

Artistic Expression and Cultural Sovereignty: A Guiding Statement on Censorship and Creative Freedom



1. Introduction

ArtBridgeCanada was founded on the belief that artists are architects of cultural identity. Through their work, they capture the spirit of communities, challenge prevailing narratives, and illuminate pathways to a more inclusive and sovereign future. Recently, one of our members was asked to surrender an artist residency due to concerns expressed by a board member of that host organization - concerns rooted in discomfort with the perceived political nature of the artist's work.

This experience compels us to address the boundaries and responsibilities that come with creative freedom, particularly within the framework of a non-profit organization. As we advocate for the vital role of artists in shaping society, it is essential that we articulate our position on freedom of expression, censorship, and the evolving nature of cultural identity.

2. The Role of Art in Society

From murals to protest songs, from sculpture to performance, art has always served as both mirror and catalyst. Artists explore beauty, grief, justice, identity, and resistance. Their work makes space for voices that might otherwise be silenced, and opens avenues for thought that might otherwise be closed.

We affirm that political and social themes are not an aberration in art, but a rich and vital tradition that spans centuries. Art is a form of dialogue. And, like all meaningful dialogue, it sometimes unsettles in order to enlighten.

3. Censorship and Artistic Freedom

We define censorship as the suppression of creative work based on discomfort, disagreement, or fear of reprisal. While institutions have every right to set clear curatorial or programming criteria, it becomes censorship when artistic voices are silenced based on subjective interpretations of what constitutes “appropriate” political content.

ArtBridgeCanada supports the right of artists to express a broad range of perspectives. We do not believe that discomfort alone is reason to exclude an artist or their work. We understand that art can challenge norms, including those held by institutions, funders, or community members. We view this challenge not as a threat but as an opportunity for dialogue, learning, and growth.

4. Navigating Non-Profit Constraints

As a non-profit, ArtBridgeCanada is bound by laws that prohibit partisan political activity. We do not endorse political parties or candidates. However, this restriction

does not extend to issue-based expression within the arts. Non-profit organizations are permitted to support programming and practices that explore social issues, cultural dynamics, and historical injustices, provided these are aligned with their charitable purposes.

Supporting an artist whose work critiques systems or amplifies marginalized voices is not partisan - it is principled. Our responsibility is not to remain neutral on the existence of inequality or oppression, but to foster a space where diverse voices can speak truthfully through their craft.

5. Commitments and Principles

ArtBridgeCanada commits to the following:

- We will not censor artists based on the political or social themes within their work.
- We will advocate for the protection of artistic freedom in any residency, exhibition, or collaborative opportunity we are part of.
- We will educate our partners and supporters on the difference between issue-based expression and partisan activity.
- We will honour the role of artists as cultural narrators, provocateurs, and builders.
- We will engage in respectful dialogue when discomfort arises, rather than react with exclusion or avoidance.

6. Culture, Sovereignty, and Freedom of Expression

We assert that sovereignty and cultural identity are built by creators. When artists are free to explore and express the full range of human experience - including its political dimensions - culture evolves in a way that is authentic, inclusive, and responsive to the times.

Freedom of expression is not just a democratic right; it is the soil in which cultural sovereignty grows. Attempts to restrict this freedom, especially under the guise of protecting public image or institutional safety, can erode the very foundations of a thriving cultural community.

7. Moving Forward

This position paper is a living document. We share it first within our internal community to affirm our values and support our members. As our network grows and our impact expands, we may share this more broadly to help guide partnerships, residencies, exhibitions, and program collaborations.

We invite feedback, dialogue, and continued reflection. We do so in the spirit of collegiality, courage, and creativity- the principles that ground all our work at ArtBridgeCanada.

Signed,

Brian Usher,

On behalf of the

ArtBridgeCanada Leadership Team