

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

ARTS ADVOCACY PROGRAM

November 1, 2021

Dear Brian Foote, Danielle Amodeo and members of the Northampton Arts Council,

The National Coalition Against Censorship unites over fifty national organizations in support of freedom of expression in the arts, culture and education. It has come to our attention that, on Sept. 28, you voted to cancel this year's Northampton visual art and poetry Biennial partially because a local Indigenous artist objected to one of the works in the show. The same artist, Jason Montgomery, called for the entire Biennial to be canceled because it was insufficiently inclusive. (Montgomery's work was featured in a previous Biennial. Work that he submitted for the show this year was not selected.)

Rather than standing by the decisions of a qualified and diverse jury and supporting the many local artists who had prepared work for the Biennial, you decided to cancel the entire event, erasing the voices of the 60 artists and poets whose work was selected.

In cancelling the Biennial, you cited both the work that Mr. Montgomery found offensive, and secondarily, the selection process.

No process of art selection is perfect. The process used by the Northampton Biennial could have involved more outreach to various groups, including indigenous groups. The selection committee could have been more diverse. These shortcomings need to be addressed. But none of them, either individually or taken together, justify the cancellation of an already curated Biennial and the impact it had on participating artists.

Worse, if the main impetus to cancel the event was to remove from view a piece by Doris Madsen because it is offensive to one or several individuals, the Arts Council would be in violation of its responsibilities under the Constitution. As a government agency the Arts Council cannot discriminate against viewpoints, no matter how disagreeable it finds them.

While the label "harmful genocidal art" that the Council has applied to Madsen's work is perplexing, it is clear that the Arts Council has taken an impermissible position in condemning that work because of disagreement with its viewpoint. The piece, which depicts the Mayflower and a number of ghostly figures, is meant to refer to the history of violence towards Indigenous people. Whether it succeeds in conveying its message and whether white artists can refer to the violence perpetrated upon people of color can be debated. However, this debate should not affect the decision made by the Arts Council. As a government agency, the Arts Council may not suppress an artistic work because of its viewpoint. By doing this you are very likely exposing the City to legal liability.

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
AICA-USA
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 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
Freedom to Read Foundation
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
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 NewsGuild-CWA
PEN America
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

In the current political climate and reckoning over historically entrenched systems of inequity, the work of art institutions on every level has become more difficult. But art institutions, even as they seek equity and inclusion, need to allow for open exploration of ideas, for experimentation, even for mistakes. Equity and inclusion will not be accomplished through censorship.

We call on the Northampton Arts Council to support artistic freedom and stand by the artists exercising it. We urge you, whatever changes you make to the Biennial process, to make sure artistic freedom will be protected.

We will be happy to assist you in the process.

Thank you,
Svetlana Mintcheva
Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship