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IS ART FREE FOR ALL?

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With today's progressing times, censorship has taken center stage, especially in matters regarding art. Debates about whether the public should be witnesses of uncensored art and received the undiluted message artists attempt to convey, or should art be more appropriate for public consumption remain prevalent. I will focus on artists who create work that champions against censorship, specifically why they disparage the identities and beliefs that promote censorship. Uncensored art unveils the truth that people deserve through freedom of speech and expression. Criticizing censorship means that certain ideas are withheld from the public and connotes that the ideas of privilege, representation, responsibility, and accountability should not be treated of significance; ergo, censorship engenders the maltreatment of information and comprises the artist themselves.

Censorship inhibits the public's right to acquire unadulterated information. Art censorship, at its base, is preventing artists to advocate their beliefs or teach the public about the problems prevalent in daily life. Artists utilize their art to portray the cracks found in society, such as the acts of stifling the horrors of the past and shrouding the public's eyes from today's pressing issues. They utilize public spaces as a platform to promote uncensored art that protest about the injustices and the concealment of information by those in authority; Adrian Piper, author of "Some Thoughts on the Political Character of the Situation," explains that "public spaces (Galleries and Museums) are political arena[s]."¹ Certain artists take on the onus to initiate a movement through their works, aiming to expose the truths hidden from society; the obstruction of information from being received by the audience just for the "protection of the ones at fault" should be condemned. For example, author of "Whitewalling," Aruna D'Souza, mentions that "at [Till Mobley's] funeral, Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley, insisted that [Till's] coffin be left open. She was acting in defiance of the Mississippi sheriff who only released her son's body for burial on the condition that the casket be sealed...In a singular act of courage, she also urged that the photograph of her son's body circulate widely to 'let the world see what I have seen.'"² Till's mother rejected to hide the horrific actions done to her son just to "protect" the whites who mutilated him. She pushed forward to expose the inhumane actions committed against her son and galvanized the Civil Rights Movement to push for a better society.



Steven Whyte. *Comfort Women*, 2017. Courtesy of NBCNews.

Steven Whyte's *Comfort Women* (2017) is another instance where artists took on the responsibility to enlighten the public about the disregarded past. The statue consists of three women, each symbolizing China, Korea, and the Philippines, and Kim Hak-sun, who is watching the women from a distance. The statue is meant to commemorate the women who were abused and victimized by Japanese soldiers during World War II. Officials of Osaka, Japan, threatened to cut its ties as "sister cities" with San Francisco if it were not be taken down because such a sculpture would surely taint society's perception of Japan. Several civil rights activists and San Francisco refused to honor such request, which ultimately led to sever the ties between the two cities.³ The piece was meant to bring light and be a witness to the sufferings such women encountered daily during the War, which is sadly often overlooked and omitted from history books.



Ai Weiwei. *Children's Names*, 2009. Courtesy of Art Asia Pacific.



Ai Weiwei. *Remembering*, 2009. Courtesy of Khan Academy.

Ai Weiwei, a renowned Chinese artist, also created pieces that signify tragedies. He has continuously battled against the Chinese government through his artworks. In his works, *Children's Names* (2009) and *Remembering* (2009), Weiwei enlightened the public about the deplorable decisions of the government that ultimately led to the preventable deaths of thousands of young students. The Chinese government attempted to cover up their mistakes and the names of the children, but Ai Weiwei honored the youth through relaying their stories to promote awareness in public, such as creating an installation that commemorates the children that perished in the accident. After Weiwei published the names on the internet, the Chinese government took it down within a day and kept him under surveillance ever since.⁴ Nevertheless, Ai Weiwei still pursued to continue his journey of exposing truths that the Chinese government hides within their walls. This brings the following statement of Nizan Shaked, author of *Critical Identity Politics*, into perspective: "The artwork thus becomes a lens, bringing into focus the function of identity in social interaction within the art world as a public sphere."⁵ Without Ai Weiwei bringing attention to the Sichuan earthquake and its aftermath, the government would have gotten its way with hiding their mistakes to preserve their image. Ai Weiwei worked close with the victims' families to investigate and later commemorated the victims' names into his work giving them a sense of identity. He wanted to memorialize the tragic event and have it remembered and learned from, rather than simply disregard the entire event by it being done to thousands of nameless students that people can easily be apathetic to.

