

MEDIA ALLIANCE

June 13, 2022

Kate Patterson
Director of Communications
San Francisco Public Library
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San Francisco CA 94102
Email: kate.patterson@sfpl.org

cc: San Francisco Human Rights Commission
25 Van Ness Avenue, 8th Floor
San Francisco CA 94102
Email: hrc.info@sfgov.org

Re: Wall and Response Exhibition

Dear Ms. Patterson,

After receiving your response to a petition signature – I feel that it is necessary to continue in dialogue with you. I was very distressed to read your response. I am also bringing this to the attention of the Human Rights Commission under their mandate of providing technical assistance, information and referrals to government agencies related to human rights.

A bit about our organization: Media Alliance is a Bay Area democratic communications advocate. Our members include professional and citizen journalists and community-based media and communications professionals who work with the media. Our members are concerned with communications rights, especially at the intersections of class, race and marginalized communities. We have been based in the SF Bay Area for 46 years after our founding at Fort Mason Center in 1976, and are currently domiciled in the Mission District at the community benefits project, Pacific Felt Factory, at 20th and Bryant Streets.

Media Alliance has protected freedom of expression and opposed censorship for decades. We also want to be clear that we are active in the fight against hate speech and for social media accountability, and that we take the need for all people to feel safe in public spaces extremely seriously.

We work with Clarion Alley Mural Project (CAMP) in the Mission District coalition called United to Save The Mission, which works to mitigate the impacts of development and gentrification in the eastern neighborhoods of San Francisco, particularly the Mission. For what its worth, our executive director is of Jewish origin and does not tolerate hateful speech directed at the Jewish community,

A bit about the current situation: *Wall + Response* is a planned exhibition at the San Francisco Public Library that features 4 public murals and responses by over a dozen poets to the content of the community murals. The exhibition has been in the works since the fall of 2021.

The four artworks on Clarion Alley address 1) the death of Luis Gongora Pat, a homeless man who was killed by the San Francisco Police Department 2) The Black Panther Party and its demands for equity 3) Affordable housing and the need for it and 4) an Arab Liberation mural. All four topics are controversial in some sectors of the population, but speak to pressing social issues of inclusion, economic equity, public space and human rights. Among the poets and artists involved in the project are [Tongo Eisen Martin](#), [Maw Shein Win](#), [Genny Lim](#), [Karla Brundage](#), [Jason Bayani](#), [Kim Shuck](#) and artists [Emory Douglas](#) and [Art Hazelwood](#).

After almost six months of development, the San Francisco Public Library abruptly objected to the Arab Liberation mural and agreed to only move forward with the exhibition if the mural was removed or defaced to remove a small portion that contains the words "Zionism is Racism". Unsurprisingly, Clarion Alley Mural Project is not willing to alter the community murals to meet the Library's sudden demands and thus, the entire exhibition may not go forward due to the Library's sudden turnabout. We note for the record, that the Library had access to the artwork when it agreed to host the exhibit and the mural did not change or transform itself in March of 2022.

In her response to the petition signature from Media Alliance (attached), Ms. Patterson, the Communications Director at the SFPL, concedes that "the Library does not advocate or necessarily endorse the viewpoints of exhibitions or exhibitor". Obviously, this is the case since it is unlikely the SFPL would respond positively to a demand from me that they remove copies of *Mein Kampf* from their library shelves because makes me personally feel unsafe to come upon it when browsing a library shelf. Given the state of this country with regards to book burning, we should take a minute to underline that the presence of a book in the library or an artwork on a wall at the library does not constitute Library or City of San Francisco endorsement of every word in a book or every image in an artwork.

In partnering with Clarion Alley Mural Project, the SF Library is highlighting public art, which features social justice art as created by local artists, not as commissioned by the City or a private entity. CAMP has produced over 700 murals on a wide variety of controversial subjects.



In her email response to me, Ms. Patterson, after conceding that the SFPL does not endorse or support the contents of all the books it makes available to the public nor the speeches and exhibitions it presents, falls back on a deeply troubling statement that the words “*Zionism is racism*” constitute hate speech. We must draw the line at these kinds of statements by public officials because they distort the concept of hate speech in ways that demonize, criminalize and threaten vulnerable communities. Labeling a set of beliefs as racism or as containing racist ideas is not hate speech. It does not call for the elimination of any individual or group, nor does it propose that physical violence be directed at any individual or group.

Racism posits that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race and justifies the displacement and enslavement of some groups by others, leading to the systemic oppression of a racial group. (Merriam-Webster dictionary).

Labeling the identification of racism as hate speech is much like labeling street protests as terrorism, an action taken by the Federal Bureau of Investigation towards the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. It is a tactic to criminalize calls for justice from marginalized groups and silence them. The San Francisco Public Library has had numerous public events and speakers that identified racism in many forms including policing and the criminal justice system, voting reform, corporate use of sweatshops abroad and hiring processes domestically, the immigrant processing system and the situation at the border, foreign policy towards the countries of the global south, Afrikaners and apartheid in South Africa ... the list goes on and on. Yet in this one particular example, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the “r” word may not be used. This is a politicized double standard.

We ask that rather than parroting histrionics that all criticisms of Zionist manifest destiny are antisemitic from lobbying groups determined to shut down the Palestinian diaspora, that the SF Human Rights Commission assist the San Francisco Public Library staff to develop a reasoned defense of free expression to address the pressures they obviously expect to receive.

We believe this falls squarely within the mandate of the Commission to provide technical assistance to city agencies on matters of human rights. It is important that San Francisco maintain its leadership in human rights, not only as a historical legacy, but also in real-time when issues remain controversial and difficult for some. When we look back in fifty years to this time, we want to see that San Francisco was courageous and uncompromising in supporting calls for justice even when some wished that the oppressed would just shut up and go away.

Thank you for reading and we really hope that this misfire will be corrected and the exhibition will proceed as scheduled to highlight the vital public art that Clarion Alley Mural Project has facilitated.

Respectfully,

Tracy Rosenberg

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