

November 3, 2020

Dear Lava,

On behalf of the San Francisco Arts Commission, I am pleased to send this letter that provides responses to each of your requests of our agency as numbered below. I hope you feel as I do that these are positive steps towards restorative justice for the actions that transpired since last fall, regarding your proposal for the Dr. Maya Angelou commissioning project.

Below are your requests, followed by the Arts Commission responses to those requests.

1. A public apology from the Visual Arts Committee to myself, the finalists and selection panelists of the 2019 RFQ for perpetuating the systemic racism inherent in Supervisor Stefani's demand that Dr. Angelou be honored with a statue based on Eurocentric aesthetics "in the same way that [white] men have historically been elevated in the city". This standard is steeped in histories of colonial violence and was weaponized to reject my winning proposal, which was grounded in an ethos of inclusion and Black aesthetics.

Roberto Ordeñana, President of the San Francisco Arts Commission, and Dorka Keehn, Chair of the Visual Arts Committee, issued public apologies to Lava Thomas at the full Commission meeting on August 3, 2020.

Link to full Commission 8/3/2020: [audio](#) / [minutes](#)

2. The Arts Commission stop prioritizing Eurocentric aesthetics to represent Black Women in the Public Realm, and adopt industry wide practices covered in the Americans for the Arts report Cultural Equity in the Public Art Field.*

The Arts Commission adopted industry-wide practices covered in the Americans for the Arts report [Cultural Equity in the Public Art Field](#) at their September 16, 2020 Visual Arts Committee meeting.

The Commission staff is currently working to incorporate recommendations from the report into the goals of the Civic Art Collection and our arts enrichment selection practices. For instance, staff have drafted new panel orientation materials that include revised Goals for the Civic Art Collection, and scoring criteria and language that align with recommended best practices included in the report.

Link to Visual Arts Committee 9/16/2020: [audio](#) / [minutes](#)

3. Dorka Keehn issue a public apology and step down as Chair of the Visual Arts Committee. Despite Ms. Keehn's early support and advocacy of my proposal last year, her

refusal to let me finish my statement after I was cut off during the 7/15/2020 VAC meeting demonstrates a failure to recognize that Black and Brown voices must be respected and heard. That Ms. Keehn became more adamant in her refusal, after an uproar ensued and several commenters requested that I be allowed to speak, reveals an investment in white privilege and power that has no place in Arts Commission leadership.

Commissioner Keehn issued a public apology at the meeting of the full Arts Commission on August 3, and proposed to recuse herself from the Maya Angelou project moving forward. Commissioner Ferras, already appointed to serve on the next panel, will represent the Commission and will lead discussions and decisions. Furthermore, Commissioner Keehn proposed Commissioner Musleh take the lead on the initiative to assess the monuments in the Civic Art Collection through a racial equity lens.

Link to full Commission 8/3/2020: [audio](#) / [minutes](#)

4. An explanation outlining how this debacle unfolded and the disclosure of ALL legislative sponsors and elected officials who were responsible for blocking my winning proposal. Disclosure of the fiscal sponsors of the project – specifically, what individuals, organizations and foundations contributed to the Women's Recognition Public Art Fund, as requested via the sunshine ordinance.

The project is the result of legislation passed unanimously by the Board of Supervisors in 2018. The legislation was sponsored by Supervisors Stefani, Ronen, Kim, Brown, Cohen, Fewer and Tang.

The Arts Commission worked closely with the legislative sponsors. The Commission recommended to Margaux Kelly, legislative aide to then Mayor Mark Farrell, that the original language be amended to substitute “work of art” for “statue”, and to include the phrase “significant figurative representation.” Unfortunately, after the panel recommended the selection of your proposal, it became clear that there was a significantly different interpretation between the Arts Commission and the legislative sponsors’ understanding of the legislative language and its implications on the design of the project. As a result, the panel recommendations were not approved by the Arts Commission.

Link to Visual Arts Committee 10/16/2019: [minutes](#) / [audio](#)

Panel recommendations for the selection of artists to commission are recommendations only to the Visual Arts Committee, and by City Charter, the Arts Commission must approve those recommendations by resolution before they are accepted. It is not the Commission’s policy to approve a project over the objection of other impacted City departments. The Commission staff work closely with other impacted City departments and project stakeholders to make sure our project goals and selection criteria align with the host site, while at the same time supporting

artists in developing new and inventive approaches to creating public art in and for our communities. While the Commission has the authority to approve the design and location of artwork for City property, it does not have the authority to compel the placement of artwork. Eighty-nine donors raised a total of \$8,923 toward the cost of the project. The average contribution was \$100. All of the donors' names and the amount each contributed are available online: <https://rally.org/maya>

Rally.org charges 5% in administrative fees, so the amount the City received was \$8,494.85, which represents less than 2% of the total revised project budget. The project is 98% publicly funded.

Moving forward, we are making certain that artists and panelists understand the role of the panel, the commission and the approval process. (For example, the nomenclature is being changed from "selection panel" to "review panel.") Language to articulate these changes has been added to our standard RFQs and panel orientation.

We are also drafting language to include in our MOUs with other City departments by which we mutually agree to work closely together to develop any art enrichment project to ensure that they and the Commission are aligned in terms of goals and expectations for the project.

5. Arts Commission Leadership advocate for and arrange a meeting with Mayor London Breed and core members of seeblackwomxn collective to understand her role in the 2019 RFQ. Arts Commission Leadership also advocate on my behalf for a public apology from Supervisor Stefani.

