

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

NCAC Decries Exhibition Cancellation at Craft Alliance

July 9, 2024—As an organization committed to protecting the freedom of thought, expression, and inquiry, the National Coalition Against Censorship is alarmed by reports that Craft Alliance, a nonprofit art organization in St. Louis, targeted specific artworks and title information for removal prior to the debut of its Artist-in-Residence exhibition titled *Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hope*, and, days later, canceled the exhibition in its entirety.

The exhibition of new works was the culmination of Allora McCullough and Dani Collette’s juried residency with Craft Alliance. Five weeks in advance of the exhibition, the artists communicated to Craft Alliance the exhibition’s theme, which focuses on the plight of Palestinians and the current violence in Gaza. The plan was approved by Craft Alliance’s Executive Director and Program Director that same day. In addition to monthly check-ins about the project, in the weeks leading up to the exhibition, the artists posted social media previews of their stained glass and ceramic works, which adopt symbolism of watermelons, olive branches, keys, animals, and patterns of the keffiyeh scarf. Three weeks prior to the exhibition, the artists submitted wall text copy for review, explaining the exhibition’s themes of peace, futurity, and regrowth, though Craft Alliance leadership declined to include much of it in the exhibition.

At an exhibition preview just prior to the opening, a complaint from a volunteer prompted Craft Alliance to remove several elements of the exhibition: Collette’s keffiyeh-patterned glass dish and watermelon-seed-shaped glass pieces etched with the phrase “Land Back”; as well as title cards for Collette’s artworks *From the River to the Sea* and *Indigenous to Palestine*. Days later, the organization canceled the exhibition in its entirety, claiming that the artists surprised them the day before the opening by including the phrase “from the river to the sea” as a work title. Craft Alliance leadership asserts the phrase is antisemitic and a call for violence, and therefore is in violation of the venue’s “policies on anti-harassment, anti-bullying, diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility.” They also claim that the show, as a whole, went against Craft Alliance’s DEI policies and created “an unsafe space for children, volunteers, and our staff [...].”

While it is confounding how work depicting watermelons, seeds, keys, animals, olive trees, and a cloth pattern can create an unsafe space or violate DEI policies, “from the river to the sea,” is admittedly a phrase used in widely different contexts with varying intents and meanings. For some, it is a call for equality, freedom, and solidarity for Palestinians. For others, it is “hate speech”: a rallying cry for terrorist groups and their sympathizers, a call for violence, and even a call to genocide. As a result, many cultural organizations must determine how to respond to the invocation of this controversial phrase in artwork without unduly censoring artistic expression or, on the other hand, allowing their galleries to promote the incitement of violence.

In response to this quandary, NCAC advocates for cultural institutions to take the concerns of audiences seriously, but to use internationally approved¹ criteria when deciding if a work, indeed, constitutes incitement to violence. To make this determination, one must consider a) the context of the expression (where and how it is invoked); b) the type of speaker (their position or role in society); c) the intent of the speaker or proponent of expression; d) the content of the expression; and e) the likelihood of violence occurring as a result of the invocation of the expression.

In the context of an artwork title card, in an exhibition in a non-profit art space, created by artists who are vocal about their peaceful intentions, “from the river to the sea” as it appears in *Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hope* does not in any way meet the criteria that would constitute a call for violence. Similarly, the artists’ use of symbolism and other phrases must be read in context and with respect to their stated intent. While the time needed to assess the phrase and properly contextualize it for a gallery audience could justify a small delay in the exhibition’s opening, it does not justify a cancellation.

Policies designed to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion should not be weaponized to censor art. Just like other forms of expression, works of art should be evaluated on their creators’ intents and contextual signifiers, and DEI initiatives should not become an excuse to remove anything that might be construed as offensive.

Given its important role in the craft community of St. Louis, it is essential that Craft Alliance communicates free expression principles to its audiences, staff, board, volunteers, and artist-residents. We call on Craft Alliance to create and implement a policy that protects freedom of artistic expression within a clearly defined exhibition policy; to offer clear behavioral definitions to its policies; and to adopt procedures for dealing with complaints about artwork, so that such complaints can be addressed in an evenhanded and consistent way.

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.

¹ Article 19, “‘From the River to the Sea’: Protecting freedom of expression in public discourse and protest during the conflict in Israel and Palestine,” May 22, 2024, <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/From-the-River-to-the-Sea-analysis.pdf> accessed July 9, 2024. Article 19 is an established international organization that defends freedom of expression.