

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

March 28, 2025

Crystal Williams, President
Tony Johnson, Assistant Vice President of Social Equity and Inclusion
Rhode Island School of Art and Design (RISD)
20 Washington Place, Room 442, Floor 4
Providence, RI, 02903

Sent via email to president@risd.edu and ajohnson@risd.edu

Dear President Williams and Assistant Vice President Johnson,

I am writing on behalf of the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), a coalition of over 60 national organizations dedicated to upholding freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. We are alarmed to learn of RISD's decision to close *To Every Orange Tree*, an exhibition on public display at the campus's Carr Haus Café. We call on you to rescind the decision to restrict access to the exhibition, and instead, permit it to continue as originally planned in coordination with the project's organizers.

It is our understanding that the organizers, the RISD Students for Justice in Palestine (RSJP) and the campus's Carr Haus Café, solicited artworks from the RISD community on themes of "political resistance, anti-imperialism, and Palestinian liberation," and that the exhibition was registered and approved through the school's Center for Student Involvement. Four days following the exhibition's opening, without consulting the organizers, the administration ordered campus Public Safety Officers to shut down the café. RSJP members were informed that there had been "unofficial complaints" about the exhibition that led to unspecified "safety concerns" necessitating the closure. Subsequent orders from administrators instructed RSJP to relocate the exhibition to a small campus office that is accessible only by student ID cards. Administration suggested that in relocating the exhibition to a non-public space, viewers would have the opportunity to "consent" to seeing it, and that in restricting viewership to students, that RISD would better protect the school from federal antisemitism investigations.

RISD justifies the censorship with vague protectionist doublespeak that claims to prioritize the safety of those involved with the show, while at the same time suggesting that irreparable harm might befall its audience. Hosting an on-campus exhibition with pro-Palestine views is no doubt challenging in this McCarthyist moment, and colleges and universities across the US are rightfully trying to protect

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

their students who are visiting the US on student visas. However, an institution of higher education that emphasizes the arts should be able to meet this challenge without capitulating to a presidential administration intent on forcing our nation's cultural and educational institutions in compliance with its political ideology.

RISD's requirements that artists' names must accompany all artworks and that the show must only be accessed with student ID cards likely constitute a *greater threat* to the safety of the show's artists and audiences alike. These measures mandate the identification of student-artists who may be vulnerable to deportation for voicing support of Palestine, and similarly require that visitors surrender their anonymity and privacy in a political context that is obviously hostile to the views in the exhibited work. The surveillance of exhibition visitors is also likely to deter many from seeing the show and engaging with its artworks because it puts every audience member on notice that their name will be included on a list of those who have attended an exhibition disfavored by government and school officials.

Instead of strong-arming the exhibition into obscurity for the political views expressed within it, RISD administrators should be working with its organizers to support and ensure the safety of its contributors, on their terms and with their consent. If RISD has indeed received credible specific threats from those who disagree with views presented in the exhibition, such threats should be handled by law enforcement.

We urge RISD to uphold its values as a premier private art and design school operating in a democracy rather than shamefully capitulate to undemocratic censorious pressures.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Larison". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent loop at the end.

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