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# PACE

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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE  
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## Free Speech

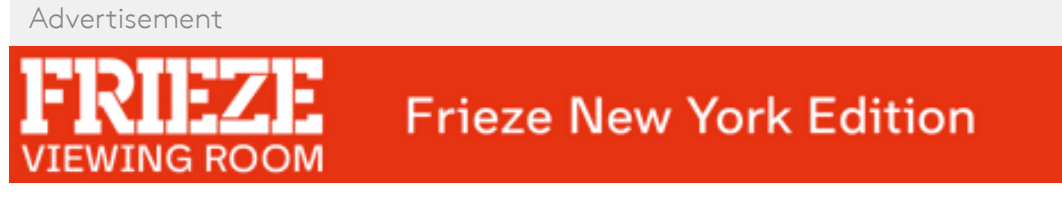
### Censorship and the art world

'You can cage the singer but not the song.'  
Harry Belafonte (1988)

Eleven small works of art are currently on display in Berlin's main archaeological gallery, the Neues Museum. They are a pleasing, rather modest, group of Modernist bronze and ceramic sculptures: a pregnant woman, a girl, a dancer, a man's head, a torso. Three of the sculptures are unidentified, while the other eight were made between 1917 and 1931 by a group of German artists including Otto Baum, Otto Freundlich, Marg Moll and Emly Roeder. Yet, despite their benign subject-matter, all of the sculptures have a remarkable history: they spent 66 years buried opposite Berlin's City Hall and were only unearthed last year. It is believed that they were in the possession of one Erhard Oewerdieck; when the Allied air raids of 1944 destroyed the block of flats he lived in, the sculptures – which, it transpired, were part of a collection of 15,000 works confiscated by the Nazis because they were considered by the regime to be 'degenerate' – were buried in the maelstrom.

Oewerdieck was probably hiding the sculptures for safekeeping; he was known to help Jews, and both the sculptures and the artists who made them were threatened with destruction. Ursel Berger, director of Berlin's Georg-Kolbe-Museum, has explained that the reasons a work of art was declared degenerate by the Nazis was 'completely arbitrary – it may have been because the figures were too fat, too thin or because they had a bulbous nose'. The sculptures now embody the violence that has been done both to them and their creators: their battle-scarred surfaces are discoloured and slightly charred. But perhaps what is most remarkable – and most moving – about them is how harmless they appear; it seems impossible that anyone could feel threatened enough by them to orchestrate their destruction.

Herein lies the confusion that dwells at the heart of censorship: one person's expression of what it means to be human is for someone else the manifestation of something so repugnant or offensive it must be removed or destroyed. Nowhere is free of censorship; even in countries such as Denmark and Spain, where anti-censorship laws are enshrined in the constitution, hate speech and libel laws exist. (Noam Chomsky's dictum is both apt and confronting here: 'If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all.' I know very few people, myself included, who would disagree with the European Union's decision on racism and xenophobia that states that denying or trivializing 'crimes of genocide' should be made 'punishable in all EU Member States'. Yet I am, of course, uncomfortable with censorship whenever it's applied to the kind of thinking I believe should not be silenced.) Many countries that express a seemingly liberal approach to freedom of expression rarely uphold it unequivocally. Witness, for example, the recent and justified furore around the removal of David Wojnarowicz's film *Fire in My Belly* (1986-7) from 'Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture' at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. after complaints from the Catholic League about a sequence in which ants crawl over a crucifix.



