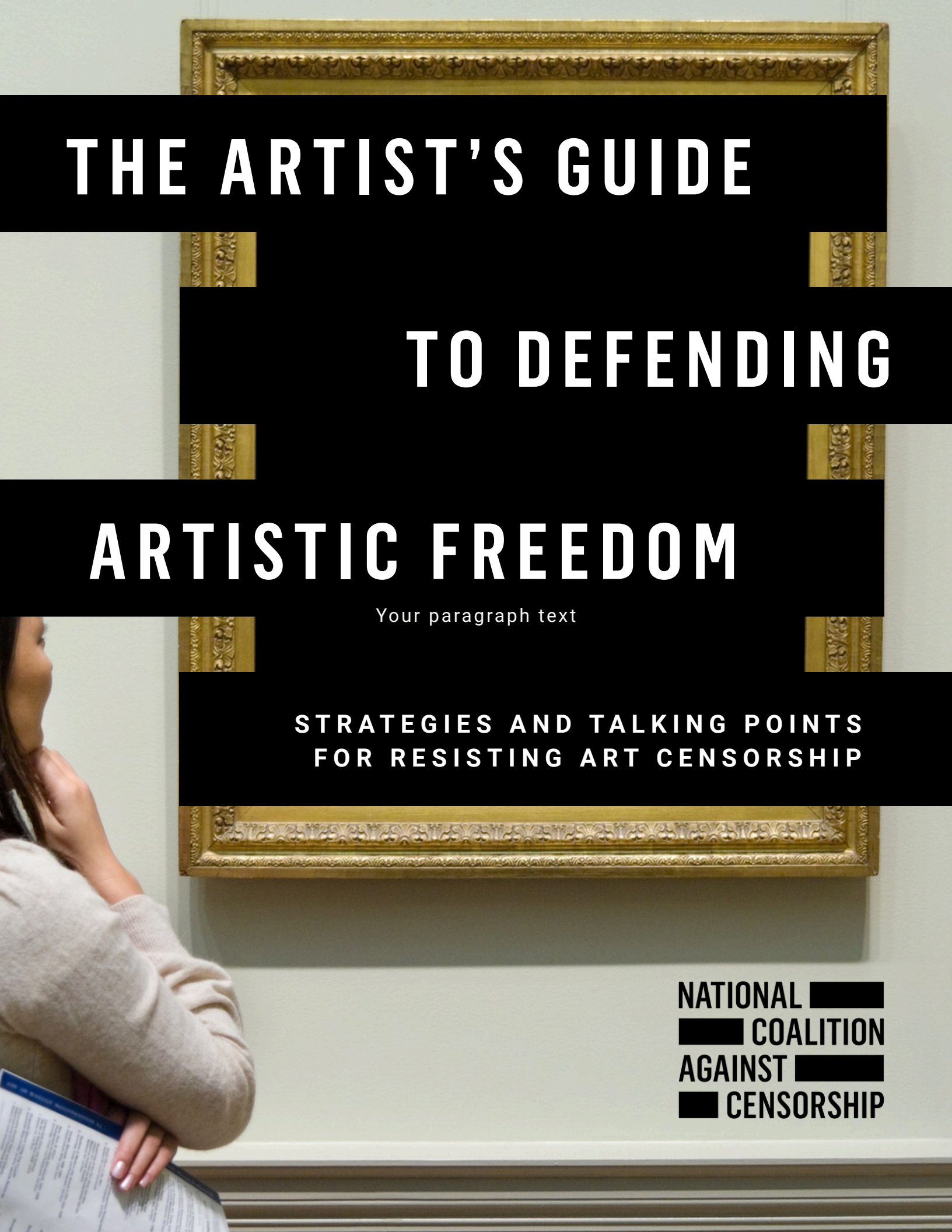


THE ARTIST'S GUIDE TO DEFENDING ARTISTIC FREEDOM

Your paragraph text

STRATEGIES AND TALKING POINTS FOR RESISTING ART CENSORSHIP

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

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The National Coalition Against Censorship
29 Broadway Suite 1400
New York, NY 10006
NCAC.org

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Introduction

Typically, when a controversy arises (or is anticipated) regarding a particular artwork, the program's organizer or curator has an implied responsibility to explain the artwork and their own original reasons for choosing it. Sometimes, however, curators are unable to defend the selection of work, whether because of inexperience or because of an implied risk to their employment status.

