

## **The Cultural Heritage Artists Project of the Orchard Street Shul notes on the NCAC Press Release and Blog**

The Cultural Heritage Artists Project of the Orchard Street Shul issued an open call for Artists to engage with a historic synagogue, largely as it was in 1927. The criteria for participation specified: *“The project is not a simple exhibition of existing work; you must make new work responding to the environment, history, or architecture of the Orchard Street Shul.”* In addition, each artist was asked that *“all work produced for this project maintain respect for the synagogue as the spiritual home of an ongoing segment of New Haven’s Jewish community, and as the legacy of past generations.”* The NCAC found that the rejection of one artist’s proposal constituted censorship.

Below is the NCAC statement, followed by our notes.

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**Post on the NCAC Blog, November 25, 2009 (following similar November 20 Press Release)**  
<http://ncacblog.wordpress.com/2009/11/25/censorship-guts-new-haven-art-exhibition>

### **Censorship guts New Haven art exhibition <sup>1</sup>**

An upcoming exhibition at The John Slade Ely House for Contemporary Art in New Haven, organized by the Orchard Street Shul Cultural Heritage Artists Project, is overshadowed by the organizers’ decision to censor one of the artworks in the show.

After numerous requests that Richard Kamler, one of the participating artists, modify parts of his installation, and a month before the opening of the show,<sup>2</sup> the organizers rejected his work for fear some members of the community may be offended.<sup>3</sup>

Richard Kamler’s work, “right around the corner” consists of an installation and a performative component, a Community Conversation. The art work refers to the changing environment of the Orchard Street Shul and to the growth of a Muslim community in the neighborhood. The installation consists of a table covered by a paper tablecloth, made from interwoven fragments of pages from the Torah and the Koran, upon which the books themselves, placed in a copper bowl, are resting. Their pages are interwoven as well. The Community Conversation was to consist of conversations involving leaders of both communities.<sup>4</sup> The artist has a 30-year history of creating similar projects and showing them internationally.<sup>5</sup>

The organizers demanded the removal or modification of the tablecloth, even after being repeatedly assured that no actual books were cut, that the tablecloths consisted of photocopies of fragments,<sup>6</sup> and that religious scholars agreed that the installation did not violate any religious taboo.<sup>7</sup> Their concern was that the piece “might offend somebody.”<sup>3</sup>

Artwork involving religion often upsets sensibilities no matter how respectful it may be. Artists we now think of as devout Catholics, for instance, were severely punished by the church hierarchy for expressing views that ran counter to orthodox teachings. Most recently, Chris Ofili’s Holy Virgin Mary, was seen as “offensive” to Catholics in spite of the fact that Ofili is a practicing Catholic himself.

Art is by its very nature open to multiple interpretations, and therefore even the most seemingly innocuous material may generate controversy. If the Orchard Street Shul Cultural Heritage Artists Project committee wanted to reduce the possibility of disagreement and ambiguity, perhaps it should have simply organized a show of archival photographs rather than an art exhibition.

### **1. The rejection of Mr. Kamler's work did not “gut” the exhibition.**

This is a cultural heritage exhibition, not a religious one. The work proposed by Mr. Kamler was one of nearly 30 works. He applied for the exhibition like everyone else, knowing the stated guidelines, and was reviewed like everyone else. Unlike other artists who embraced the challenge of working within the guidelines of an artist organized themed exhibition, however, he chose to develop a work outside the parameters of the guidelines. This project and exhibition, when taken as a whole, represent an activist community art project giving voice to a specific under-represented community in need. Not all of the artists engaged the community members directly, but all spent time in the space of the Shul, and many did spend hours interviewing community members and creating works that spoke directly of their experience, which was the format the Mr. Kamler originally proposed when he visited but which ultimately, he did not follow. Although some other works include allusion to ritual, or challenges to religious practices, or references to inter-faith commonalities, Mr. Kamler’s proposal required participants to embrace the literal destruction of sacred texts, with these acts described as by Richard Kamler in the aggressive terminology of “*shredding*” and “*tearing*.” In this context, therefore, we decided his work would be more appropriately shown elsewhere and it was not accepted as part of this themed exhibition.

### **2. The Proposal was not rejected a month before the exhibition.**

At no time was the work accepted in a format that fell outside of our guidelines. At our September 11 review Mr. Kamler’s work was not accepted as proposed, and Mr. Kamler was informed of this on September 15, nearly 3 months before the exhibition. We engaged in a long dialogue attempting to find resolution, but by October 23 this dialogue had ended, as Mr. Kamler wrote that the work would not be modified to fit the Project Guidelines, conforming to what he had suggested in March as a work developed with input from this particular Community.

