World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

Article Collection

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ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED

World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

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ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED – Article Collection
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Introduction

These articles were collected to provide in-depth knowledge of violations of artistic freedom of expression.

The collection features censorship cases as well as interviews with artists who have been persecuted or whose art have been censored or attacked.

The articles were commissioned between June and October 2012 and originally published on the website of the conference *All that is Banned is Desired* – the first world conference on artistic freedom of expression – held in the Oslo Opera House, Norway, 25-26 October 2012. The conference was organised by Fritt Ord and Freemuse.

The articles as well as video recordings of the conference sessions and interviews with the artists are published on the website www.artsfreedom.org

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Executive Director, Freemuse

Content

Sun Mu – the faceless painter 7
by Jason Strother

Tunisia's ground zero for creative freedom 17
by Kerim Bouzouita

Symbols into soldiers: Art, censorship, and religion 22
by Svetlana Mintcheva

The rise and 'ban' of the collateral 30
by Kanchan G. Burathoki

The invisible red line – maneuvering Chinese art censorship 37
by Si Han

Fear, threats and self-censorship among Syrian rappers 42
by Janne Louise Andersen

Mali: The day the music stopped 50
by Andy Morgan

Iranian musician responds upright to death threats 57
by Elke Safaei-Rad

Syria: Art, creative resistance and active citizenship 66
by Donatella Della Ratta

ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

Sun Mu – the faceless painter

Sun Mu is not his actual name. It's a *nom de plume* that uses a combination of two Korean words that translate to 'The Absence of Borders'. It not only represents what he feels is the transcendence of art but also the literal military demarcation line that keeps the Korean people separated.

BY JASON STROTHER

THE RAIN had just stopped falling when I arrived at Sun Mu's small art studio atop an old industrial building in one of Seoul's western districts. His wife, Jeong and their two daughters, ages 5 and 2, had dropped by and stayed awhile longer to avoid the unpleasant weather.

Standing inside the studio, we're surrounded by stacks of vividly colored paintings: some depicting smiling schoolchildren, another the silhouettes of dancers colored in blood-red and hanging on the back wall. a portrait of the late North Korean ruler Kim Jong-il.

Some of these images, while out of place if not illegal in democratic South Korea, reflect Sun Mu's life story. It's a complicated history that stretches back to his childhood in North Korea.

"When I saw Kim Il Sung on TV being pleased with the writings and paintings of little kids, I was really impressed. I wanted him to pat me on the back. I wanted his praise," Sun Mu said. "I wanted him to like me too."

Sun Mu has not seen his family since late 1990s. Even though his hometown would be just a few hours drive from where he lives now, it might as well be on another planet. As a defector from one of the world's most repressive nations, Sun Mu can never go back.

Separated by the landmine filled DMZ since the end of the fratricidal Korean War in 1953, travel between the two nations is all but forbidden. There is no phone or postal service. And given the state of tensions now on the peninsula, there appears to be no change on the horizon.

Sun Mu's story is not of a man whose questioning of the system led him to seek freedom. Unlike in George Orwell's novel 1984, Sun Mu did not come to a revelation that what he had grown up believing was all a lie. Instead he like most of the other 23,000 North Koreans that now call South Korea home, never actually intended to leave his family for good.

When Sun Mu arrived in Seoul in 2002, he only knew one thing: how to paint. He had been trained as a propaganda artist back in the North and didn't want to give up his trade, even though he was unsure how he could make this style relevant in his new surroundings. After time, he realised that same motif he once used to glorify North

Korea's leaders on banners and posters back home could be used to create an ironic critique of the same men he once worshiped like gods.

"In North Korea art exists to promote political propaganda. And North Koreans exist to promote the regime. Now my mission is to describe how life is for North Koreans, how painful it is through art."

Since his first exhibition in 2007, Sun Mu has gained international recognition. He's been invited to present his work at galleries in Germany and Australia. Of all his works, the portraits of his former ruler Kim Jong-il, dressed in colorful track suits, have brought him perhaps the most attention.

Making something like that would have been unthinkable back home.

"You don't even need to go to a court, you are executed right away," Sun Mu said while gliding his hand across his throat. "If you play with the face of the leader, you are done."

Photo by Jason Strother

'The Faceless Painter'

Sun Mu is not his actual name. It's a ***nom de plume*** that uses a combination of two Korean words that translate to 'The Absence of Borders'. It not only represents what he feels is the transcendence of art but also the literal military demarcation line that keeps the Korean people separated. But it's not only for artistic effect that he goes by this handle: it's to protect the people he left behind.

South Korean media dubbed Sun Mu 'The Faceless Painter'. That's because he refuses to have pictures taken of him straight on. He's worried that if his real name and image gets back to the North Korean authorities, his family will be punished for his crimes. And whenever showing his artwork at galleries, Sun Mu pulls a brimmed cotton hat down over his face.

