

Community Board 2 Set to Propose New Guidelines for Artists in Washington Square Park



Kanami “Let Hair Down” Kusajima performing by the Washington Square Park Fountain, March 7, 2025.
Photo by Ian M. Torres

BY IAN M. TORRES

A Community Board Meeting was held in Washington Square Park on Monday, January 13, to discuss the issue of enforcement against artists around the Washington Square Park Fountain circle. Tensions have been at an all time high due to recent policy changes and use of excessive enforcement by Parks Enforcement Patrol Officers within the park.

“I busk because I, we rely on this. People are trying to shut that down here... they take everything away from you, kill the middle class, kill the lower class,” said a local musician and busker who wished to remain anonymous.

This comes at a time when after an unseasonably warm day in Washington Square Park last fall turned chaotic as a young artist was arrested for displaying his art on Nov. 5. The arrest was part of an escalating conflict [between artists in the park and law enforcement](#), although New York City Parks Department continues to claim “there have been no changes in enforcement,” [since the eviction of artists began](#) on Sept. 27.

“I’m not saying that’s the motive, but it’s like, I have a good feeling that’s part of it, they’re trying to kill people’s incomes,” he added.

Keion Kopper, 27, an artist, poet, and self-published author was put in handcuffs when approached by Parks Enforcement Patrol officers for displaying his art too close to the fountain at the center of the West Village Park. “I was selling my art like I usually do. Things were going well; I made a few sales. I’ve been selling for seven years and I was told I couldn’t sell there. It escalated and I got arrested,” said Kopper.



Park Enforcement Patrol (PEP) Officers placing Kopper in handcuffs, as park goers look on. Photo by Jeremiah Moss via Instagram account [@vanishingny](#). November 5, 2025

According to Parks Department rules, any artist displaying their art within 50 feet of the fountain is subject to a summons or threat of arrest and eviction. As per New City Parks Department, the enforcement policy is to first begin with a period of education, where they explain what the rules and regulations are to new park goers that they find violating them, before moving on to eviction. “I think it’s definitely a power tactic. I’m not doing graffiti,” Kopper added.

The arrest [was captured on video](#) via Instagram. It shows five PEP officers surrounding Kopper, and then placing him in handcuffs as park goers look on, objecting to his arrest. “I only saw what

was in the video; I arrived in the middle of it,” said Jeremiah Moss, an American poet, writer and author of the blog Jeremiah’s Vanishing New York, which ran from 2007 until 2022. His book, *Feral City*, also documents how Washington Square Park “opened up during the pandemic, and became a much more welcoming space for a diversity of people in terms of race and class,” Moss said.

“It’s obvious that the powers behind the park want that space to be whitewashed and controlled, curated for tourists, the affluent, and the interests of NYU,” he said, referring to nearby New York University. “The current harassment of artists is a continuation of the heavy-handed, violent police repression of the park that began after the pandemic lockdown.”

During an earlier 2021 protest, Moss explained how a riot ensued after friends of his were beaten with clubs and pepper sprayed by police. “They were routinely harassed and arrested by cops.... “Keion was one of them,” he added.

Along with many other young artists of color, Kopper began showcasing his art by the fountain in Washington Square and continues to do so, as a means of supporting himself and sharing what he called a positive message through his art in the process. “I call them the [Figures of Humanity](#), and that means everybody in the world, we’re 100% the same spiritually and emotionally. We just look different on the outside, and that’s what makes us believe that we’re separate from one another,” he explained.



Kopper displaying his artwork in Washington Square Park. Photo via Instagram account, [@keion211](#), November 18, 2024.

Frustrated, Kopper at times feels the pressure of his determination but chooses to keep a steady mind. “I like to start my heavy work when my brain is the freshest. So, I’m not getting there and racing other artists to a designated spot. There’s only two spots that you can be in, and there’s fifteen artists that sell at the park.” ... “The heaviest foot traffic is right there, right where the circle is

at, where everybody wants to be,” said Kopper.

When suggested, going to another park that uses a medallion system isn’t something Kopper plans on doing. “There’s no reason I need to pay for people to see my art. That’s silly,” he said.

In the meantime, Kopper remains optimistic and hopes things can change for the better and maintains his composure when faced with an issue. “Thank you for shedding light on a very minute situation that’s happened in a city full of problems.”

Kopper is the second arrest since recent enforcement began, while other artists have had their share of experiences with law enforcement within the Washington Square Park.

Kanami Kusajima also known as (“Let Hair Down”, a dancer and performer in WSP since the start of the 2020 pandemic, has been used in [ad campaigns for the city](#) in [promoting the park](#), and was recently [featured on PIX 11 News](#) but still manages to be harassed by parks officers for her performances.

“Last summer, I got my first ever ticket from police officers. They didn’t even conduct any hearing and I didn’t have to go to court. And then a month later, it was automatically dismissed,” she said.

Following discussion of how artists and performers in parks, particularly in New York City, are often targeted by law enforcement, Kusajima shared personal experiences of receiving a summons by police for using a small speaker during performances, despite the lack of complaints from neighbors about noise levels.

“Another time I was targeted was in 2021 when I was featured on a bus stop advertisement. The New York City mayor’s office was doing this project called No Stopping New York and my photo was used to promote the city recovering from the highest peak of the COVID time.”

