

To:

Date: December 16, 2010

Re: Censorship in America

As artists and citizens, we are outraged by the censorship rearing its head in our nation. In a country founded on freedom of expression – the First Amendment – we find it shocking and senseless that some amongst us would deny the rest of us by silencing any voice they deem “different” or “other.” Dissent is a right that has been bought and paid for by the American people. Disagreement is the cornerstone of democracy. A great nation is represented as much by its art and artists as by its statesmen and women. As artists and citizens, we will not be bullied by blind bigots, silenced by fear, or denied our basic civil rights.

On December 1, World AIDS day, G. Wayne Clough, secretary of the Smithsonian, without consulting curator Jonathan Katz, removed “A Fire In My Belly,” a video piece by artist David Wojnarowicz, from the current exhibition “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture.” Catholic League president Bill Donahue, with the support of incoming Speaker of the House John Boehner, exerted pressure on the Smithsonian. Even though this piece had been on view since October 30 without complaint, Donahue and company claimed this video is “anti-Christian hate speech” and a waste of taxpayer money. In short, the Smithsonian caved.

Since then public outcry has built across the nation. As citizens, we realize that censoring work in a Washington, D.C. museum violates us all. We understand that this is not an isolated instance. We understand that the real targets go far beyond a four-minute video—to arts funding, to stigmatizing free expression and open dialog, to demonizing gay culture in all its forms. This fear-mongering and distortion is what is truly un-American, and it’s unacceptable.

On December 14, in the midst of an upstate freezing blizzard, people gathered to attend an emergency screening of “A Fire in My Belly” held by ArtRage Gallery and Light Work in Syracuse. Both Light Work Gallery at Syracuse University and ArtRage Gallery will now continuously screen the work until February 13, the slated closing date of “Hide/Seek.” And we are not the only ones. What you can no longer see in our nation’s capitol you can now see in cities and towns across the land.

Day by day, and decade by decade, social and cultural liberties have come under attack, disrupting our nation’s progress and the very vitality of our scientists, intellectuals and artists. At every turn we are losing ground with cuts in funding and the dismantling of cultural programs and significant institutions large and small. And this must stop! We are counting on all US representatives who care about fairness and freedom to protect and to defend the First Amendment at all costs. For more information go to [Hideseek.org](http://Hideseek.org) and [PPOWgallery.com](http://PPOWgallery.com).

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Kimberly McCoy, Community Engagement Organizer, ArtRage Gallery