"It covers my face just enough. I've been wearing it since my first exhibition. I do it out of concern for my family in North Korea," he said.

Sun Mu's fear for the safety of his loved ones is not without reason. For decades North Korea has implemented a three-generations rule that punishes a law-breakers' entire family if the crime is seen as an affront to the state. Defection alone is punishable by death. Sun Mu's new career as a critic of the regime would without doubt be regarded as one of the most treacherous of offenses.

Although he goes to great lengths to conceal his face, Sun Mu is a handsome man in his late 30s. Sun Mu can look very stern one moment, but when a smile begins to form his face illuminates. His wide smile reveals a boyish charm, which considering what he's been through, might seem amazing.

But as Sun Mu explains, no matter what the circumstance, all North Koreans know how to smile.

Smiling for the Great Leader

"She is smiling too much. It's an organised and fake smile."

For six decades, the Kim family has ruled North Korea with an iron fist. At the end of World War II the Soviets, who ceded control of the northern half of the peninsula, chose the guerilla fighter Kim Il Sung to lead the newly formed Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the nation's official name. Kim would go on to launch the surprise attack in June 1950 that ignited the 3-year long Korean War. Millions of Koreans from both sides lost their lives and tens of thousands of families are still divided today. Combat only ended in a cease-fire agreement.

A personality cult was formed around Kim. He was credited with single handedly driving away the Japanese in 1945 after their 35-year colonisation of Korea as well as successfully keeping the imperialist Americans at bay with their puppets in South Korea. Kim became known as the Great Leader and father of the Korean race. The same cult of personality has been inherited by his son Kim Jong-il and grandson, North Korea's new leader Kim Jong-un. Sun Mu was not unlike any other child growing up in the DPRK.

Sun Mu recalls drawing pictures of flowers and bamboo trees as a child. His family and teachers noticed he had a knack for painting. By age 12, Sun Mu was chosen to receive special guidance from his elementary school's art teacher, who he lived with for six months at the school.

"The teacher said that observation is the most important skill for an artist. You have to look at the subject and find its interesting characteristics," Sub Mu recalls. "You see an object for a moment, you have to take as much from it as you can and then draw it as accurately as possible."

Throughout his teen years, Sun Mu used those lessons to improve his skills. He'd climb to the top of hills overlooking his town and draw landscapes. He recalls dropping by train stations and sketching the passengers waiting to board. Sun Mu credits this teacher with giving him the foundation for his artwork.

"I had a part time job while I was in university here in Seoul. My friends and I had to paints murals on the sides of some walls, pictures like birds and trees. But while my friends painted imaginary looking trees, I painted really realistic ones, like pine trees. The owner of the wall was impressed with my attention to detail. He let the other guys go and hired me to finish the mural all on my own."

Painting realistic images might have been the only practical lesson Sun Mu received from his education. He says he thought he knew a lot about the outside world, but acknowledges that at the time he was only taught countries' names and nothing about their people or history, let alone their art. No one knew that beyond North Korea's borders, other Communist regimes were falling and that South Koreans were wealthier, better educated and ate three meals a day.

Sun Mu doesn't get upset about his lost childhood. He and every other North Korean child had no idea what they were missing. But he tries to convey this hollow happiness in his work today.

Sun Mu's paintings of children are some of his most striking pieces of art. They are portrayed with wide-open eyes and ear-to-ear smiles, often dressed in North Korean school uniforms or traditional costumes. At first glance they look happy, but look closer and they seem miserable.

"I was educated to smile like this when I was a child too. I thought I was happy. But after I came to South Korea, I realised it wasn't real happiness."

Intuition artist

Sun Mu hands me a book, a collection of some of the paintings he's done since coming to South Korea. There are portraits of accordion playing soldiers, a little girl holding a bouquet of flowers, a pudgy baby boy in blue suspenders: all with that same unbelievably eerie smile. These pictures are a far cry from the images Sun Mu painted back in the North.

"One of the paintings I made that hung on the walls in some schools there was of a North Korean student in his school uniform. He was stabbing a pencil through an American soldier. That pencil then went through the body of a Japanese soldier standing behind him," Sun Mu recalls with a smug laugh. "On the painting was the slogan 'Let's Study As If We Are Stabbing Americans'."

That is a typical example of the kind of propaganda art that is found all over North Korea. From an early age, children are indoctrinated to hate the United States, which Pyongyang blames for keeping the peninsula divided. These banners and murals are violent and bloody and were what Sun Mu did best.

But he didn't receive any special training on how to create these types of paintings. He was never shown examples of propaganda from the USSR, Cuba or East Germany to serve as a model. As he explained, artistic education in North Korea is a matter of copying what has already been done.

