

**NATIONAL
COALITION
AGAINST
CENSORSHIP**

**ARTS
ADVOCACY
PROGRAM**

14 September 2022

Paul Feiner, Town Supervisor
Town of Greenburgh
177 Hillside Avenue
Greenburgh, NY 10607
pfeiner@greenburghny.com

Sent via email

Dear Paul Feiner,

As an organization dedicated to advocating for the protections of the First Amendment, we are concerned to learn of your calls to remove the depiction of Minister Louis Farrakhan, and potentially other public figures deemed “controversial,” from a new town-commissioned mural, painted by the artist known as Kindo Art, in collaboration with other artists, activists, and Town Committees. These demands have serious implications for freedom of expression. We urge you to rescind these calls for erasure and allow the uninterrupted completion of the mural as originally agreed and budgeted.

As we understand it, the mural—initially commissioned to allow due artistic license of Kindo Art—was to represent Black History, including the Civil Rights Movement, in the United States. Original good faith requests by the Town to avoid depictions of violence, sexuality, and hate speech in the mural have been respected, and the mural planning has undergone over two years of planning and cooperative review. The resulting project, which is to date half-completed, is true to these blueprints, and illustrates over twenty figures, past and present, who have contributed to Black culture and political life. To get to this stage, the artwork has undergone two key reviews, which included the approval of an initial rough sketch, and the approval of the painted mural, which included a completed depiction of Minister Farrakhan. These approvals preceded the second of three contracted payments to Kindo Art, and your subsequent calls to censor the mural.

To dictate who can and cannot be represented in the mural does a disservice to the project’s original intentions of celebrating Black voices, contributions, and histories by attempting to assert control over them. Practically every public figure has the ability to invoke different associations and take on divergent meanings to individuals across a heterogeneous and democratic society. Similarly, a close reading into the history of any movement of liberation often reveals contributors at odds with one another. Dissent is an important, and importantly messy, part of democracy.

We understand your responsibility as an elected official is in part to represent the interests of your constituency. However, your constituency is not limited to those who

**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

have vocalized their disapproval of the mural. It also includes those who celebrate every square foot of it.

Indeed, while some may associate the representation of Minister Farrakhan with his anti-Semitic, anti-white, or anti-LGBTQ sentiments, others may connote it with a focus on uplifting and defending the Black community, or with his involvement in a particular time and place, as with 1995's Million Man March—an event that aimed to push back against racial stereotyping of Black men by encouraging support and self-sufficiency within the Black community. Respecting diversity of perspective does not mean suppressing everything that could potentially generate an objection.

Your demands as Town Supervisor appear to be based on subjective interpretations and individual complaints, which is concerning to us. The practice of public officials using their power to arbitrarily remove elements of an artwork whose message some individuals do not like violates principles of free expression. Government should not force an artist, who has been expressly selected to create a public installation, to modify their message in order to satisfy individual complaints. In effect, you give power to hecklers and embolden them for future disputes.

It's important to remember that conflicts of artistic intention and audience interpretation are not uncommon in art: by its nature art is open to multiple readings which are informed by personal experience and perspective. However, there is a serious problem when one interpretation is privileged by those in power and becomes the reason to censor public artwork.

Instead of removing controversial material we encourage the Town of Greenburgh to contextualize the artwork and make clear the intentions of the artists and collaborators of the project, which may indeed include educational context regarding more fraught figures in the planned QR codes, or public discussions. We also strongly encourage the Town of Greenburgh to enact a policy for the selection of public art, and procedures for reviewing and responding to complaints that are consistent with principles of free expression. We stand ready to offer assistance as needed.

Sincerely,



Christopher Finan
Executive Director

CC: Judith Beville, Greenburgh Town Clerk
Ellen Hendrickx, Greenburgh Town Councilwoman
Gina Jackson, Greenburgh Town Councilwoman
Ken Jones, Greenburgh Town Councilman
Francis Sheehan, Greenburgh Town Councilman
Hudson Valley NYCLU
Kindo Art
Clifton Abrams, Black Lives Matter Mural Committee

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