

**NATIONAL
COALITION
AGAINST
CENSORSHIP**

**ARTS
ADVOCACY
PROGRAM**

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.

**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
Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
International Association of Art Critics United States (AICA-USA)
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 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
PFLAG
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Poets & Writers
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
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ, Office of Communication
United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Freedom Foundation
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

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.