Kusajima has since created [a petition](#) that aims to modify park rules to better accommodate artists while respecting community noise levels and maintains efforts to engage with local officials and community members to advocate for artists’ rights, including meetings with city council representatives and community organizations, despite gathering over 4,000 signatures for the petition, the process of changing regulations is expected to be lengthy and challenging.

“I started performing in this park in November 2020. The first year and a half I was here full time, six days a week, and one day to take care of my body. After that, the COVID restrictions slowly started to loosen up and I had more opportunities outside of the park as well.”

Evoking emotions through her performances and believing that the shared human experience is central to her art, through incorporating paint into dance, Kusajima hints at a creative evolution in her art, and has since expanded her opportunities to include various venues and events, while still valuing her original performance space in Washington Square Park. “I need to make sure that I can keep up with my living, I need to perform here, I need to still, somehow keep making my living.”

A Community Board Meeting was held between Manhattan Community Board 2 and artists on Dec 4, regarding current and ongoing issues in Washington Square Park. Topics of discussion included park enforcement procedure as well as harassment of artists, most recently of Kusajima herself on Nov. 18, when she was approached by Parks Enforcement Officers, as well as NYPD, which only resulted in non-conclusive matters until a later date was determined the following month.

“At first, I was very angry because I’m tired of the lies from the enforcement taking all the precedence. There has definitely been a change in enforcement. It’s hard to deny it, but that I

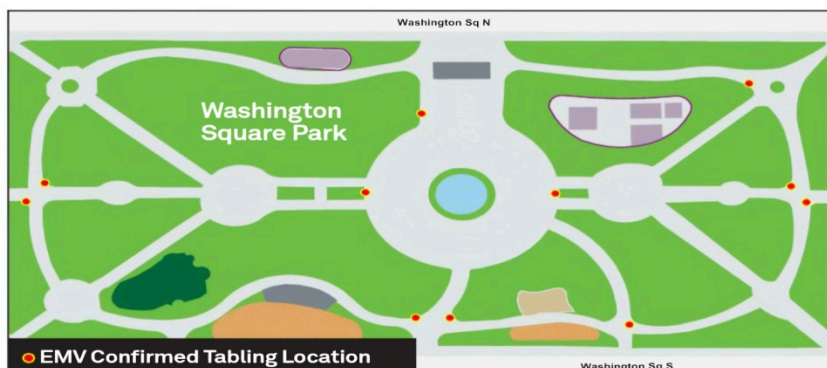
have to keep standing, that we all have to keep standing up to these constant lies and denials,” said J. Eric Cook, an artist who currently occupies one of only two designated spots for artists in WSP after being removed from his original location for close to a decade.

“And then it takes all that time away from actually trying to solve the problem. Instead, we spent all this time trying to convince people that there was actually a situation because they have people with credentials that are saying there is no situation and that, you know, we’re doing the same thing we always have.”

Current [park rules and regulations](#) state that “It is important to reiterate that these proximity restrictions, which include a prohibition on vending within 50 feet of a monument or within five feet of park furniture, ONLY apply to vendors using a display table to sell items. Because performers do not typically use display tables, the rules should not impact the majority of performers and buskers in parks without designated vending spots.”

“I am attaching the pdf of the map document in full here for your reference and do need to be clear that it does not depict any “new” rules related to Expressive Matter Vending. The document depicts locations that NYC Parks believes to be acceptable for the use of display tables as a courtesy guidance,” said NYC Parks Administrator William Morrison.

“The definition of Expressive Matter Vending is included in the middle of the document as a courtesy for those not familiar with the term. As stated at the bottom of the document, NYC Parks is not confirming that there are no other spots for vending with a display table and would be open to vendors using display tables elsewhere if the vendor can demonstrate they are operating within NYC Parks rules & regulations.”



Proposed map of Washington Square Park, with new designated locations for artists. January 2025.

Confirmed Locations For Expressive Matter Vendor Display Tables

Expressive Matter Vending (EMV) includes, but is not limited to, any person(s) who:

- 1) **SELL ITEMS** such as paintings, prints, photos, and reading material; or
- 2) **PERFORM** for a donation, including juggling, dancing, and music

As a courtesy, NYC Parks has identified in the above map confirmed locations where an EMV display table may be used.

To learn more, visit nyc.gov/parks and search for “expressive matter.”

NYC Parks has determined that Expressive Matter Vendors utilizing a display table for vending are vending in compliance with NYC Parks Rules at the spaces shown above. If vendors believe there are additional vending locations consistent with NYC Parks rules, they should contact NYC Parks for clarification. Please refer to NYC Parks Rules at Title 56 Section 1-05 (b) of the Rules of the City of New York for more specific information regarding NYC Parks vending requirements.

“We all know something changed on September 27th, even though they were giving people a hassle for years before that. It’s never been like it is right now. That’s the only thing I can think about is I can’t get

past the lying and the duplicity and the denials to obstruct trying to get people to be able to do something worthwhile on this,” said Cook.

“The new map presented was created as a “courtesy” by WSP and Parks Department with no public input – and prior to 9/27, artists had been ticketed and ejected from those eleven “allowed” spaces and two of them go directly against the park rules, blocking a major pedestrian crossway,” he added.

A new meeting date has not yet been determined as of this writing.