"The government holds a contest amongst professional propaganda artists. They spread the art around the country. All we did was copy that kind of style. Of course the outcome is different, but we just copied what we saw."

Artistic inspiration was also taken from one's surroundings. After high school, Sun Mu was accepted into a specialised school for iron welding. He also was the head of an extracurricular art club where he and classmates drew more propaganda posters. The floor of the school's foundry became the backdrop for many of Sun Mu's works at this time.

"These kind of paintings are called intuition art, because you draw what is in your immediate sight."

Key to all North Korean propaganda is the slogans. Sun Mu would attach grandiose phrases to his art like "We Can Go Our On Way," a reference to the state's political ideology of self-reliance, called juche. He says he was never worried that the pieces he created wouldn't be good enough.

"Your teachers give you the phrases, you can't modify them. Basically you just take what you have seen from another poster and apply the phrases. So you really couldn't do it a wrong way."

Sun Mu decided to leave the welding school and complete four-years mandatory military service. His unit was in need of it's own propagandist and once his senior officers learned of his talents, Sun Mu was conscripted to become their official painter. This was the point when his art took on a darker tone.

"I had to add some more violent imagery, scenes of destruction, more power and energy to the type of art that I had already been making."

It was by now that Sun Mu knew he had what it takes to become a nationally recognised propaganda artist. He aspired to join the government commissioned troupe that made the regime's official art, the Mansudae Art Studio. After finishing his military duty he was accepted into an art school and was on his way to achieving his dream.

Sun Mu says there wasn't much left for him to learn about making intuition art. The school was more of a chance for him to network and make connections for what he planned would be his career. There were classes on the role of the artist in North Korean society- to serve the promotion of juche and honor the nation's leaders. Sun Mu also took a course in Western Art History, but says in hindsight, he didn't really get much out of it.

"We learned about Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, the Last Supper and the Renaissance, but we never actually saw any of these paintings."

Any Western ideals of romantic art were lost on Sun Mu. But that didn't matter to him. He was getting praise from his teachers for his work. In fact, that was about all the feedback he received. Students did not talk to one another about their projects or ideas. There were no critiquing sessions or opportunities for students to learn new techniques to improve their craft.

Like the manufactured smiles in Sun Mu's paintings of children, art was an emotionless expression. The militant top down nature of North Korea did not encourage students to experiment with new concepts or designs. And according to Sun Mu, fear was a major factor in preventing artists from exercising creativity. "In North Korea, becoming it's impossible to be an outlier. If you try something beyond the frame of what you have learned from your teachers you will go to jail. Everyone knows that. There are very specific guidelines to follow and if you don't, you are removed, no matter how good you are. That's how the system has worked for over half a century. People are used to it. So you don't even think about doing something different."

Under these conditions, censorship was not an issue. Sun Mu and his classmates had a clear understanding of what was expected of them in order to please Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il. Ironically, it wouldn't be until a decade later, in South Korea, when Sun Mu was painting portraits of the two North Korean rulers that he would be confronted with outright censorship.

No regrets

"In front of the river there are bushes and trees. I was waiting there to cross the river at the right moment. When I was waiting, even the sound of insects was loud to me. What would've happened if I had stepped on a branch and made a noise? Soldiers would have probably come and killed me."

When I asked Sun Mu what he missed most about North Korea, he leaned back and took a few moments to respond.

"There are a lot of things I miss," he said. "My family, my friends."

But soon that boyish grin returned to his face as he recalled a memory from his childhood.

"My friends and I would go fishing in the river in my hometown. We'd make porridge out of the fish we caught."

Sun Mu then went into another story, at a rapid pace, laughing as he recounted it.

"One time my friends and I wanted to throw a barbecue party for some other guys who were coming back home from the army. We wanted to grill four dogs, but needed 50kg of corn to barter for them. We didn't have enough so I stole a bag of rice from a warehouse that I was working at and we were able to get the meat."

The fact that food accounts for some of Sun Mu's favorite memories about life back in the North is not surprising. By the time Sun Mu was finishing up art school, North Korea had plunged into famine. There is no reliable data on how many people actually died during this time in the mid to late 1990s, but aid groups' estimates range anywhere from 800-thousand to 2-million.

The loss of support from the Soviet Union, consecutive years of bad weather and the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 broke down North Korea's food distribution system. The signs of mass starvation could be seen all over Sun Mu's town. He remembers spotting an old woman lying on the dirt outside the town market waiting to die. Beggars at the local train station were too hungry and weak to even move. Many people in his town did not survive.

"I didn't blame the government for what was happening. I just didn't understand what was going on. I asked a professor at my university and all he told me was that I had better watch what I was saying."

