

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

July 30, 2024

Molly Eppard
Coordinator, Art in Public Places
75 S. Frontage Road West
Vail, CO 81657

Sent via email to meppard@vail.gov and publicinput.vailtowncouncil@vail.gov

Dear Ms. Eppard and the Town Council of Vail, Colorado,

I am writing on behalf of the National Coalition Against Censorship, a 50-year-old coalition of over 60 national organizations dedicated to upholding freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. Our [Arts & Culture Advocacy Program](#) is the only national project dedicated to working with artists and cultural institutions in the service of protecting artistic freedom in the United States.

We are alarmed to learn about the May 2024 decision made by the Town of Vail, Colorado, to cancel Danielle SeeWalker's artist residency with the town's Art in Public Places Program, which was to happen in June. The residency, which had been in development since January, was to include the commission of a new mural, a photo exhibition of existing work depicting contemporary Native American life, a workshop on creating *parfleche*, and public talk.

Our understanding is that the cancellation occurred because of community complaints about an unrelated artwork by SeeWalker that was created for a different exhibition. That work depicts a portrait of a figure wearing a keffiyeh adorned with an eagle feather, and is titled *G is for Genocide*. Per the artist's explanation on social media, the portrait addresses the crisis in Gaza and considers the parallel experiences of Gazan and Native American populations. In statements, the Town of Vail explained its decision to cancel the residency arose from concerns that the unrelated artwork, along with SeeWalker's political views expressed on social media, could "politicize" the public art program.

In our increasingly political environment, cultural programs are faced with the very high likelihood of working with artists who happen to be politically outspoken in their artworks and/or in their public statements. In fact, the bulk of SeeWalker's lauded body of work is undeniably political in its focus on the culture of Native Americans and the violence and inequalities they have faced since colonization.

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

In a democratic society, it should be anticipated and accepted that artists may wish to comment on political issues—both in their personal lives and in art. Artists’ right to political and civic expression must be defended, not punished.

Though the town claims that it canceled SeeWalker’s residency in an effort to make sure it wouldn’t “politicize” the AIPP program, in abandoning months of discussions with SeeWalker and siding with the political views of a complainant who disliked an unrelated artwork, it does just that. For a town to censor art based on reaction to an individual’s specific political views is impermissible under the first amendment.

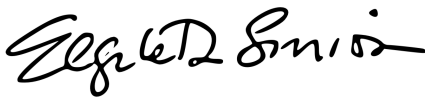
Per Vail’s stated intentions to “reexamine its approach and create robust and specific guidelines” for the future iterations of its Art In Public Places Program, we’d like to offer the following as guidance for establishing policies that promote transparency around Vail’s AIPP program’s artist/artwork selection criteria and uphold artistic freedom.

[Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy](#) is a document we drafted in collaboration with a cohort of national and international arts and museum organizations concerned with protecting artistic expression. Page four has a sample “freedom of speech commitment” that might be of interest.

[Exhibition Criteria Guidelines for State Arts Agencies, Museums, University Galleries, and Performance Space](#) offers frameworks for considering how to shape an exhibition criteria policy that upholds principles of artistic freedom.

Should you have any questions, or should you want any feedback or support as your department embarks on its declared path of “real transformation,” please let us know. We’d be more than happy to advise on how best to uphold artistic freedom in the process.

Sincerely,



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