This document provides strategies and talking points that may be used by artists and cultural workers when making an argument for the work's retention. If you use this document and find it helpful to avoiding censorship outcomes, please—let us know! If you use this document and find you are still facing censorship, please contact us to see if we can offer further strategizing.

If you have suggestions or feedback relating to this document, please email elizabeth@ncac.org.

Defining censorship in the arts:

Art censorship occurs when a work of creative expression is curated or selected for presentation, and then that invitation is rescinded or the presentation is canceled because the people leading the presenting entity (like a museum, theater, or other venue) or government actors, disagree with the work's perceived message, or fear there will be backlash because of it.

An artwork may also be censored because of the artist's socio-political positions expressed in their other work or in outside comments, or because of allegations about their behavior.

NCAC defines art censorship broadly, in recognition that private entities—not just government actors—can suppress art, and that censorship is detrimental to the free exchange of ideas and artistic expression.

A note on terms:
For the purposes of this resource, we use the word "work" or "artwork" to refer to everything from visual arts, performing arts, literature, media arts, and more.

Similarly, we use the word "organization" or "institution" to refer to the presenting entity that has the power to control the terms of display, including the power to censor (such as a theater, venue, museum, art space, gallery, art residency, municipal art program, public library, performing art space, etc.)

About NCAC's Arts and Culture Advocacy

The National Coalition Against Censorship's (NCAC) Arts and Culture Advocacy is the only national initiative dedicated solely to defending artistic freedom in the United States, which it has done since 2000.

Artistic freedom is a critically important human right that is as essential to a thriving culture as it is to the functioning of a democratic society. When art provokes, or even offends, we believe that it should be met with critique, contextualization, and discussion, and never with censorship.

NCAC's Arts and Culture Advocacy offers direct support to artists, curators, and cultural institutions facing censorship pressures, and the strategies in this resource are drawn from our decades of advocacy experience. In addition to censorship case interventions, we track and respond to censorship trends, and offer an array of other resources and ongoing programs that aim to empower the cultural sector to protect artistic freedom.

Even as this resource is designed to bring NCAC's strategies to people who can use them, we always encourage direct contact from anyone in the arts and culture sector facing threats of censorship. Where relevant and as resources allow, NCAC may be able to provide behind-the-scenes strategic support, public advocacy and media support, and/or legal referrals. Even if you are not seeking intervention support, we welcome reports of censorship so that we can continue to track its constant evolution and frequency in the United States. All queries are confidential unless otherwise agreed upon.

To fill out a censorship report, visit our website: https://ncac.org/report-censorship.

Section 1:

Strategies for Artists: Preparing Your Work for Presentation

Establish Key Information About Your Work
Though a given work can inspire multiple interpretations and have complex, layered meanings, when it comes to contested subject matter and controversial themes, you as the artist can be proactive in preventing your work from being misunderstood or intentionally misinterpreted.

- Support the work of the curator by providing information about the work, your intent, and process.
- Request that the curator or project organizer get your feedback before publishing wall texts, exhibition essays, or publicity materials describing your work.
- You can support a particular interpretation or conceptual grounding for your work by publishing a short statement about the project on your artist website or social media accounts.

Consider the Power of Titles
Ultimately, it is the curator's and the presenting organization's responsibility and right to decide how to contextualize your work, and sometimes artists have limited ability to ensure specific information accompanies the work.

In anticipation of such cases, you might consider integrating key information into the work's title, so that even the most basic of wall labels can still communicate key aspects of the work's message. For example, if it is important to understand that an artwork is made in response to a particular historical event, or to memorialize a specific person, it may be advantageous to reference the event or individual's name in the title. This can help retain your power to control the interpretation of your work; though you may want to be mindful of how strongly-worded titles might also discourage some curators from considering your work to begin with.

