3 October 2022

Michael Lambert, City Librarian
San Francisco Public Library
100 Larkin St.
San Francisco, CA 94102
citylibrarian@sfpl.org

Sent via email

Dear Mr. Lambert,

The National Coalition Against Censorship's Arts and Culture Advocacy Program defends the right of artists to participate in democratic dialogue by defending public access to their works. We recently learned of the San Francisco Public Library’s March 2022 decision to cancel the exhibition Wall + Response. The project, which showcases murals from Clarion Alley in the city’s Mission district, was pulled because of objections to an idea expressed in one of the pieces. We urge you to reconsider that decision and display the work. We also urge you to incorporate into your Exhibition Guidelines a clause stating the Library’s commitment to upholding the First Amendment.

It is our understanding that at the time curators Megan Wilson and Maw Shein Win proposed to bring Wall + Response to the SFPL, the poems and murals comprising it were already completed in full. Library officials approved the exhibit enthusiastically. However, that attitude changed one week before the opening when concerns were voiced over one of the pieces, which depicts a sea of protesters holding various signs, including one that reads “Zionism is racism.”

Critiques of Zionism are controversial and often—erroneously—called out as antisemitic. Zionism, however, is a specific political ideology and should not be confused with Jewish identity. The cancellation of the exhibition over one representation of an opinion critical of this political ideology not only undermines the Library’s mission, but it precludes a meaningful opportunity to foster conversation between its diverse communities on exactly what the words on the sign mean in context.

SFPL is a public institution that must serve both the critics of the work and the artists who created it, and all those who agree with it. If the Library were to remove all content that might generate an objection from some section of its diverse constituency, its offerings would be catastrophically reduced and its mission derailed.
Censorship often appears to present an easier solution than facilitating dialogue around contested subjects, but the latter is critical in a functioning democratic society. In this, libraries play a critical role through their support of free speech and the open exchange of ideas, despite perennial calls to censor their offerings. In the face of such attacks, it is regularly (and rightly) pointed out that the presence of a given book on a library’s shelves does not mean that the library endorses the ideas expressed therein. The same principles apply to artworks and exhibitions presented at libraries.

Instead of preventing the presentation of any politically charged material—and thus becoming vulnerable to future calls to remove any material that draws controversy—SFPL should reschedule *Wall + Response*. It is not too late. By contextualizing the artworks’ messages as planned, the Library can clarify the creators’ intentions, and facilitate opportunities for public conversation and collective learning.

We have attached a set of guidelines drafted by the NCAC and the American Library Association,¹ that outline how libraries can uphold freedom of expression while exhibiting controversial material. Especially relevant measures include the adoption of a transparent process of artwork selection that is based on objective and viewpoint neutral criteria, and the establishment of protocols for handling controversy. We encourage you to draw from these resources, and include in your Exhibition Guidelines a commitment to the First Amendment.

Please contact us if we can be of assistance.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Larison
Director, Arts and Culture Advocacy Program
National Coalition Against Censorship

cc: San Francisco Library Commission
San Francisco Chronicle
Hyperallergic
Hannah Kieschnick, ACLU NorCal
Megan Wilson, Clarion Alley Mural Project
Sharif Zakout, Arab Resource and Organizing Center

¹Please note: the ALA is currently in the process of approving a shorter set of the guidelines, so the ones attached should not be treated as ALA’s official position.