

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

President James H. Mullen, Jr.
Allegheny College
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Meadville, PA 16335
c/o Pamela Higham, Assistant to the President
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March 1, 2019

Dear President Mullen,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Arts Advocacy Program at the National Coalition Against Censorship, a national project dedicated to protecting and promoting artistic freedom. We were disturbed to learn about the recent removal from your campus of a student art project featuring depictions of graffiti. We urge you to actively support art students in their right to express themselves freely on important issues of the day, and to fulfill your obligation as an educational institution to prepare young artists to show their work in a polarized world where social media misrepresentations are frequent and often also damaging.

It is our understanding that the student, working in an Art Department studio space, created a series of paintings that portrayed walls sprayed with graffiti. The images include typical found expressions such as “Big Cat,” “Alien Luv,” “Clap Thots,” and “Kill Cops”. College employees who saw the “Kill Cops” phrase misconstrued it as a literal threat to law enforcement. They took a photo of it, cropping out the rest of the painting, and posted it on social media, where it drew outrage from members of the college community as well as local law enforcement. The college issued a statement saying that it does not condone violence, and explained that the intention behind the work was “to call for an end to mindless violence and the language that leads to it, just the opposite from the context being circulated on social media.” Nevertheless, the student removed the work.

Across the country, artists respond to current events by creating works that reflect upon their environment. This may include subjects such as street violence and police brutality that are sensitive, difficult or divisive. Such work is easily misconstrued, especially when the material is posted out of context on social media. As a result, its display — on college campuses, in a library or at a high school — is regularly followed by calls for its removal, often from the law enforcement community.

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
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
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
Writers Guild of America, West

Colleges and Art Departments need to educate their students about how to navigate this environment, and support them when they are attacked on social media. While we understand that the decision to remove the work was made by the student and not the administration, academic freedom requires active support for a diversity of views and opinions to thrive on campus.

Art students have a lot to learn by exploring the tensions presented by the violent language of Hip Hop, graffiti, and other visually and culturally powerful elements of their immediate environment. As engaged citizens, students should be free to question the ills experienced in our current environment, from violence in our communities to the tactics of law enforcement and the workings of government.

We are aware that the college has offered to further this conversation by holding a panel discussion with the Art Department and the student artist later in the semester. Yet such a discussion, while welcome, would be biased from the start if the cropped element of the painting on social media is the only representation of the painting that people can refer to.

We urge Allegheny College to encourage the student artist to re-display the work in the studio space and make sure that in the future, students are prepared to face controversy, including on social media. A commitment to academic and artistic freedom, in conjunction with discussions like the one that you are hosting later in the semester, will help the college to become a place where difficult subjects can be addressed in a thoughtful, deliberate and non-divisive way. Please let us know if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Garnett', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Joy Garnett
Arts Advocacy Associate
National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc:

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