Section 2:

Strategies for Artists: Responding to Institutional Censorship

Defend the Value of the Work
Know why your work was invited, and make a case for its curatorial inclusion within the exhibition or program.

- Familiarize yourself with the institutional culture of the exhibiting organization. Many organizations have particular missions. Does that mission feel like it's being upheld in keeping the work, or in rejecting it?
- Emphasize the ways your work meets the designated theme or criteria. Draw from exhibition descriptions or wall texts, if available. Alternatively, refer to initial inquiries in which project staff explained their reasoning for including your work in their program.
    - It can be helpful to communicate your intention, use of symbolism, and process in plain, neutral language.
    - You may be able to talk to the curator off the record (i.e., not on their institutional/work email) to gain insights or suggestions.
- Remind institutional leadership that their audiences are not a monolith, and offer to collaborate with them to devise ways to contextualize the works for audiences who might need it.
- If the work was to be presented on a college campus, review the Wolf Trap Statement on Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression and present it to the organization as an established and respected best practice endorsed by the American Association of University Professors.

Defend the Integrity of the Selection Process
Know the process through which your work was invited, and make a case for why that process should be respected.

- Emphasize the importance of the established procedure:
    - The more competitive or lengthy the review process, and the more people involved in the review, the more valuable it is for the organization to maintain the appearance of its integrity. Any aberration undermines the credibility of the organization as well as the procedures in place.
    - Abandoning the established process undermines the work of those involved in the selection, and sends a message to future curators, jurors, and committees that their time and expertise are not respected.
- In cases where there is limited curatorial oversight:
    - Underscore the lack of oversight as the standing precedent, and emphasize its likely appeal for both participating artists and audiences, alike.

- Regardless of the level of curatorial oversight, remind the organization that it relies on the trust and good faith of artists, and that when an organization reneges on its own selection or invitation procedures, it signals to artists that their work may be disregarded on a whim.

Refer to the Agreement or Contract
Review the loan/commission/performance agreement (if applicable), and ensure its terms are being followed.

- Identify any clauses outlining prohibited subject matter.
  - If there are none, make a case that there were no established guidelines that your work transgressed. This matters because it suggests that the decision to censor was arbitrary and reactive, rather than principled.
  - If you think your work has been misinterpreted as falling into a prohibited category, explain why it does not.
- Make sure the issuing organization adheres to the agreement, particularly as it relates to checklist edits, program cancellations, disputes over the agreement, or requests for revision (in the case of commissions), and clarify who has the authority to make such adjustments.
  - If the organization is not following its own policies for settling disputes, seek support from legal counsel specializing in contracts. Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts may be able to help, and you can look up affiliates in your state.
  - Note: In absence of a formal agreement, refer to written correspondence with organizers that specifically indicate any such stipulations.

Identify and Respond to the Objections
Identify the subject of the objections being made, and, as relevant, make a case for why the objections are not applicable.

- Objections to the work itself:
  - If the institution claims the work contains prohibited subject matter, ask whether there is a written policy describing this, and if so, was that policy communicated in advance? Does it truly apply to your work?
    - Regardless of whether the prohibitions are codified, review the organization's program history for counterexamples. Counterexamples not only illustrate exceptions considered culturally valuable for audiences, they also can reveal when prohibitions are enforced selectively, which suggests a lack of procedural consistency and may lead other artists to feel that their work will not be reliably respected.
  - Consider the ways in which your work might be misunderstood or misrepresented, and offer any information (such as its process, context, or intent) that might help the organization better communicate the work to stakeholders and audiences.