Sun Mu says he wasn't doing well himself. At school, students were only fed ground corn mixed with plants. At night, he and his classmates would take cabbages from nearby farms.

"If you don't steal, you don't survive in North Korea."

Left with no other option, Sun Mu told his parents that he would travel several hours north to the Tumen River. There he would contact relatives in China and ask them to bring food and money across the border for him to take back home. Sun Mu says he had every intention of coming back.

"I even told one of my friends that when I return that I would buy him lunch."

But that would never happen. When Sun Mu arrived at the Tumen River, his relatives refused to come to him. Instead they insisted that he cross the river himself and stay with them.

This would be no easy task. Armed guards are stationed along the riverbank with orders to shoot anyone they see trying to escape. Sun Mu staked out the river crossing, hiding in bushes, waiting for the best time to sneak past the soldiers. After 15 days he made his break and stepped onto Chinese soil.

Tens of thousands of North Koreans are thought to have taken the same path as Sun Mu. They come to China in search of food, money and work with the intention to eventually return home. Many do go back, while others crisscross back and forth. China's northeast is home to an ethnic Korean minority, so the escapees blend in. But Beijing does not recognise them as refugees, instead sees them as economic migrants that must be repatriated. North Koreans in China live in constant fear of detection: if they are sent back home they face months of hard labor in prison camps, torture or public execution.

It took a few months before the reality of it all sank in for Sun Mu. His relatives helped him find work on a tobacco farm. He was earning money and all the while planning to get back to his hometown in time for a national election in the late 1990s. But time was running out. Sun Mu says that if he didn't get back to vote the authorities would realise he had gone away without permission and some form of punishment would follow. He decided to stay.

"I began to see a lot of things that made me realise something was wrong with my homeland. All I did was cross one river and it was a different world. It confused me. In China people were well fed, while North Koreans were starving. At restaurants people wouldn't even finish eating. Their leftovers would be given to the pigs. In North Korea, our dream was to eat rice and meat soup, which it was everywhere in China."

Sun Mu was on the move, he had to be, to avoid capture by the Chinese police. He went from location to location working odd jobs; he picked tree bark for a paper company, he even joined a gang for several months and was paid to rough-up unruly clients in karaoke bars. But on one job loading sacks of flour onto trains, he met a young woman, an ethnic Korean-Chinese, named Jeong.

"At first I didn't think about marrying her, she was too young. But I thought if someday I ever got to South Korea I would try to help her come there."

Sun Mu was tired of being on the run. He felt unsafe and craved stability. While in China, many North Koreans receive their first exposure to South Korean culture. Media that is banned back in the North is widely available. The escapees see that the South isn't the third world hellhole they thought it to be. Sun Mu realised that if he wanted real freedom he would have to make it there.

Sun Mu bought a map of China and plotted his flight. He would have to make it to Southeast Asia, where he could safely reach a South Korean embassy and be granted asylum. At the time of his journey south, most North Koreans relied on a network of safe houses run by Christian missionaries, known as the underground-railroad. But Sun Mu says he along with one other man did it on their own.

They reached Laos, but were arrested by local authorities. The other man, who Sun Mu thought was a refugee like him, turned out to be a Korean-Chinese and was sent back home. After two weeks in jail, Sun Mu was released to Thailand. Finally, he was able to get help and was soon put on a plane bound for Seoul.

"I don't regret leaving North Korea," he said. "I still cannot understand how the government could let its people starve to death. But, I feel bad that I didn't have a plan back then, I didn't know I was going to end up here. If I had known that, I would have brought my family with me. I would like them to come here, but I know they can't. Its just too dangerous."

Stranger in a strange land

Like all North Korean defectors, he was automatically granted South Korean citizenship. He spent three months at a government-run facility where refugees are taught the basics of living in the capitalist world, such as how to use computers, bank machines and cell phones. But all the counseling and preparation could not prepare Sun Mu for his first day at university in Seoul.

"I asked myself why I ever came here," he said.

After sixty years of division, the two Koreas have gone separate ways. Many North Koreans suffer a culture shock upon arrival. Sun Mu thought the transition into life in the South would be easier, but what he found perplexed him.

He had been accepted into Honggik University, the nation's top arts school with a very liberal student body. Sun Mu says he wanted to finally finish his degree and make friends while studying. But he could not figure out how to interact with his new classmates.

"I couldn't understand how these students behaved. I thought they were crazy. Should they see a doctor? We were all speaking Korean, but I couldn't really understand what they were saying."

A language barrier is perhaps the most surprising difference that North Koreans discover in their new home. Many English words have seeped into daily usage and many Korean expressions don't have quite the same meanings here as they do in the North.

"I was really thinking about quitting school."

