to complaints.
- Specify who or what body is responsible for selection and explain how this person or body is appointed or elected to this role.
- In the case of open calls and juried exhibitions, specify procedures and deadlines from the initial stage (application forms or submission of proposals) to the final decision.
- Identify target audiences for various programs and involve them in the planning and execution of exhibits and performances.
- Develop a strong communications plan, with talking points addressing potential controversy.
- Engage the audience with discussions and dialogue prior and during an exhibition (this could be done through special programming, as well as by providing response and feedback opportunities).
- Collect materials that identify the artist, the exhibition, and the larger context and history of the work.
- Look for other community groups and agencies to involve as co-sponsors.

An effective Visual Art Exhibit policy will also include a statement affirming artistic freedom of expression. The following language is endorsed by the Association of Art Museum Curators, the American Alliance of Museums, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries and others as part of *Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy* (2013):

Freedom of speech is the foundation of our communities and our nation. The works this institution exhibits may awe, illuminate, challenge, unsettle, confound, provoke, and, at times, offend. We defend the freedom to create content and exhibit such work anywhere in the world, and we recognize the privilege of living in a country where creating, exhibiting, and experiencing such work is a constitutional right.

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. If and when controversies arise from the exhibition of a work of art, we welcome public discussion and debate with the belief that such discussion is integral to the experience of the art. Consistent with our

fundamental commitment to freedom of speech, however, we will not censor exhibitions in response to political or ideological pressure.

2. What about children?

Librarians have the professional expertise to select content and programs that have proven to be of interest for various age groups. Librarians also work with parents, teachers, the faith community, and other community members to plan programs for the library. Libraries providing “art walls” and other interactive spaces should be mindful of topics and content of interest to young people, as well as aware of the placement of exhibits specifically designed for adults. However, the art that libraries exhibit cannot be limited to work suitable for children, just as the books on library shelves cannot be limited to those accessible to children.

As the *ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual* observes, minors have a well-established First Amendment right to receive information. Therefore, censorship of art exhibits or programs in public libraries will not be permitted “unless the material is found by a court of law to be obscene, child pornography, or, in the case of minors, harmful to minors.”

3. How can I respond to a controversy?

If a community member or group questions the appropriateness of a particular program or visual images in the library collection, the library should have a written policy available explaining why and how the program was selected, and their policies regarding programs. This policy should also include a way for the community to suggest programs for the future.

The two core elements in response to a complaint are to 1) ensure the work stays on display until the complaints have been reviewed and 2) establish a learning opportunity by creating possibilities for thoughtful discussion between concerned stakeholders.

- *Leave the exhibition exactly as it is while establishing a period for review and discussion.*
- *Provide the complainant a copy of the exhibition selection procedure or similar document.*
- *Develop an official complaint form.* If the complainant is not satisfied after discussing the details of the exhibition and artist's intent, invite them to submit a formal written complaint. (See, the ALA's [Sample Request for Reconsideration of Library Materials](#)).
- *Establish a spokesperson.* Designate one person to interact with the public and the media and ensure that others refrain from contradictory public commentary.
- *Engage with the media strategically.* Be aware of the difference between the cultural press and hard news, as well as who is writing/producing the story, what section of a paper/type of broadcast it will appear in, and who is editing it.
- *Focus on the library's mission, rather than the details.* Contextualize an exhibition within the library's history and role in the community.

Further information: “Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy” is a valuable resource to apply to libraries mounting exhibits or providing visual resources:

<http://ncac.org/resource/museum-best-practices-for-managing-controversy/>