

# NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

3 February 2023

Dr. Robin E. Bowen, President  
Arkansas Tech University  
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Russellville, Arkansas 72801  
rbowen@atu.edu

*Sent via email*

Dear Dr. Bowen,

As organizations committed to ensuring the free exchange of ideas in educational and artistic settings, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the College Arts Association are deeply concerned by Arkansas Tech University's handling of its on-campus exhibition, *Artifacts* by Dominique Simmons. By abdicating its responsibility as an educational institution to stand by its exhibition programming and actively create productive dialogue around it, the University has failed its students and the artist.

It is our understanding that Ms. Simmons, a professional artist and arts instructor, was invited by ATU's Department of Art to present her work at the University's Normal Hall Art Gallery beginning in January of 2023. According to the artist, the exhibition sought to "reflect on and grapple with complex societal issues," and acknowledge "the past, good and bad," as it relates to the American South. Reflecting this intention, the exhibition included three works with fraught imagery, including the Confederate flag, figures in KKK regalia, and a racialized minstrel caricature.

Shortly following students' return to campus, critiques of the exhibition emerged. ATU's African American Student Association alleged that it "perpetuates racist narratives through harmful symbols," and claimed that the artist, a white Southerner, has "no place" addressing the history of racism. The AASU arranged to meet with the artist, and meanwhile made plans to hold a silent march in protest of the exhibition on January 16. Before the march, and before she was scheduled to meet with the students, Simmons canceled the exhibition.

We agree with the University's January 13 statement on the importance of artistic expression and freedom of speech, but its words are hollow if ATU does not actively uphold these principles in practice. Without further action or guidance from the University, the incident establishes a precedent that encourages self-censorship and creates a chilling effect on creative expression. It also undermines the university's most important role: teaching students how to examine and contend with difficult subject matter.

## 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

Simmons's ghostly, cobwebbed versions of racially-charged historical tropes suggests how America's brutal history still haunts its present. However, in the absence of additional context or programming, the presentation of such symbols can be interpreted as arbitrary, inappropriate, or even threatening. It is the role of the university museum to help guide audiences to identify meaning and intent in the artworks it presents on campus. This is especially crucial when artworks incorporate controversial imagery and raise contested issues, including the right of white people to engage creatively with histories of racism. Instead, it seems that the University's strategy was to let the artist's statement function as the only framing of the work.

Without contextualization, it is unsurprising that the exhibition was deemed offensive by the student community. And in the absence of University support, it is unsurprising that the artist chose to take down her work rather than deal alone with student pressure.

We urge ATU to provide additional educational opportunities to its student community in response to this exhibition's cancellation, and reconsider its approach to the presentation of future exhibitions. We are living at a volatile time when cultural conflict is frequent and emotionally fraught. Under these circumstances, university exhibition spaces cannot simply be neutral venues where the public encounters art. University galleries and museums need to play an active role in framing and presenting their exhibitions. They must lead discussions that address exhibition critiques, and provide forums to explore controversial issues.

We have attached guidelines drafted by the NCAC, the College Arts Association, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries, and others, which show how museums can uphold freedom of expression while exhibiting controversial material. We encourage you to draw from this resource as you determine your next steps in addressing this incident, and as you plan for future exhibitions. Please contact us if we can be of any assistance.

Co-signed:

National Coalition Against Censorship  
College Art Association

cc: Dr. Lynette Gilbert, Interim Head of Department of Art, ATU  
Michael Lamoureux, Board of Trustees, ATU Russellville

**National Coalition Against Censorship**

Since its inception in 1974, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) has functioned as a first responder in protecting freedom of expression, a fundamental human right and a keystone of democracy. Representing 59 trusted education, publishing, and arts organizations, NCAC encourages and facilitates dialogue between diverse voices and perspectives, including those that have historically been silenced.

**College Art Association**

CAA, as the preeminent international leadership organization in the visual arts, promotes these arts and their understanding through advocacy, intellectual engagement, and a commitment to the diversity of practices and practitioners.