But Sun Mu stuck with it. In his coursework, he began to introduce elements of the style of art he was accustomed to. The easily identifiable North Korean propaganda style set off alarm bells within the university's faculty.

"My professors asked me, why are you painting this kind of stuff? My classmates didn't know what to think about my art. No one encouraged me. I began to think there was nothing for me here in South Korea."

But Sun Mu's fortunes picked up when he met art collector Ryu Byeong-hak, a Korean national who had been living in Germany for the past two decades.

"My first impression of Sun Mu's paintings was that they were very vivid. I thought you couldn't find this type of work in South Korea, Germany or anywhere," Ryu said.

In 2007, Ryu used his contacts in Seoul to get Sun Mu's work hung up in a gallery. His art would be shown along with photographs from Pyongyang. It was perhaps the first time that pictures of Kim Il Sung and North Korean flags were publically displayed in South Korea. Even though they knew the show would be provocative, neither Sun Mu nor Ryu expected the kind of reaction that followed.

"People called the police and said someone was trying to display real North Korean propaganda. The police showed up on the opening day, but once I explained who I was and what my art is, everything turned out ok," Sun Mu said.

"Well, it didn't help that the gallery was located right behind the President's house," Ryu added.

Faced with real censorship, Sun Mu had to re-think his initial impressions about South Korean society.

"I thought South Koreans had freedom of expression, but its not completely true. They are still ideologically divided and not as open as I expected when I first arrived."

Sun Mu continues to have trouble getting his work into galleries here because of the controversy it causes. Likewise, he has been passed over for grants or other endowments given to help support artists.

"Art of course should not be restricted. Censorship of art is in my opinion barbaric. But even when there is official censorship, real art does find a way to exist."

Despite this resistance to his art, Sun Mu says he is doing just fine. Some of his work has fetched up to $20,000 and he finds many international buyers who are interested in his work. His wife, Jeong, helps the family out with a part time job too.

"Well, all I can say is at least we are not starving," he says modestly.

Peace through art

"I want North and South Korean children to connect with each other. We can't deny each other's existence anymore."

This past June, Sun Mu came the closest to his hometown in almost a decade. He was on South Korea's Baengnyeong Island in the Yellow Sea, four hours by boat to Incheon, only 10 minutes to the North Korean coast.

"I felt frustrated, more so than ever before. Why should we live like this? I could see some of the scenery from my hometown through the fog."

Over the years, Sun Mu's art has become less about Kim Jong-il and more about symbols of hope. He believes he has a role to play in bringing the two Koreas closer together. There is much mistrust between the two nations, but he wants his art to help lay the groundwork to show that peace is possible.

"The role that art can play is not very obvious. But I still think I can reach out to ordinary people, effect their thinking, I want to change the mindset of these people."

Sun Mu does not define himself as an artist. He doesn't have a name for his particular style either. But whatever it is he creates, he wants it to reflect the division of the two countries he both calls home.

"I'll find a way to bring Korea into a painting. Even if I am painting a zebra, I will put the Korean situation into the piece. I am North Korean, my family is there, the two Koreas are divided and it's still an international problem. I am still thinking how I can help solve these problems."

Solving the problems of an entire peninsula is one challenge, trying to explain his past to his own young children is another.

"I tell them your grandmother and your cousins are in North Korea and we have to go there someday."

But he knows the chances of that actually happening are slim to none.

Sun Mu says his eldest daughter has told some of her friends about her North Korean father and the family there she has yet to meet. The children told her that North Korea is a dangerous place and that if she ever goes there, she will die.

"All I can tell my daughter is that there are people living there."

Ten years into his new life in South Korea, Sun Mu has started to reflect on the one he gave up. He figures that if he hadn't made it as a government propagandist, he'd at least be teaching art to upcoming students. And perhaps it's the stress of living in a fast paced city like Seoul as well as the pressure to support a family that sometimes makes Sun Mu nostalgic.

"What makes me sad is that I will never have that chance to be with my friends, catch fish and make that porridge together again."

Jason Strother *is an American freelance journalist who has been based in Seoul since 2006. He has reported throughout the region and files for broadcasters and online media in the US, Europe and Asia.*
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ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

Tunisia's ground zero for creative freedom

The 'Nadia Jelassi' affair has become a stake, a symbol of the successful democratic transition of the Tunisian revolution, and could represent ground zero for individual freedoms in the country that in late 2010 sparked off a world geopolitical earthquake.

BY KERIM BOUZOUITA

IT'S 2012 IN TUNISIA and artist Mohamed Ben Slama and visual artist Nadia Jelassi, lecturer and head of department at the *Tunis Institut Supérieur des Beaux Arts*, have been charged with causing a breach of the peace and face prison sentences of between six months and five years. What are now known as the 'El Abdelleya events' were first presented by commentators as a violent, disproportionate reaction by certain fanatics wounded in their religious sensibilities by works that could be seen as provocative. But the affair is looking increasingly political, with artists and freedom of artistic expression becoming collateral damage.