- Objections that displaying the work will create legal risk (for example, due to claims that it might "violate" a specific executive order, or existing law). *If this happens, we encourage you to seek analysis support from NCAC, or have a lawyer review these claims.* Generally speaking, you should know that:
  - When the government decides to fund the arts, it can make funding or grant award decisions based on merit and many other criteria, but it may not deny a grant for the sole reason that it disagrees with the views expressed in the project.
  - A federal court determined that the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) grant rules banning projects that "promote gender ideology" violated the First Amendment because it constituted a viewpoint-based restriction on private speech. (As of May 2026, the government is appealing that ruling; more information about the case can be found here.)
  - NEA grants may be used for programs or work that "promote" diversity, equity, and inclusion, so long as they don't violate federal anti-discrimination law.
- Objections that displaying the work will lead to the loss of donors or funding:
  - Make a case for all the ways in which your work, and its curation, helps fulfill the mission of the organization as stated on its website.
  - Remind the institution that side-stepping curatorial integrity and mission-centric decision-making can expose them to a greater loss of public trust, reputational damage, and jeopardize other current and even future support. The organization might use the situation to further engage and cultivate its best supporters and outreach to new prospective donors.
- Objections to other works you've made, or to things you've said or allegedly done:
  - Ask whether all other artists have been scrutinized in the same way. Review past programming and look for examples in which the organization has worked with strongly opinionated or contested artists.
  - Make a case that cultural institutions are not moral arbiters dedicated to assessing compliance with specific ideologies or norms, but rather stewards of culture and creative expression.
  - Remind them that your work was selected based on its alignment with standards of creative excellence or relevance.

- Objections based on potential "safety concerns":
  - Argue that *the work itself* does not pose a safety concern, and that the institutional response should *address the actual source* of the safety concern–with additional security and staff preparedness, but not cancellation.
  - Ask whether a substantial credible threat has been made and, if so, whether the institution reported it to the relevant authorities for advice as a first step.
  - Ask whether the institution can consider seeking additional security training or staff for specific events, rather than cancel the program.
  - If there are "concerns of protest," argue that is not sufficient reason to cancel a program (and draw upon arguments against adhering to the "heckler's veto" as elaborated in **Section 4**).
- Objections that the work or expression doesn't reflect the organization's values:
  - Ask the institution to consider whether all works it has ever shown reflect its values—it's almost impossible, as there's no way that all artists it has ever shown share the same values and perspectives on all issues.
  - Advocate for the organization to reflect upon this publicly by creating a *Statement for Artistic Freedom* and *Standing Disclaimer*. Such policies protect both the organization, and artists!
    - For more information and examples, refer to NCAC's Guidelines for State Arts Agencies, Museums, University Galleries and Performance Spaces, and Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy.
- Objections that the project should not be supported by "taxpayer dollars":
  - Public funds supporting the arts cannot be wielded to manipulate the messages that get presented. The First Amendment prohibits the government from withholding funding to discriminate against ideas based on their viewpoint.
  - In cases where the venue is clearly a government space and not an exhibition space (e.g., a government office which contains art work), there is an exception for "government speech." In such spaces, works may be restricted based on viewpoint. If an organization is alleging that it is a government space, look into its founding and mission, and contact NCAC or seek legal advice for interpretation.

Leverage Your Other Work (if relevant)
If you have other works that the organization still wants to present, you may wish to wager withdrawing them if the organization does not agree to present all of the works as originally agreed upon.

- This puts pressure on the institution to find replacement works or else explain why a particular program didn't open as intended.
- In combination with other actions (such as making an announcement on social media or writing an OpEd), this can help turn the silencing of your work into a statement of defiance, and put a spotlight on the work that was censored.
- *Be aware of the risks.* Review your agreement and be prepared that withdrawing other works and putting this pressure on the organization may result in the forfeiture of your artist fee (if applicable) and may impact future opportunities to work with the given organization.

Documenting Censorship

In an effort to avoid being seen as a "censor," organizations will often come up with a public reason as to why a work cannot be shown.

Keep any written communications (including emails, texts, voicemails, letters, or memos) that indicate your work is being censored because of its message, or for a fear of controversy.