Arts Commission leadership successfully arranged a meeting with you and Mayor London Breed, Supervisor Catherine Stefani, Trish Bransten, Nashormeh Lindo, Tyra Fennell and Robert Mailer Anderson in order to discuss the project and what transpired since last fall regarding this commissioning project.

At the October 21, 2020 meeting of the Visual Arts Committee, Supervisor Catherine Stefani issued a public apology to Lava Thomas and the community for her remarks at the October 2019 Visual Arts Committee meeting.

Link to Visual Arts Committee 10/21/2020: [audio](#) / [minutes](#)

6. Commissioners and staff prioritize and participate in Racial and Cultural Equity training and adopt practices that reflect the Arts Commission's Racial and Cultural Equity statements.

The Arts Commission created a Cultural Equity Working Group in spring 2016 and participated in a day-long racial equity training with Race Forward. In 2017 and 2018, five staff participated

in year-long trainings with the Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE) Northern California Learning Cohort, and shared the tools, resources and knowledge gained from these workshops with the Working Group and larger staff.

In November 2017, the Arts Commission assigned leadership of this work to the senior policy analyst fellow; in doing so, a new agency position was created, the Senior Racial Equity and Policy Analyst. The assignment of this position was integral to the development of a Racial Equity statement and action plan to guide the agency's work. The statement and plan were approved by the full Commission in January 2019, and the plan became the Agency's strategic plan for 2019-2020. In addition to agency-wide goals, every employee's performance plan and review includes racial equity goals, including participation in Racial Equity training. Currently, we are updating our plan to be aligned with the Human Rights Commission's Office of Racial Equity, established in June 2019, to ensure we are responsive to citywide goals and deliverables. We have also expanded our Working Group to include all staff as this work is integral to the day-to-day operations of all staff in the agency.

The Commission receives regular updates on this work, and approves all strategic plans. All staff and all Commissioners are required to complete implicit bias training annually.

Link to the Arts Commission's racial equity [plan](#).

7. Increase diversity at the San Francisco Arts Commission. Hire a person of color as Director of Cultural Affairs. Appoint a Black women to the Arts Commission and the Visual Arts Committee. Hire people of color to the Arts Commission's staff - specifically more Black women.

All fifteen Arts Commissioners are appointed by the Mayor, as established in the City Charter. Currently, ten out of fifteen commissioners, or two-thirds, identify as people of color. Four out of fifteen, (27%), identify as Black. The President of the Commission is responsible for making committee assignments.

Fifty-seven percent of Arts Commission staff identify as people of color. The Arts Commission is currently in a hiring freeze, in order to balance the budget without laying off staff or cutting grants to the arts community. The Director of Cultural Affairs position is the only vacant one we are currently in the process of filling. The Executive Committee is leading the search, in partnership with an Executive Recruiting firm whose president is a woman of color. President Ordeñana has repeatedly stressed the importance of a racially diverse pool of candidates as well as the importance of candidates with deep professional experience in racial equity work.

8. The Arts Commission and Visual Arts Committee must remain independent and autonomous to administer public art selection processes without interference from elected officials and other non-arts professionals. Autonomy is vital so that this fiasco is

not repeated, and other artists are not harmed. Adopt Americans for the Arts [Proposed Best Practices for Public Art Projects](#).

The Arts Commission is a department of the City and County of San Francisco. Commissioners are appointed by the Mayor and serve at the Mayor's pleasure, as established in the City Charter (5.103). A City organizational chart may be found on page 28 of the [Mayor's Proposed Budget Book](#).

The City Charter gives the Arts Commission broad authority for approving the design and location of artwork on City property. However, we do not have the authority to force the City to accept artwork on its property. While not every artwork recommended is implemented, the overwhelming majority are successfully installed. We are proud of our strong success rate, and our public art collection sets a national standard.

The Arts Commission works closely with other City departments and communities in the development of public art projects. It is important that any work of art put in the public realm have the support of its constituents. That is why representatives of the relevant department and the community, along with arts professionals, sit on the panel to review and recommend public art proposals to the Commission for approval. Panels are racially diverse and gender balanced. Our practices are all in line with best practices in the field.

The Arts Commission has already adopted the Americans for the Arts Proposed Best Practices for Public Art Projects. Susan Pontious, Civic Art Collection and Public Art Program Director, was one of the principal authors when she served as a member of the Public Art Network (a program of Americans for the Arts) advisory council.

9. My correspondence to the Visual Arts Committee and the Arts Commission become part of the public record. This includes my 8/26/19 letter to the Visual Arts Committee, my withdrawal statement of 3/4/20 (attached), my statement of 7/15/20 and this letter, dated 7/29/20. All public apologies become part of the public record.

All four documents were entered into the public record at the August 3, 2020 meeting of the full Commission. The audio of the meeting is posted on the City's website, along with the meeting minutes.

I hope that the Arts Commission has fulfilled each of your nine restorative justice requests with this letter. Please let me know if you have questions about any of these responses. This letter will also be submitted, as per my Acting Director's Report in yesterday's meeting, to the public record as part of the meeting's minutes and supporting documents.

We look forward to working with you to realize this singular monument to one of the most important and iconic artists and activists in American history, and to setting the stage for San

Francisco to represent more women in the City's public art collection and having its home be in front of the San Francisco Public Library. This will be a grand step forward for all of us.

Sincerely,

Denise

Denise Bradley
Acting Director of Cultural Affairs