Apart from it simply withholding information from the public, censorship dilutes the message the artist initially intends to convey to the audience. It will simply change the overall message that was first intended by the artist, which can engender many misinterpretations regarding the art. Susan Sontag, author of "Regarding the Pain of Others," makes the point, "The photographs are a means of making "real" (or "more real") matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore."⁶ The idea of exposing the truths and realities, despite its disturbing nature, should be advocated in order to educate the public about the problems that exist in the world. Censorship of such constricts the education of our generation about the personal horrors that hit close to home and should be excised for the betterment of our people and the future. In the controversy surrounding the Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket*, Aruna D'Souza explains that "what started with questions around a single painting by a single artist in a single exhibition turned into a national public debate over the fundamental questions that bind culture and society: who art is for, socially speaking; what are the responsibilities of art institutions to their audience and artists' to theirs; who is granted the right to speak and paint freely; and what censorship is

and who has the power to censor.”⁷ The freedom of speech and expression is a right that should be exercised by people as a whole. People should not be limited to such restrictions, especially if the intention of the works is to display and prompt communication about the ideas and subjects that have been long sealed from the public. Art is a way of expressing one’s thoughts and beliefs—censoring such pieces only equates to condemning the individual themselves.



Occupy Museums, 2011. Courtesy of Occupy Museums.

There are museums dedicated to displaying withheld information. An example would be the *Occupy Museums* (2011), which is a project that consists of connecting cultural institutions and spreading information about the economic injustices and realities that have been happening throughout the world.⁸ Such information is on display for public viewing to educate and express these inequalities that most people are not aware of. With the existence of these institutions, it brings awareness to the public of what is happening in their communities. It also acts as spark for people to bring knowledge to others in hopes of inspiring change in the current conditions of their homes and lives.



Dana Schutz. *Open Casket*, 2017. Courtesy of The New Yorker.

Another example of an artist being forced to restrict their rights includes the huge controversy that involved a white, blue chip artist, Dana Schutz, receiving backlash as a response from a community she didn't expect. Dana Schutz's painting, *Open Casket* (2017), made international news because it portrayed Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black teenager who was beaten to death back in 1955, in a casket as an abstract painting. It sparked outrage within the black community as Schutz had no "right" to create such art. Criticisms also implied that the painting would make a profit off of a black person's death. However, Schutz believes that her reason for artwork stems from empathy, saying that she, as a mother, would know the pain and created the painting out of sympathy and grief to Till's mother.⁹ Though Emmett Till's murder has been a recurring discussion, it is mostly done in specific instances, often relating to academia or politics and that only a select group of people are privy to it. For a painting that caused controversy regarding the ideas of racism and injustice, the question of "Didn't Schutz accomplish something that art should be doing?" comes up. Agitating the crowd's belief, making them face the problems that society has encountered for decades and continuous to plague it still are one of the main reasons why artists take such political standpoints in order to make people converse about such important events. Schutz's controversy gave rise to the questions: "Who can create art and what are the limits of creating an art piece? Doesn't this violate the artist's right to freedom of expression?" The Dana Schutz incident shed light to what the boundaries of an artist in their intention of creating art and who it is for.



Michael Lebron. *Is it the Right's Beer Now?*, 1992. Courtesy of Thomas Jefferson Center.

Another work that received great criticism is Michael Lebron's work, *Is it the Right's Beer Now?* (1992). It sparked the national case *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corporation*. Lebron intended to place his creation on display in New York City's AMTRAK Penn Station but was threatened to be put down due its political nature that criticizes Coors Brewing Company, a company that supports the contras in Nicaragua. The billboard is meant to condemn Coors's support of the contras through depicting a scene where avid Coors drinkers are contrasted with a Coors can aimed at a poor Nicaraguan neighborhood.¹⁰ Lebron sued and went on trial, claiming that the act of censoring his art violates the first amendment laws; his right to freedom of speech and expression is encroached upon. He won, with the case stating that rejecting a billboard sign due to its nature is considered unconstitutional.¹¹

A great number of art exposes concepts the public may not know in the first place. Art can be utilized to agitate people, to make the mull over concepts they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with in order to broaden their perspective. However, a line can be drawn in regard to the artist's intention. Art that is created with a malicious intent should be censored. This is where censorship should be drawn, when the artist's intention is malicious and hostile, with the objective to breed havoc among the public. While Ai Weiwei and Schutz have their ways of expressing and educating the public about the flaws in our society, it is done without contempt. However, artists like Sabo whose works are meant to stir and attack a certain population should be deemed to be

censored. The WochenKlausur insists that “art should deal with reality, grapple with political circumstances, and work out proposals for improving human coexistence”.¹² Art should be more progressive and “agitate” the public about the flaws that we have accepted and ingrained in society, to challenge those ideas in order to create a better environment for us to live in. D’Souza also mentions, “When the protesters were demanding that the Schutz painting must go, they were not suppressing Schutz’s right to speak- they were challenging the curatorial decisions that gave her platform, while denying others the same opportunity.”¹³ The idea is not to stop artists from creating artworks that they want to create, no matter what judgement they have, but the idea of putting out such works that entail the provocation of a certain group or idea should be limited and censored due its antagonistic nature.



Sabo in his studio in LA, Rory Carroll, 2017. Courtesy of The Guardian.



Sabo. *First Female Potus: Above The Law & Out of Touch*, 2016. Courtesy of Yahoo.

