

FINAL REPORT

Artistic Censorship in Greater Los Angeles

Introduction:

This is the final report for my project funded by the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement for 2021/2022. I begin with sincere and deep acknowledgement for the assistance of several people without whom this highly successful project could not have been possible. The Executive Director of the Center, Michelle Deutchman and her assistant Brenda Pitchman were absolutely crucial at every stage of this endeavor. They provided effective guidance and worked closely with me and my extremely able staff in the Department of Communication at UCLA. The personnel there were exemplary in every possible way: Zack Burwell, Pia Svenson, and Olga Duka. Each of these persons assisted with the complex logistics and the financial details involved in arranging the public panel on May 23, 2022. Olga Duka also arranged to ensure that everyone received their honoraria in timely fashion.

Above all, I want to thank my undergraduate assistant, Alexandra Leon. She was involved in this project at the outset and performed outstandingly in every conceivable way. She assisted with logistics, contacted all the panelists, arranged parking, followed up after the event, and met with me in person or virtually weekly or even more frequently as needed. She was, in short, one of the finest undergraduate employees I have selected in my long teaching career at the University of California.

The Overall Project:

Overall, this project was in my judgement tremendously successful. It required extensive planning and effort in contacting the panelist for the May 23 event. Likewise, it required significant research for the program. That task proved difficult because it demanded an examination not only a review of my previous publications on artistic censorship, but also an inquiry into some new material, including more recent examples that I could relate to the audience. All of this had been carefully outlined in the initial proposal submitted to the Center. The most problematic feature of this process occurred when my panelist Noni Olabisi died unexpectedly. Noni was one of the finest muralists in the United States and I had to make the decision about her replacement. I finally decided that I would assume the role personally because I had been a prominent participant in the successful battle to preserve her mural in 1995. "To Protect and Serve." I had published an article about that controversy and I have taught and spoken frequently about that censorship controversy. In my view, this decision turned out to have worked well; I knew Noni Olabisi very well and I felt confident that I could replace her effectively.

The Event

The May 23 event went very smoothly. It attracted a large audience of students, faculty, and members of the public in one of UCLA's large classrooms (Rolfe Hall

1200). I am attaching some photographs of the event taken by Alexandra Leon throughout the evening. I am especially gratified that many members of my Spring Quarter class also attended because this topic was very relevant to our course content.

The program itself consisted of the following panelist, all outlined in the proposal except for the change owing to the death of Noni Olabisi. Each panelist stayed largely within the time prescribed (approximately 15 minutes per presentation):

1: Paul Von Blum, Project Director:

“Brief History of Artistic Censorship in Greater Los Angeles.” This was the overview for the entire event. I detailed the long and sorry history of artistic censorship in the Los Angeles area, providing a very quick account of the broader U.S. history of such censorship. My focus was on the most dramatic and highly publicized examples: “America Tropical,” by David Alfaro Siqueiros; “Back Seat Dodge,” by Edward Kienholz; public nude sculptures, Long Beach State College, by William Spater; and several others. I also noted the broader implications of artistic censorship for free expression and civic literacy.

2. Barbara Carrasco, muralist:

Barbara discussed the attempted censorship of her iconic mural “L.A. History: A Mexican Perspective.” She detailed how this created a massive highly public struggle in 1981 and how she and her allies in Latino/communities and elsewhere worked to get this mural exhibited. She also detailed the work itself to the audience on the screen. Finally, she talked about her long efforts to find a permanent home for an artwork now widely recognized as one of the most important public artworks of the modern era.

3. Paul Von Blum, replacing Noni Olabisi:

As noted above, I provided a detailed account of the struggle to get “Protect and Serve” painted in South Los Angeles in 1995. I talked about the various meetings with the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Commission, where Noni Olabisi took the lead, assisted by many artists, community leaders, clergy, and academics, including myself. I noted how we finally prevailed and, like Barbara Carrasco, I discussed the mural itself in depth on the screen in the auditorium.

4. Dave Conrad, son of the late artist Paul Conrad:

Dave discussed his father’s massive Santa Monica anti-nuclear war sculpture “Chain reaction,” which was ordered removed in 2014 by the Santa Monica City Council for ostensibly maintenance reasons. A public campaign saved the sculpture. Dave was a leader in the campaign and spoke about it as well as the work. He also showed several of his father’s political cartoons to add artistic context to the narrative.

5. Bob Scheer, veteran journalist, wrap-up.:

Renowned journalist Bob Scheer concluded the panel and offered cogent observations about artistic and other forms of censorship. He recalled all but the Siqueiros case and was able to regale the audience with anecdotes from his long career fighting for free expression on numerous fronts. It was clear that he

engaged the large audience, reflecting his decades-long experience as a public speaker and as a longtime university teacher.

Following the panelists, I opened the floor to questions and answers. This proved, I believe, to be another highly successful feature of the program. Each panelist had the opportunity to respond. We went a little beyond the allotted 30 minutes until our time had arrived for us to vacate the auditorium.

Nevertheless, the panelists stayed around and spoke informally to several audience members for several additional minutes until the custodian absolutely needed to clean the room entirely.

Finances:

As noted above, Olga Duka, the Department of Communication Chief Administrator capably managed the entire grant from start to finish. I believe that all the panelists were properly compensated. Bob Scheer misplaced the forms and we had to communicate with him a few times to ensure that he could fill them out properly. This was merely a minor paperwork issue that is common at UCLA and I believe was effectively resolved.

Final Observations:

I am enormously pleased to have had the opportunity to present this public form to the UCLA campus community and I reiterate my gratitude to the UC Center. I believe that this focus on the visual arts and censorship is a valuable addition to the continuing inquiry into free expression and civic engagement. Obviously, I hope that the arts including painting, sculpture, photography, assemblage, murals, and other forms as well as visual culture generally remain on the center's agenda. That would increase public interest and encourage fruitful scholarship among students and faculty alike.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul Von Blum
August 23, 2022

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/1R9aTADZC7uMvDzE6>