The 'Nadia Jelassi' affair has become a stake, a symbol of the successful democratic transition of the Tunisian revolution, and could represent ground zero for individual freedoms in the country that in late 2010 sparked off a world geopolitical earthquake. For a better understanding of the actors and stakes in this affair, and helped by the artist in question, we show what really happened.

The official story

It all started on 10 June 2012, the day the annual *Printemps des Arts* (Springtime of the Arts) exhibition, now in its 10th year, where both accepted artists and young hopefuls meet, closed its doors. Mohamed Ali Bouazizi, a court attendant, noticed how much rubbish had accumulated around the exhibition, and 'acting as someone politically responsible in the area' (he said) asked the janitor to clean up; he looked round the various exhibits. He photographed some paintings he judged 'religiously offensive' and showed them to people praying at a La Marsa mosque, La Marsa being a small seaside town in the northern suburb of Tunis. With Bouazizi accompanying them, they went straight to the El Abdelleya gallery and ordered the organisers to remove the offensive works, threatening otherwise to return early that evening with a great crowd of people to destroy them. When the organisers refused to listen, and were joined by about a hundred people mobilising in support of the artists, they quickly scattered and left.

The following day saw an unprecedented wave of violence shake many of Tunisia's towns, requiring energetic reaction by the police, who arrested several dozen assailants, and killed a demonstrator known to belong to the Wahhabi movement. For several days a curfew was imposed.

The hidden story

Unlikely as this may seem, in a land whose people are known for their particularly peaceful and friendly temperament, certain points do indicate that something else lies behind these facts.

Firstly, when he appeared in court, Bouazizi was unable to explain exactly what 'political responsibility' he had for cleaning up the town. According to some commentators, he had been a very active member of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (the RCD) – the party of the former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Although this has not been totally confirmed, Bouazizi himself said on a private Tunisian TV channel that he was a member of the Movement of Social Democrats (MDS), an RCD satellite which had systematically supported Ben Ali by calling for people to vote for him instead of its own candidate.

Next, the timing. 12 June coincided almost exactly with the handing down of the verdicts that cleared Moncef Laâjimi (former head of the action squad), Moncef Krifa (head of the security apparatus for the Head of State and official persons) and Khaled Ben Saïd (former Jendouba police superintendent) of responsibility in the cases of the Thala and Kasserine martyrs, killed during the popular uprising of December 2010-January 2011. These verdicts set off waves of violent protest in Kasserine and Thala but were given little media attention, in fact were drowned out by the preceding violence.

Finally, the quasi-military organisation and heterogeneity of the assailants who had burned down several public buildings, including a court and a police stations according to our sources at the Ministry of the Interior confirm that these men were 'people who would not usually mix: religious fanatics, notorious delinquents and ex-jailbirds'.

These facts leave little room for doubt as to the premeditated, political nature of the affair. The artists seem to have been collateral victims of a political power struggle.

So why is Nadia Jelassi facing a five-year prison sentence? Her only 'crime' was a work exhibited at the 2012 Printemps des Arts exhibition in the El Abdelleya gallery. 'Let him who has not' shows two sculptures of veiled women emerging from piles of stones that bring to mind a stoning. Although this punishment was never advocated by the Koran, it is still current in countries with Muslim majorities which claim to enforce sharia law (Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), and along with the issue of the veil, which has monopolised public debate in Tunisia since the flight of the dictator, has inspired the work and life of this committed artist.

Influenced by images

Nadia Jelassi says: "There are many ways of being an artist: I'd go so far as to say that there are as many ways as artists... Each in his own way, intersecting and sometimes opposing, brings his own vision of or sensitivity to the world he's working in. Artists aren't exclusive, they can use traditional materials like wood or marble or non-tangible materials like sound and light; in each case, the social and political can become sources of artistic provision. To get back to the question, I would say that I'm an artist who lets her self be influenced by images that don't necessarily come from the artistic world. As an artist living and working in Tunisia, I obviously can't be indifferent to what is happening. My studio isn't watertight and I am as yet neither blind, deaf or dumb. So I am an artist, like many others, who interacts with everyday images and materials however tense. Today, simultaneously, in different parts of the planet, we can instantaneously see the same images. Satellite channels, social networks, and internet generally have de facto brought about an iconographical globalisation. So as an artist I find myself faced by an inexhaustible source of images, a never-ending source of new materials. My interaction with my social and political environment, now ranging further than narrow geographic borders allowed, is nothing new in my artistic development. People who know me, who have watched how my work develops, know this. My last personal exhibition (in November 2010) was called 'Breaking with the establishment'. At that time, using the chair as a piece of furniture through drawing and collage…and an image bank including a pack of cards and advertising catalogues for big brand names in Tunisian supermarkets, I tried to translate in sculptural terms different manifestations of power (political, scientific, legal, medical etc.) The issue of the veil as a piece of cloth and a discourse informing a particular status of women's bodies also recurs in my work."

