



October 17, 2025

President Jim Gash
Pepperdine University, Office of the President
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263

Sent via email to jim.gash@pepperdine.edu

Dear Mr. Gash,

As national organizations dedicated to upholding free speech principles, including creative and academic freedom, we at the National Coalition Against Censorship and the College Art Association were dismayed to learn of the censorship of two artworks at Pepperdine University's Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, and the premature closing of *Hold My Hand In Yours*, the exhibition in which the works were displayed. We urge the University to take steps towards reinstalling the exhibition and, importantly, to adopt a statement affirming the value of free expression and develop guidelines for the exhibition of art on campus.

It is our understanding that the exhibition, which opened September 6th and was scheduled to be on display until March 29th, was shut down October 8th after several of the participating artists requested to withdraw from the exhibition in protest against the demands of the Advancement Administration (which oversees the Museum) to censor elements of two artworks. The censorship requests were made after Advancement Administration officials visited the Museum and took issue with the perceived politics of a video on display. Soon after, presumably upon the request of administrators, the video was powered off.

The video work in question, *Call to Arms, 2015-2025* by Elana Mann, shows performers speaking into a modified bullhorn, the microphone of which is shaped like a cupped hand that covers the speaker's mouth. The performers sing and speak through the horns, responding to current issues including the COVID pandemic, immigrant rights, the fall of *Roe vs. Wade*, among others. Since the video was an essential part of Mann's installation, she requested the removal of the installation's remaining elements.

At the same time, another installation, *Con Nuestras Manos Construimos Deidades* by AMBOS Project, was also censored. The work, made in collaboration with over 240 people, many of whom are migrants awaiting asylum in Mexico, consists of embroideries, woven textiles, and ceramic hands designed for audience touch and interaction. Administrators objected to a piece of fabric embroidered with the phrases "SAVE THE CHILDREN" and "ABOLISH ICE." It is our understanding that, in response to objections by administration officials, museum leadership hid the embroidery and removed wall text about interactivity, presumably to ensure nobody would pull the patch into visibility.

The administrators based their objections on their interpretation of the works as political, and concerns that the expression of political positions in the gallery would affect the non-profit status of the University. These concerns are misguided and untenable. Virtually every artwork on a topical subject can be interpreted as expressing a political position. Crucially, the exhibition of an object in an University

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museum does not mean that the University endorses the ideas it expresses any more than teaching a text in a classroom means that this text expresses the position of the University.

As the 1992 Wolf Trap statement on Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression (endorsed by the American Association of University Professors and adopted at a conference sponsored by the AAUP, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges) states:

Academic institutions provide artistic performances and exhibits to encourage artistic creativity, expression, learning, and appreciation. *The institutions ... do not thereby endorse the specific artistic presentations nor do the presentations necessarily represent the institution.* This principle of institutional neutrality ... mean[s] *that institutions are not responsible for the views or attitudes expressed in specific artistic works* any more than they would be for the content of other instruction, publication, or invited speeches. [italics added]

The Wolf Trap statement emphasizes that all artistic expression in a university setting is integral to the learning process, and therefore merits the protection accorded to other scholarly and teaching activities. This is contrary to Pepperdine's claim that the exhibition was not "part of the academic enterprise" because it did not include works by Pepperdine students or faculty. The principle of academic freedom protects *access* to ideas, not just their expression. A museum that is part of the University, where students can come to learn and debate, is certainly protected by academic freedom principles.

It appears that the decision to censor the work at the Weisman Museum was made in haste and without much consideration. To keep such arbitrary, reactive decisions from stifling creative and academic freedom, Pepperdine needs to adopt a statement affirming the value of free expression, and develop guidelines for the exhibition of art. Such guidelines must guarantee the administration's viewpoint-neutral approach towards artwork—including work that some administrators may consider too political or even offensive—and should also prohibit administrators from censoring a work of art without due consideration and discussion with all parties concerned. Having such guidelines would ensure the excellence and artistic freedom of the Weisman Museum, and make plain that the University does not adopt the viewpoints of every work shown on its campus. NCAC would be happy to provide a sample free expression statement and exhibition criteria that may be helpful.

In the meantime, we hope the University takes steps to reinstall *Hold My Hand in Yours* for its original duration. Such steps should include a public apology, a dialogue with the artists, assurance that artists' expression will be protected from arbitrary censorship, and a discussion with the students who work at the museum and/or participated in the show. Please let us know what action you will take to reaffirm the University's commitment to academic freedom, and how we can support you in this commitment.

Sincerely,

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

Meme Omogbai
Executive Director and CEO
College Art Association

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CC:

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