

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



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Mr. Earl A. Powell III, Director
National Gallery of Art
200B South Club Drive
Landover, MD 20785

Dear Mr. Powell:

The Art Everywhere partnership between the National Gallery of Art and the Outdoor Advertising Association of America to place great works of art on vacant billboards throughout the country has a consequence that you may not have considered: you are undermining the efforts of thousands of communities throughout the country to bring down billboards and stop the construction of new ones.

The American landscape has suffered greatly at the hands of the outdoor advertising industry. Hundreds of cities and towns are trying to control the presence of these huge structures in their jurisdictions, in spite of lengthy and costly billboard industry lawsuits. The best hope for these cities is that, as advertising moves from billboards to electronic media, vacant billboards will no longer be profitable and will be removed as blight.

Some in the media have criticized the placement of great works of art on billboards as cheap and intrusive advertising that most people have come to dismiss. We agree with the criticism that this demeans the works themselves and does little to educate Americans about their artistic treasures.

It is particularly ironic that five prestigious art institutions --with the National Gallery of Art at the forefront -- should become a partner with OAAA on the eve of the 50th anniversary of Lady Bird Johnson's Highway Beautification Act of 1965. Drive into most cities -- Baltimore, San Francisco, Atlanta -- and you will be overwhelmed, not by an iconic skyline but by billboards that block that skyline. Further, studies show that billboards divert drivers' attention and can be a safety hazard. (See www.scenic.org)

Your action indicates that the Gallery is out of touch with best landscape preservation practices even though stunning landscapes by great artists fill your collections. We urge the Board of the National Gallery of Art to support the desire of cities and towns to become more beautiful and of all Americans to conserve the magnificence of the American landscape.

Sincerely yours,

Nancy MacWood, Chair