If discussions about your work and its intended placement within a project are becoming strained, be wary of requests for in-person meetings or phone calls. Artists commonly learn that their work is being censored—and the reasons for the censorship—in direct conversations, around which there is no "paper trail." If the state you are in only requires "one-party consent" for recording conversations, you may consider recording the exchange for documentation.

Build Support for the Work
Seek allies both inside and outside the institution to develop support for your cause.

- Inside:
  - If possible, use internal connections to identify the source of pressure so you know where to direct your appeals.
  - If possible, see if allies on staff can identify which of their colleagues, institutional leaders, board trustees, or funders might be sympathetic to your case. Share with these people the case for keeping your work, and see if they can negotiate internally to keep it on view. (See **Section 4** for general talking points that can be used.)
  - If the institution's employees are unionized, contact a representative to see if they'd be willing to issue a statement in favor of protecting artistic freedom.

- Outside:
  - **File a censorship report with the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC).** All reports are confidential unless otherwise discussed. We can work with you behind the scenes or publicly as mutually agreed upon. We may be able to provide non litigation support and general legal information.
  - Notify other artists in the exhibition (and/or artists in recent or upcoming shows). Tell them what's happening and ask if they would be willing to draft a statement in support of retaining your work and on the importance of artistic freedom. Artists in current or upcoming exhibitions may wish to withdraw their work as an expression of protest.
  - If your work is in an exhibition on campus, consider seeking support from faculty and students. Allies may seek to organize protests, write OpEds in student-run publications, or petition against the censorship of your work.
  - Work with audience groups or special interest groups who may be moved by the story of your censorship and who might reach out to the institution in support of your work.
  - If the censorship of your work occurs at the hands of a government entity (such as a state university, municipal museum, public library, etc.) there's a chance this may violate the First Amendment. If the censorship of your work violates the terms of your signed agreement, there's a chance it violates contract law. In cases such as these, you may want to be in touch with organizations that offer pro bono legal information and advice:
    - American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) affiliates nationwide
    - Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)
    - Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts
    - Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI)
    - Arts/Cultural membership and professional organizations often have legal resources available for members

Section 3:

Strategies for Artists: Making your Case Public

If you are unable to convince the organization to retain the work for presentation, you might consider trying to harness the Streisand Effect to attract attention to your work and the act of censorship that befell it.

Learning from "the Streisand Effect"

Oftentimes, attempts to censor something result in increased publicity for the thing itself—a phenomenon referred to as the Streisand Effect. This happened in 2003 when the singer and actress Barbara Streisand attempted to cease the circulation of a photograph of her beachside Malibu estate. The photo was posted online along with 12,000 other images documenting California's coastal erosion, but Streisand filed a lawsuit attempting to remove the image of her property. Before the lawsuit was filed, the image of Streisand's property had been downloaded just six times; but following the lawsuit, public awareness increased and resulted in more than 420,000 visits to the site in the following month. As a result, the term "Streisand Effect" is used to describe the tendency for censorship to draw increased public attention to censored content.
Even though censorship can't always be "undone," artists and cultural workers can amplify public attention so that censored works can be made accessible to a broad audience.

Telling Your Story
However you share your story, use concise, neutral language, and remain focused on facts as they relate to the case. Keep your focus on your art.

- Include the terms of the initial invitation and any language the organization has that supports artistic freedom of expression.
- Briefly explain the work, your intention with creating it, and why it fits within the given cultural program. Have in mind that you are addressing a broad audience not necessarily familiar with art.
- Contextualize the project within the organization's program history.
- Describe how you learned the project would be canceled/suspended/impacted.
- List the reasons you believe (or were told) your work was censored.

- Include a demand (e.g., you may ask that the work be shown as originally intended, or else advocate for better policies protecting against curatorial interference).
- Include a call to action (e.g., invite readers/followers to write to the organization, demand accountability, etc.).
- Emphasize the broader consequences for the community if the practice of censorship exemplified by your case continues. Make the point that this is not just about your work, but about protecting artistic freedom for other artists and community members, too.

Note: When working with reporters, especially print or broadcast media that is out of your control, remember that they are not necessarily on your side, and that your work and relationship to the exhibiting organization could be misrepresented.

