

# NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

8 February 2023

Hayley Eber, Acting Dean  
Alexander Tochilovsky, Exhibition Committee Chair  
The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture  
The Cooper Union  
30 Cooper Sq  
New York, NY 10003

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Dear Ms. Eber and Mr. Tochilovsky,

As a coalition of over 50 national non-profit organizations united in defense of free expression, we are writing to share our concern over Cooper Union's repeated postponements of its exhibition titled *Vkhutemas: Laboratory of the Avant-Garde, 1920-1930*. It's our understanding that the project has been delayed at least twice in response to complaints related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine: once, in late Spring 2022, again in late January 2023.

Even though the Vkhutemas exhibition was based entirely on the work and research of Cooper Union students, and even though it refers to a design school which was operational in a time that long preceded the modern Russian state, some objectors denounced the project as pro-Russian propaganda. Other critics considered it a deeply insensitive choice on behalf of the school, which is located in a Ukrainian neighborhood. In response to these complaints, the school suspended the exhibition.

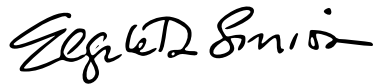
The suspension is deeply troubling. While academic and cultural programming should certainly take into account concerns driven by geopolitical conflict, it should not be subservient to them. An educational institution's first responsibility is to maintain the integrity of its instruction and scholarly research, not to cater to political demands. If an exhibition about a historical design school is to be suspended just because one hundred years later, after several regime changes, the country in which it operated is involved in a war of aggression, then any display related to the heritage of "bad actor" countries could be subject to a similar fate. This would have crippling effects on cultural and historical explorations. It would subject all human heritage to the reductive filter of contemporary political conflict.

## 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 News Guild-CWA  
PEN America  
People for the American Way  
PFLAG National  
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

We're heartened to learn that the Vkhutemas exhibition is being rescheduled for the coming months. The other aspects of Cooper Union's response—engaging its surrounding community, arranging additional programming, and providing additional materials to frame the project—are appropriate and commendable. It is our hope that moving forward, leadership at the Cooper Union recognizes that the institution does not need to suspend programming in order to incorporate such approaches.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Larison". The script is fluid and cursive, with a prominent loop at the end.

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

cc: Laura Sparks, President, Cooper Union