Identified the wrong enemy

On June 12, in the thick of the action, using fake images on Facebook, politicians condemned those artists who 'touched on holy issues'. Unsurprisingly, the President of the al-Nahdha Party used the occasion to urge his troops and public opinion to make this constitutional by calling it an 'attack on religion', even launching a petition with over 80 signatures on 21 June; what did come as a surprise was that the President of the Republic, Moncef Marzouki, and of the Constituent Assembly, Mostapha Ben Jaafar, also unanimously condemned the artists. But the real shock was that the man who should have defended culture and creativity, the Minister of Culture Mehdi Mabrouk, quickly condemned the artists and said he would lodge a complaint against the Printemps des Arts organisers. He immediately closed the gallery.

"The politicians who publicly condemned the artists on prime time television hadn't even seen the exhibition. I admit that many artists were specially affected by the Minister's words. By condemning the artists and perhaps this is the other side of the coin, he abandoned his true role and function: promoting and protecting art and artists.

Now seen as a minister who censures, an enemy of culture, he even presented himself as an art critic at the press conference when he railed against the 'mediocre self-taught people who have nothing to do with art', blaming them for the crisis, since 'art shouldn't be revolutionary, it must be beautiful'," says Nadia Jelassi.

Unjustly condemned on the grounds of false evidence by three ministers (the Human Rights, Religious Affairs and Culture Ministers) at that sadly memorable press conference, many of the exhibiting artists have received death threats. The preacher at the Tunis Great Zitouna Mosque called for their blood. But the Tunisian artists didn't let themselves be intimidated. They reacted quickly: on 18 June, 27 acted to lodge a complaint against the three ministers they hold responsible for the danger they are in.

Brushes with the law

A few days after the events, Nadia got a call from the police judiciary informing her that an investigation had been opened on the 'El Abdelleya events'. The political underside of the case was obvious. "Nobody lodged a complaint against me," said Nadia. "It was the State Prosecutor, the representative of the Justice Minister who opened the case."

Two months later, 17 August, Nadia was called to the Tunis Court of First Instance where the examining magistrate of the second office told her she was charged with 'breach of the peace and moral standards' under Article 121.3 of the Penal Code (inherited from 2001 under the former dictator, it had been used to send human rights activists and political dissidents to the torture chambers).

On 28 August, Nadia was back in the courts, posing for anthropometric photos. "I could have been back under the Inquisition," she told Human Rights Watch. "The examining magistrate asked me what were the intentions behind my works at the exhibition and whether I'd wanted to provoke people through my work."

We decided to ask her some questions.

Freemuse: *Nadia, did you want to 'provoke' by your Printemps des Arts installation in a sensitive revolutionary context?*

Jelassi: "Well before the 14 January revolution I made and exhibited several kinds of portrait that I called '*Textile portraits: 'Let he who has not'*'. So the June 2012 El Abdelleya installation showed artistic continuity. The novelty was in the materials used and how they were arranged. Unlike my textile portraits, which are a bit like pictures, the installation – ephemeral – is three-dimensional. People move around it. Pebbles, partly covered with newspaper, surround three female busts in resin 'clothed' with uniform brown veils to form a disc two metres in diameter. Let's say it's a scene bringing into a relationship objects with marked connotations. I just had to do it. Unlike what I used to do, it was not nuanced. I needed to *shout*, to express something *raw*. But I don't think I sacrificed sculpture. What was remarkable about the last Printemps des Arts – and I must stress this – was that without any prior agreement a lot of artists needed each in his own way to shout the same thing."

Back home, criminalized, she photographed herself with a ruler on her face to show her humiliation and posted it on Facebook. Artist friends did the same in support. The campaign spread quickly, and anonymous or famous surfers took up the cause, posting photos of themselves with rulers or tape-measures. Willis, awarded the Cartooning for Peace prize, showed her famous cat with a transparent ruler and caricaturist Lotfi Ben Sassi dedicated his weekly 'Bok Bok' drawing to Nadia. 'Art has only one rule: freedom.'

Visual artist Rachida Amara sent a message with her photo: 'Rule by show of hands against imposed rules'. Actress Leila Toubel was snapped by Mohamed Ben Mustapha hanged by a ribbon tape-measure. 'My freedom will never be begged for – I'll seize it.' A vast campaign got under way in protest against artistic censorship and for freedom of creation and expression in Tunisia.