After initiating contact with the NCAC we agreed to consider a resolution, including acting on Mr. Kamler's behalf by contacting the leaders of the Orchard Street Shul to determine if they would participate in the dialogue in the presence of cut sacred texts. When they confirmed that they were unable to do so, we were unable to include the work by Mr. Kamler in the project. If the resolution had included a modified installation, the leaders may have participated. Our willingness to consider resolution put considerable stress on our schedule, but we wanted to be fair about any miscommunications.

### **3. The quote noted in the NCAC press release and blog that Richard Kamler’s piece “*might offend somebody*” is not attributable to anyone from the Cultural Heritage Artists Project.**

No one from the Artistic Committee ever referred to the issues surrounding this work in such general terms, nor did anyone make a decision out of “*fear some members of the community may be offended.*”

All statements concerning a lack of respect or potential to cause offense were consistently linked to the Orchard Street Shul community. No statement was ever made without the specificity of this community, which was the object and subject of this Cultural Heritage Artists Project. This artist project and exhibition are clearly aimed at engaging a specific community.

### **4. The NCAC press release and blog state that “The Community Conversation was to consist of conversations involving leaders of both communities.”**

This statement is misleading, as the dialogue as proposed simply could not have taken place, as it was to take place with the leaders of the Orchard Street Shul and the Masjid Al-Islam actually sitting in the installation, including among several components a tablecloth comprised of cut strips of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an.

When Mr. Kamler failed to provide evidence that the Shul leaders would in fact participate under these circumstances, and with common understanding of the religious practices of traditionally observant Jews and Muslims, we undertook our own research, and determined that they would not have been willing or able to do so out of respect for the traditionally observant members of both communities. This information was communicated to the NCAC during our November 3 meeting, and in the hope of a resolution, the NCAC was given the name of one leader who would in fact participate if the installation was modified so as to be respectful of traditional Jewish and Muslim religious practice, which prohibits the cutting of sacred texts.

**5. The artist Richard Kamler does not have a "30-year history of creating similar projects and showing them internationally."**

According to his website, Mr. Kamler does in fact have a successful 30 year career, but not of similar projects. Only one other project, *Table of Voices*, dating from 1996, is similar in including a community conversation "performance" as a part of the work, and this is also accompanied by an installation. As *Table of Voices* includes recorded voices relating to the project, one might assume that Mr. Kamler spoke with the subjects in developing the project.

No works on his website describe the combination of "community conversations" taking place literally within the context of an installation developed without community participation, but created nonetheless for a targeted community.

**6. The NCAC statement that the organizers were "repeatedly assured that no actual books were cut" and that the "tablecloths consisted of photocopies of fragments" is simply untrue and reflects poor fact checking on the part of the NCAC.**

On the contrary, Richard Kamler wrote on September 9, 2009, that he was "shredding bible and qu'ran (sic)" and "slicing up the bible and th quaran and weaving them back together;" and this was the description read by the Artistic Committee during the scheduled review on September 11. He posted the slightly revised description of "tearing up the bible and th quaran and weaving/meshing them back together (sic)" hours later, and this description of the installation remained on the group networking website, with no further clarification, for nearly a full month after he was aware of the artistic committee's concerns. In one telephone conversation, prior to sending photographs of the work, he did say that he was aware of prohibitions against cutting text, but when he finally sent photographs they confirmed his description of one-inch strips. Without answering questions, he changed the description to the more ambiguous listing of "paper" among the materials for the installation, accompanied by photographs matching the original description.

**7. In the same sentence that is noted above, the NCAC states that the organizers knew "that religious scholars agreed that the installation did not violate any religious taboo."**

The primary responsibility for producing this documentation fell to Richard Kamler, who, despite repeated requests for information failed to provide evidence that the tablecloth did not violate the religious precepts of traditionally observant Jews and Muslims. In fact, no religious scholar informed us that the installation did not violate the religious precepts of traditionally observant Jews and Muslims.

The Cultural Heritage Artists Project is an artist's collective group, without curatorial staff, and it was the responsibility of each participant to undertake the research required for the successful completion of the new work produced for this project. Initially, Mr. Kamler promised to discuss the full proposal himself with the Shul leadership, but when he failed to do so, the artistic committee undertook research in the interest of keeping the work in the exhibition. We were informed by one religious scholar, who was advising the leadership of the Orchard Street Shul, that the cutting of the Bible and the Qur'an was disrespectful of both religions, and another, who is actively engaged locally in facilitating Jewish-Muslim dialogue, advised against the installation with cut sacred text tablecloth.

If Mr. Kamler did have evidence that the installation did not violate religious precepts, we would like to know how he planned to communicate this to the targeted community, and if the description of the installation he provided to religious scholars matched the description he provided to us.