

National Coalition Against Censorship

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Executive Director

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Members of the Smithsonian Board of Regents
Office of the Regents
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20013-7012

Dear Members of the Smithsonian Board of Regents:

As a group of national and Washington D.C. organizations committed to free expression in culture and the arts, we are writing to express concerns and make recommendations for your consideration when discussing "Exhibition Planning, Sensitive Issues and the Hide/Seek Exhibition" at your January 31st meeting.

Smithsonian Secretary Clough's ill-considered response to partisan political threats to the institution's funding and the public outrage that followed it clearly call for the establishment of specific policies and procedures that would guarantee the integrity and independence of the institution and affirm its respect for artistic freedom and First Amendment principles. Unless you, as a governing board, adopt such policies, the Smithsonian's failure to stand up for the professional curatorial selection process and for the free speech rights of artists and museum visitors will surely have a chilling effect on future programming not only at the Smithsonian but also at other cultural institutions. It will also seriously erode public support and confidence in your leadership.

As a public trust, the Smithsonian serves the interests of all Americans. It betrays its mission the moment it ejects a work, which has been selected following established procedure and already put on display, because some dislike the viewpoint that work expresses. Once the leaders of a public trust cave in to political pressure from religious groups and suppress work deemed "sacrilegious" it is inevitable, as the Supreme Court warned in 1952, that "the most vocal and powerful orthodoxies" will impose their views and public institutions will "find it virtually impossible to avoid favoring one religion over another."

Taxpayer funds go to maintaining a vibrant and diverse cultural sphere that serves all Americans, not just Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals, Christians, Muslims, or Jews. We may differ on cultural or social issues and

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of
School Administrators
American Association of
University Professors
American Association of
University Women
American Booksellers Foundation
for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Television
& Radio Artists
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators
Association
American Orthopsychiatric 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
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
International Reading 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
PEN American Center
People For the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation
of America
Screen Actors Guild
Sexuality Information & Education
Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers
& Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ
Office of Communication
United Methodist Church
United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

argue about these issues - in the press, in public spaces, in galleries and performance spaces - but government officials cannot use financial leverage as a threat to silence those with whom they disagree. Nor should the leadership of a publicly funded institution bow to such threats and sacrifice the institution's integrity out of fear of future attacks on its funding.

Indeed, as the Report of the Commission on the Future of the Smithsonian Institution observed in 1995, it is part of the mission of the museum to engage audiences in a conversation about diverse, potentially clashing, values. As the Commission concluded, "museums in general, and the Smithsonian in particular, are increasingly flash points in the debates that characterize our nation's transition from a society that depends for coherence on a single accepted set of values and practices to one that derives its strength and unity from a deep tolerance of diversity. *This happens because museums, to fulfill their missions, must prepare exhibitions that record and illuminate this transition.*" (ital. added)

We urge you to adopt explicit policies that uphold First Amendment principles, as well as a **procedure for responding to complaints**, whether coming from the general public or from elected politicians. The latter entails **creating an open process of careful review and discussion, which should take into account the facts** that

1. **members of the American public hold diverse beliefs and values,**
2. **that some of the most vital issues facing us are subject to controversy,**
3. **and that controversy in a museum setting, when handled well, can productively illuminate such issues and advance public dialogue.**

We hope that the Board of Regents takes resolute action and thus assures the public of the integrity of its leadership of one of the nation's most important cultural public trusts.

Sincerely,

AICA-USA

American Booksellers Foundation for Freedom of Expression

American Civil Liberties Union

American Library Association

Association of American Publishers

DC Arts Center

Defending Dissent Foundation

The First Amendment Project

National Coalition Against Censorship

People for the American Way

Transformer

Washington Area Lawyers for the Arts

Washington Project for the Arts

cc: C. Wayne Clough, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution
Martin Sullivan, Director, National Portrait Gallery