Censorship is, to put it mildly, complicated: degrees of punishment, legality and the pressure of cultural mores shift from country to country. In recent months, a few examples have highlighted this. At the Singapore Biennale 2011, Simon Fujiwara's installation *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* (2010) was removed from display as it includes gay pornographic material, which is illegal in Singapore. Similarly, Mustapha Benfodil's installation in a public square at Sharjah Biennial 10, *Maportaliche / Ecritures Sauvages It Has no Importance* (It Has No Importance / Wild Writings, 2011), was removed after complaints that it was blasphemous and indecent. Both incidents beg the question: in choosing to present work in countries that not only have strict blasphemy and censorship laws but in which homosexuality is illegal, did the curators choose to defy local laws as a symbolic gesture or did they assume that the framework of an international art event would somehow protect them? In both of these instances, the surprise and shock at the censorship was, in itself, surprising. Unlike the US, both Sharjah and Singapore have never claimed to be anything but censorious. If artists and curators choose to work in these cultural contexts they have a stark choice: work within the law or deal with the consequences. I know quite a few artists who have refused invitations to work in certain countries as they're uncomfortable with any level of complicity with regimes they do not support. On the other hand, obviously many artists and curators choose to work in countries in which censorship is part of daily life in order to promote dialogue and openness – an approach that, at its best, is laudable and constructive and, at its worst, patronizing and colonialist.

The most recent high-profile case of an artist persecuted by the state is, of course, the arrest and incarceration of Ai Weiwei and people close to him, and the confiscation of work from his studio in Beijing. It's a particularly brutal example of the treatment of an artist who has always understood exactly what he was doing. Ai obviously has intimate knowledge of the hypocrisy and violence of the Chinese government, for which censorship is just one of its cruel weapons. He chose to provoke the authorities to an extent that he has now become both a symbol of opposition to a totalitarian regime – and a victim of it. But it is important to remember that he is only one of thousands of artists, writers and activists who are incarcerated around the world because of their beliefs – a situation that, despite the art world's engagement with the imagination, most of us find totally unimaginable.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

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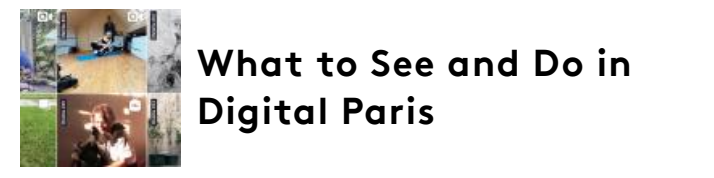
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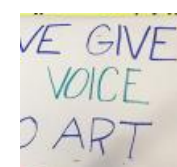
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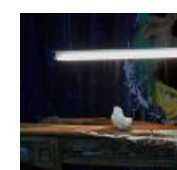
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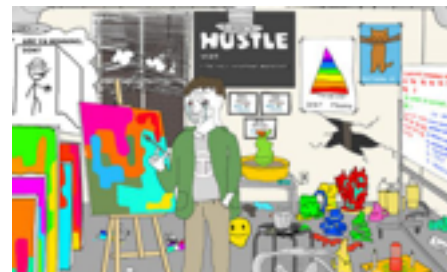
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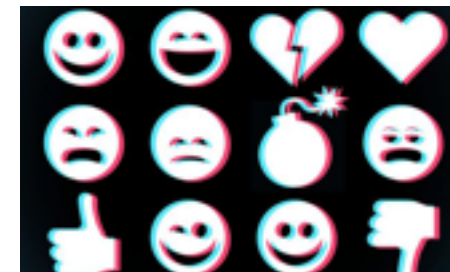
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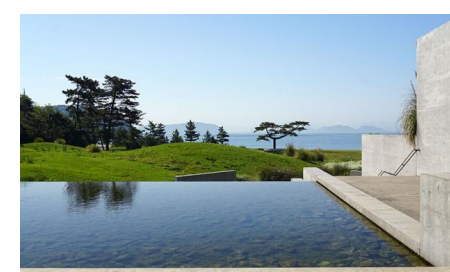
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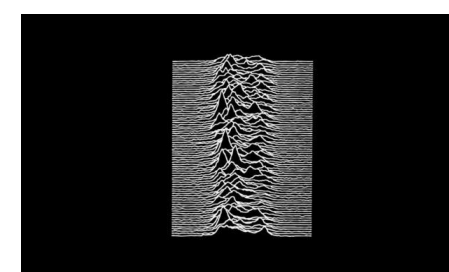
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