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COMMUNITY BOARD NO. 2, MANHATTAN

3 WASHINGTON SQUARE VILLAGE

NEW YORK, NY 10012-1899

www.cb2manhattan.org

P: 212-979-2272 F: 212-254-5102 E: info@cb2manhattan.org

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September 20, 2017

William T. Castro
Manhattan Borough Commissioner
Arsenal West, 24 West 61st Street, 5th Floor
New York, NY 10023

Nicholas Baume
Director and Chief Curator
Public Art Fund
One East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022

Dear Commissioner Castro and Director Baume:

At its Full Board meeting on September 19, 2017, Community Board #2, adopted the following resolution:

Resolution regarding the citywide public-art exhibition “Good Fences Make Good Neighbors” and the installation in Washington Square Park

Whereas

1. Washington Square Park has a long history of supporting independent artists and the park, and the community at large has been at the forefront of many human rights movements;
2. Public Art Fund, with the support of the Parks Department and other relevant city agencies, will present a citywide public art exhibition of 300+ works by Ai Weiwei entitled “Good Fences Make Good Neighbors” that will be on view from October 12, 2017 through February 11, 2018;
3. The public art exhibition is “inspired by the international migration crisis and current global geopolitical landscape ... (and) seeks to reflect on the growing hostility toward immigrants and nationalism throughout the world ... (and) will emphasize sites and locations illustrative of that theme,” according to the Public Art Fund;
4. One of the works, cited by Public Art Fund as one of the major pieces of the exhibit, will be constructed in Washington Square Park and installed underneath the Washington Square Park arch and will consist of an elaborate “fence” with a 16-ft-high opening in the outline of two embracing people, that is meant to be walked through; Ai Weiwei is a world-renowned, inventive and influential artist who lived in New York (Union Square, East Village) for ten years, part of which was spent as an art student, and hence has a connection to the area;
5. CB 2 invited Public Art Fund to a joint CB2 committee meeting where they presented to CB2's Arts & Institutions committee and its Parks & Waterfront committee and the community its plan for the exhibition, the process it went through to obtain approvals, and which agencies gave approvals;

6. Roughly 100 people attended the meeting and nearly 60 people commented and/or posed questions to representatives from Public Art Fund. In addition, prior to the meeting, 51 letters of support (14 from organizations (citywide and local), 37 from Community Board Residents and Business Owners) and 2 letters against the installation were received by the CB2 office;
7. Public Art Fund explained that it began outreach in June, 2017, met with various community groups over the summer, listened to feedback, and has been working to address concerns. Their representative stated that they would prefer to have started this outreach process earlier, but “to do so earlier, without a design or any engineering assurances, would have been premature.” Also, it was specified that “the exhibit is Ai Weiwei’s vision; not a collective design”;
8. At the CB2 joint committee meeting, many commenters expressed enthusiastic support for the exhibition and the installation inside the arch; others strongly conveyed concern about the process: specifically, the lack of community involvement until the end of the process; the placement of the work within the Washington Square Park arch; and the disruption traditional holiday celebrations, including the Holiday Tree, which has been placed in front of the arch by the Washington Square Association each December since 1924;
9. There were questions posed and requests made to the Public Art Fund to consider moving the location of the work and to reconsider the duration of the installation, i.e., shortening it, the responses to which were that such changes were not possible;
10. The Public Art Fund began planning the citywide project and the Washington Square Park installation more than a year before the community was notified of the possibility of it occurring. City agencies, including the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, were consulted and granted approval long before any notification was provided to the community;
11. While the message of the installation is a laudable one that aligns with the values of many in the community, the placement, scale, and duration of the installation in Washington Square Park demanded more than the cursory, late-stage engagement that the City and Public Arts Fund offered to the community.

Therefore be it resolved that Community Board 2, Manhattan

1. Supports the temporary installation of Ai Weiwei’s artwork in the arch of Washington Square Park, and welcomes the opportunity for our neighborhood to provide the setting for, and interact with, an exhibition of such high quality that resonates with our community’s history as a center for artistic and political innovation and
2. regards this large-scale project as a one-time, unique event and requests assurance from the City and its agencies that this project not establish a precedent for future uses of Washington Square Park and
3. demands that in the future the City and its agencies be more transparent and engage CB2 and the community earlier on in the process whenever plans are being considered for public art in our area and
4. requests that Public Art Fund continue to work with the Washington Square Association to find an alternative location for placement of the Holiday Tree and that it cover any incremental costs for placement in this alternative nearby agreed-upon location.

VOTE: PASSED, with 26 Board Members in favor and 8 against (K. Berger, T. Connor, D. Diether, J. Giacobbe, S. Russo, R. Sanz, G. Silvera Seamans, C. Spence)

Please advise us of any decision or action taken in response to this resolution.

Sincerely,



Terri Cude, Chair
Community Board #2, Manhattan



Robin Rothstein, Chair
Arts and Institutions Committee
Community Board #2, Manhattan



Richard Caccappolo, Chair
Parks & Waterfront Committee
Community Board #2, Manhattan

TC/EM

c:

- Hon. Jerrold Nadler, Congressman
- Hon. Carolyn Maloney, Congresswoman
- Hon. Nydia Velasquez, Congresswoman
- Hon. Brad Hoylman, NY State Senator
- Hon. Deborah J. Glick, Assembly Member
- Hon. Yuh-Line Niou, Assembly Member
- Hon. Gale Brewer, Man. Borough President
- Hon. Margaret Chin, Council Member
- Hon. Rosie Mendez, Council Member
- Hon. Corey Johnson, Council Member
- George Vellonakis, WSP Administrator
- Allegra Thoresen, Public Art Fund