Sabo, as an artist, had the intention to agitate and anger the public through his works.¹⁴ The art he creates are very political but expressed in an extreme way that is borderline disrespectful for public viewing. In his work *First Female Potus: Above The Law & Out of Touch* (2016), it portrays Hillary Clinton tattooed and almost naked in the streets of Hollywood.¹⁵ Though

everyone should have a right to exercise their freedom of expression through their works, a line should be drawn if the intention of the work is to create a hostile and chaotic reaction from its viewers. This piece, among many others, is one of the many works Sabo has put out in public that depicts an exposed body of a political figure. Though Sabo is making the public aware of the subject's character, his methods are inappropriate due to the platform he is utilizing. There is a great difference in displaying a nude image of a person in a museum and displaying it out in public; the difference is found between the audience in each space varies greatly as museum goers usually have no problem seeing nudity and actually have an expectation of seeing radical art, while the general public that roam the streets may not.



David Cerny. *Shark*, 2005. Courtesy of Curiator.com.

David Cerny's *Shark* (2005) sparked controversy in Europe when it was first unveiled. The idea of the work was meant as a metaphor for Saddam Hussain's tendency to feed his captives to sharks.¹⁶ It is reminiscent of Damien Hirst's *Shark* (1991). Though this idea might be a bold artwork to showcase, it still sends the wrong message to some of its audience. For one, the artwork seems to be creating a victim out of Hussain as he is seen tied up, naked and placed in a container for public display. It also may cause an outrage within a certain community to how graphic and obscene the artwork is as it still depicts the death of a human and even seeks out sympathy for a man that precipitated unforgivable suffering of many.



Damien Hirst. *Shark*, 1991. Courtesy of Independent.

The idea of censorship restricts the artists' right to freedom of speech and expression no matter what their work entails. Artists, especially today, have used art as an outlet and museums and galleries as a platform to ignite movements regarding inequality, maltreatment, and oppression that society coexists with. Artists should be free of such shackles in order to educate and inspire change in people. However, there should be limits, specifically pertaining to one's intention, to what artworks can be displayed in certain areas. Art should not be used for violence and transgressions, but should be used as a catalyst and a stage to conduct change and create progress in order to establish a better future for us all.

¹ Piper, Adrian. *Some Thoughts on the Political Character of the Situation*. (Art of Conscience: The Lost Decade, 1983.)

² D'Souza, Aruna. *Act 1, Whitney Biennial, 2017*. (Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts. Badlands Unlimited: 2018), pg. 16.

³ Hauser, Christine. "'It Is Not Coming Down': San Francisco Defends 'Comfort Women' Statue as Japan Protests." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 4 Oct. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/10/04/us/osaka-sf-comfort-women-statue.html.

⁴ "Ai Weiwei, 'Remembering' and the Politics of Dissent." *Khan Academy*, Khan Academy, www.khanacademy.org/humanities/global-culture/global-art-architecture/a/ai-weiwei-remembering-and-the-politics-of-dissent.

⁵ Shaked, Nizan. "Critical Identity Politics." X-tra, Fall 2008.

⁶ Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. (Picador: 2004), pgs. 3 -36.

⁷ D'Souza, Aruna. *Act 1, Whitney Biennial, 2017*. (Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts. Badlands Unlimited: 2018), pg. 18.

⁸ "Occupy Museums." *Occupymuseums.org*, Occupy Museums, 19 Oct. 2011, www.occupymuseums.org/index.php/about.

⁹ Tomkins, Calvin. "Why Dana Schutz Painted Emmett Till." *The New Yorker*, The Art World, 10 Apr. 2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/10/why-dana-schutz-painted-emmett-till.

¹⁰ "Michael Lebron." Thomas Jefferson Center. <https://tjcenter.org/art-on-trial/michael-lebron/>.

¹¹ "Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corporation." *Oyez*, 5 Nov. 2018, www.oyez.org/cases/1994/93-1525.

¹² WochenKlausur. *From the Object to the Concrete Intervention*. www.wochenklausur.at, 2005.

¹³ D'Souza, Aruna. *Act 1, Whitney Biennial, 2017*. (Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts. Badlands Unlimited: 2018), pg. 55.

¹⁴ Carroll, Rory. "'I Think Leftism Is a Disorder': Is This Artist the Rightwing Banksy?" *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 21 June 2017, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/jun/21/rightwing-street-artist-sabo-donald-trump-la.

¹⁵ The Hollywood Reporter. "Nearly Naked Hillary Clinton Portrayed as the "Beast" in Hollywood Street Art." Yahoo! News. August 29, 2016. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/nearly-naked-hillary-clinton-portrayed-beast-hollywood-street-171408878.html>.

¹⁶ Braeckel, Luc Van. "Meet Saddam, The Shark." *The Brussels Journal*, 18 Jan. 2006, www.brusselsjournal.com/node/679.