

**NATIONAL**  
**COALITION**  
**AGAINST**  
**CENSORSHIP**

March 18, 2024

Rachel G. Mohl  
Executive Director and Chief Curator  
Public Art of the University of Houston System  
4224 Elgin Street  
Houston, TX 77204-2007

*Sent via email to rgmohl@uh.edu*

Dear Ms. Mohl,

As a national organization dedicated to defending artistic contributions to the democratic dialogue, the National Coalition Against Censorship is pleased to learn that Public Art of the University of Houston System will complete the installation of Shahzia Sikander's on-campus exhibition titled *Havah... to breathe, air, life*, which was to be completed in time for a scheduled opening on February 28. Given the controversy and confusion that has accompanied this installation, we would like to offer our resources to you and your team as Public Art UHS completes this exhibition, re-affirms its support for artistic expression, and ensures that future projects are not endangered by public criticism.

We understand that Public Art UHS faced criticism and protests from a vocal religious group following the installation of Ms. Sikander's sculpture *Witness*. In our experience, cultural institutions often feel unprepared for pushback against planned exhibitions, and unanticipated controversy can raise difficult questions. We urge Public Art UHS to anticipate and plan for this kind of public response in the future to ensure that it remains an institution that stands by its exhibitions and is dedicated to artistic expression. Though we know you are actively working to uphold Public Art UHS's commitment to present the exhibition and defend the integrity of Ms. Sikander's work, we still have concerns about the initial response: the delayed installation of the exhibition's projection work, stanchions, and signage components; the sudden postponement of opening programs; and the publishing of an online FAQ without input from the artist. This response not only casts doubt as to the University's support of the exhibition; the University's response and delay risks encouraging the efforts of future hecklers who may seek to undermine or stall the programming of Public Art UHS.

As you work to complete the installation of the exhibition, we want to share with you our [Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy](#), a resource conceived by several organizations including the NCAC, the College Art Association, and the Association for Academic Museums and Galleries, which outlines useful considerations for presenting contested works.

In line with the recommendations provided in the document, we strongly encourage Public Art UHS to again revise the online exhibition FAQ document, which, even in its updated form, provides misleading information about the exhibition. As currently drafted, the FAQ still privileges the perspective of the small group opposing the exhibition, rather than introducing the work as intended by the artist. We strongly recommend that text presenting the controversy be placed following the proper introduction of the artwork, and that it cites a credible news source to ensure the issue is framed objectively. In addition to updating the FAQ, we urge you to publicly commit to a date for the rescheduled exhibition programs, so that interested audiences can plan to attend and learn more about the work. These simple steps would communicate Public Art UHS's good faith dedication to presenting the exhibition as intended.

In light of the confusion surrounding the presentation of this exhibition, we'd also like to suggest convening an on-campus conversation on the topic of public art and free expression in a polarized political environment, so as to further educate the campus community and demonstrate Public Art UHS's commitment to artistic freedom. We would be happy to advise in organizing such a discussion with leading experts in public art, artistic expression, and academic freedom. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Larison". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

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