

# NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS SOUND THE ALARM:  
SUPPRESSING ART BECAUSE IT RELATES TO POLITICAL CONFLICT IS A VIOLATION OF  
ARTISTIC FREEDOM

3/7/2024—National arts and civil rights organizations expressed deep concern today over the extent to which cultural institutions are halting the development of programs that can be interpreted as relating to the conflict in Israel and Palestine.

A rash of cancellations over the past few months has affected cultural programs and exhibitions that contain references to the conflict or that involve artists who have commented on the Israel-Palestine conflict publicly. And this chilling of artistic expression now extends to works that examine *other* geopolitical conflicts, for the sole reason that conjuring one conflict may evoke another. A recent incident involving the Center for Book Arts raises the alarm that the current political climate is pushing cultural institutions to a level of self-censorship that would prevent them from addressing (any) political conflict.

The arts have a key role to play in the context of a global geopolitical crisis. Denying them that role not only violates artistic freedom, it stifles a very necessary public conversation. We call on cultural institutions to recognize and accept their responsibility as forums where conversations about global issues that affect us all can and should take place.

Please read the full Statement here:

As organizations that support artistic freedom and recognize the value of artists' contributions to the democratic dialogue, the undersigned arts and civil rights organizations are greatly alarmed by the lengths to which U.S. cultural institutions are suppressing access to artworks which might be interpreted as relating to the present conflict between Israel and Palestine.

In recent months, we have seen works come into question for unambiguous reference to the conflict, such as the cancellation of a [commissioned installation](#) that included the Palestinian flag. We have also seen the cancellation of [hip-hop performances](#) on account of safety concerns because the artist is vocally in support of Israel. We have even seen [literary events](#) and [exhibitions](#), which do not even reference the conflict, get canceled because the artists involved expressed support for Palestine in public statements and/or in social media posts. Now, the reach of artistic suppression appears to extend to works of art that reference other armed conflicts.

This month the Center for Book Arts, a non-profit cultural venue in New York, abruptly halted its plans to bring Sister Sylvester's *The Eagle and the Tortoise* onto its 2024 program roster. The

performance tells the story of a young woman from Turkey who, at various stages in her life, becomes a political activist, a freedom fighter, and eventually, a proxy soldier in a U.S. war.

The artist was told that CBA could no longer pursue the project as discussed because the conflict at the center of its narrative—namely, Turkey’s treatment of its Kurdish minority—”may be too closely related to the current conflict in Gaza for [CBA] to present the performance.”

This incident suggests that the current polarized social climate is so extreme that it is pushing cultural institutions to a level of self-censorship that would prevent their programs from addressing (any) political conflict. Yet, artist voices that reflect upon the nuances of conflict are especially relevant in moments like these. Cultural institutions hold unique potential to use their connections to archives, art, and artists to find ways to help audiences better understand the world around them, particularly when doing so is at its most difficult.

The sphere of arts and culture is a critical arena in which audiences and artists should be free to reflect upon relevant social issues of the time, whether directly or indirectly. It is at its richest when cultural institutions feel emboldened to present thoughtful artworks that examine challenging subjects, and which help foster difficult conversations through programming. Allowing current events to dictate the lowest common denominator of what’s publicly acceptable programming not only forecloses the possibility for our society to grapple with pressing issues, it goes against principles of free expression and undermines the role of the arts in our democracy.

We call on cultural institutions across the U.S.—including their funders, trustees, directors, and staff—to uphold their role in providing forums for artists and audiences alike to examine and reflect about pressing issues of our times.

Signed:

National Coalition Against Censorship  
American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA)  
Artists at Risk Connection (ARC)  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Defending Rights and Dissent  
Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression  
Media Freedom Foundation  
PEN America  
Project Censored  
Woodhull Freedom Foundation