

National Coalition Against Censorship

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Joan E. Bertin
Executive Director

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 Jewish Congress
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 Foundation
Catholics For a Free Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Directors Guild of America
First Amendment Lawyers Association
International Reading Association
Lambda Legal Defense &
Education Fund
Modern Language Association
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches
of Christ
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
Office of Communication,
United Church of Christ
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
The Creative Coalition
The Newspaper Guild/CWA
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Methodist Communications,
United Methodist Church
Women's American ORT
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

The Honorable Mayor Tom Bates
mayor@ci.berkeley.ca.us

November 7, 2008

Dear Mayor Bates,

I am writing on behalf of the National Coalition Against Censorship, an alliance of over 50 national non-profit organizations united in defense of free expression, to voice our concern over City Arts Commission's blanket ban on art containing guns. The ban caused the recent cancellation of the Art of Democracy exhibition scheduled for display at the Addison Street Windows Gallery, as the exhibition organizers preferred to withdraw the show rather than selectively censor four of the participating artists.

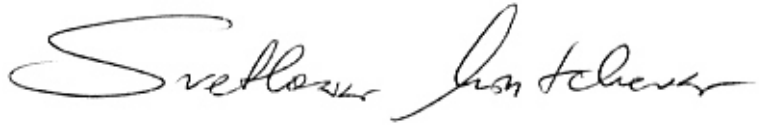
While we sympathize with the City's desire for a world without guns or violence, the decision to put a blanket ban on all art including guns is not only unproductive, it threatens to silence important political speech. The recent incident involving the four Art of Democracy posters, which express strong views on US foreign policy, is a clear example of the type of serious political expression that the ban can suppress. To suppress political speech, which enjoys the highest constitutional protection, a government venue has to have a significant interest—in security, public safety or the like.

It is hard to see how the City can demonstrate such an interest given the nationwide presence of guns and weaponry in war memorials, murals, and film posters, just to enumerate what one can see in the street. In fact, one of Berkeley's iconic murals, the People's History of Telegraph Avenue, contains guns. In this context there doesn't seem to be any legitimate justification for banning the representations of guns from a public gallery. Indeed, according to the organizers, no other venue among the fifty to host the Art of Democracy exhibition around the country has censored the show.

We urge the City of Berkeley to review its guidelines and uphold its proud tradition of free speech. We all want to see fewer guns and less violence in the world, but

suppressing a discussion of violence just because it graphically refers to violence, would not accomplish that goal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Svetlana Mintcheva". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Svetlana Mintcheva
Arts Program Director

CC:

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