Attracting Public Attention
Considerations for where and how to share your story:

- Social Media: Online platforms enable you to take an immediate public stance, and posts can generate media interest. At the same time, social media statements also may make you vulnerable to negative comments and harassment, so consider your own risk tolerance/risk aversion as it relates here. If you do decide to post something:
  - Carousel posts or threaded posts are effective ways to share your story.
  - Include images of your work and explain your intent in making it.
  - Include screen grabs of correspondence notifying you of your invitation and the project's cancellation.
  - Consider redacting personal information or contact information relating to anyone not directly responsible for the decision to censor.
  - Tag local media, arts media, the institution, and other stakeholders.
- Op-Eds: Opinion editorials that make a compelling argument are ideal for more detailed storytelling. One benefit of op-eds is that you retain control of the narrative, and it benefits from the established circulation of the given publication.
  - Determine your argument and make sure the anecdote of your censorship supports it.
  - All publications have different criteria for Op-Eds. Know where you are hoping to get it published and look up their parameters before writing.

- News Journalism: News reports may help establish the legitimacy of your censorship, since many newsrooms have standards for investigative reporting and fact checking before publishing a given article. That said, you should not assume that any particular reporter has your interests at heart.
    - Contact a reporter that covers art in your area directly, or issue a press release and send it to a list of local and national publications that cover arts and culture. In some cases, news publications without a specific interest in culture may still cover a censorship incident.
    - When contacting reporters, be prepared with a digital file with documentation confirming your story. Don't share the file until you know the reporter is interested.
    - Research every reporter and news outlet before engaging with them and make sure they have your interest and artistic freedom in mind, and will not just sensationalize your work and delegitimize your grievances.
- Contact the National Coalition Against Censorship: Before going public, consider contacting NCAC for strategic censorship cases and publicity support. NCAC's Arts and Culture Advocacy offers behind-the scenes support for censorship disputes, but also, as agreed, can support in launching media responses and calls for accountability.Visit ncac.org/report-censorship

Section 4:

Key Talking Points for Artistic Freedom

Consider the talking points below to help rally support and to help convince leadership that censorship is not the best solution to controversy.

- With censorship, attempts to avoid negative publicity tend to backfire. Censorship often causes even more negative attention and controversy for the organization.
- Art censorship betrays the very people and principles that cultural organizations depend upon for quality program content (creatives, curators, artistic directors).
- Engaging in censorship is not “neutral.” It concedes that the critics are "correct," thereby aligning the organization with a position that may alienate it from key audiences and community members.
    - To protect itself and presenting artists, the organization should adopt a Statement for Artistic Freedom and Standing Disclaimer. Refer to NCAC’s Guidelines for State Arts Agencies, Museums, University Galleries and Performance Spaces, and Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy for more information.
- Conceding to the “heckler’s veto” sets a dangerous precedent.
    - It undermines the independence and integrity of the entire organization.
    - It undercuts the expertise of curatorial and program staff by affording non-experts (and others who might not have even experienced the work) power over what can be presented.
    - Conceding to one set of critics often emboldens them to harass the organization in the future should they dislike another project. It also sets a precedent for other potential critics to do the same and expect similar results.
    - Taking down the work might appease the handful of hecklers who have spoken up, but disregards the opinions of the countless exhibition visitors who want to see and engage with the work.
- If the organization is a museum, consider that museum accreditation and professional ethics frameworks—such as those associated with the American Alliance of Museums (AAM)—prioritize intellectual independence and establish an expectation that curatorial decisions remain free from undue external pressure that could compromise institutional integrity.

- It is okay if an artist holds, or an artwork presents, views that do not reflect those of the presenting organization. No museum can be assumed to align with all of the opinions held by the artists and presenters they work with.
- Not all visitors may share the perspectives of a given artist whose work is presented at a given organization, but it is the role of the organization as an educational/cultural institution to contextualize and provide information about the works in its walls, which reflect the world outside.

Refer organizations to NCAC's *Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy*.