Wind of change – and politicians change too

On 3 September 2012, Human Rights Watch, alerted by the support campaign, called for all proceedings against the artists in the El Abdelleya case to be dropped. Eric Goldstein, Deputy Head of the NGO's Middle East and North Africa division, stated that "the Tunisian prosecutors should abandon the charges against both sculptors for works of art deemed to be breaches of the peace and moral standards. Criminal proceedings against artists for works of art that do not incite to violence or discrimination violate the right to freedom of expression. So often, prosecutors have used penal law to stifle critical or artistic expression."

The next day saw a turnaround by the Minister of Culture. At a press conference he announced that he 'fully supported the artists' and that sixteen people had been taken to court for acts of violence linked to the case. His ministry had lodged five complaints against people who had hampered artistic events and shows in Ramadan.

24 hours later the spokesman for the President, Adnene Manser, said on a private radio station: "The Presidency is against proceedings being taken against the artists and we are against legal proceedings where freedom is expression is concerned."

The Culture Minister met with Amor Ghedamsi, Secretary General of the Union of Tunisian Visual Artists, Nadia Jelassi and Samir Triki, head of the Tunis Beaux Arts, to discuss the following points: "The Culture Ministry's support for the freedom of creation and of artists, its trust in justice that can but guarantee the freedom of art and artists, and

that the legal system should support Nadia Jelassi and Mohamed Ben Slama, the Ministry's wish to work with the Union so that the Abdelleya gallery open its doors again for artists in all freedom."

Epilogue

Although in their official discourse the politicians seem to be competing to win back a public opinion that has sided with the creators, Nadia believes that action is lacking and that the underside of the case has still not been made clear: "Today the Culture and Human Rights Ministers seem – and I say seem – at least in certain public declarations but not yet at the level of facts to have retracted. Although their discourse is positive there has not yet been any concrete action. But today I have difficulty decoding the underside of this case that I see as a total fabrication. I find it hard to make out the deeper reasons why I was summoned by the examining magistrate and charged. I find it hard to understand why they subjected me to the anthropometry test. I remind you that I am still being investigated and I am a defendant."

A political case? Dark dealings at the top? Political opportunism? Or religious touchiness? Whatever, a single truth emerge from the above: in free Tunisia, artists and citizens are struggling hand in hand against an attack on something that we all hold sacred: freedom.

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ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

SVETLANA MINCHEVA *THE MISADVENTURES OF ROMANTIC CANNIBALS* *YO MAMA'S LAST SUPPER* *OUR LADY*

Symbols into soldiers: Art, censorship, and religion

Notwithstanding almost two and a half centuries of separation of church and state, religious groups in the US have never given up the desire to impose their values and beliefs on society at large. Controversies around art with religious content persist with some regularity, generally spurred by private religious groups or conservative – or just sensation-seeking – media. The groups protesting an artwork are invariably small, but their strident voice is amplified by media coverage and somehow becomes representative even though it may not be.

BY SVETLANA MINTCHEVA

IT IS IRONIC to begin an article on the censorship of art in the US when mass media, politicians, religious leaders and just about everyone else is trumpeting the nation's commitment to free speech. If we can just make them understand, the thinking goes, how important free speech, i.e. the freedom to say things that may offend somebody else's feelings or beliefs, is to a democracy – no, more, to humanity itself – the riots would stop. Well, no, they won't: And not because the Middle East, or a fraction of it, is constitutionally incapable of understanding free speech, but because those fomenting the riots have no use for it; on the contrary, they capitalize on outrage. (i) And so, in spite of current protestations, do their Western counterparts. Nurtured for generations on First Amendment principles, religion-based interest groups in the US conveniently abandon those principles when it suits them.

Symbols can be potent political soldiers that can mobilize constituencies and inspire them to go to battle for what are always, ultimately, political goals: the pursuit of social and cultural hegemony. And those who deal in religious symbols know that better than anyone. The tactics vary with local conditions, the strategy remains the same: attribute a simple and maximally offensive intention to an image, a film, play or artwork and use it to trigger long standing grievances, while also mobilizing and radicalizing your constituency by creating the impression that they are engaged in a war and that their most cherished values are under attack.

On an otherwise peaceful October afternoon in 2010, a woman armed with a crowbar entered the Loveland Museum/Gallery in Colorado, slammed and broke the Plexiglas case holding Enrique Chagoya's lithograph ***The***

Misadventures of Romantic Cannibals, then reached in and ripped out the work screaming: "How can you desecrate my Lord?" The act of violence against an inanimate object apparently testifies about the power of images to arouse strong emotions, which include the desire to suppress, even destroy them, at any cost. But it may, in fact, tell us a lot more about politics, about how images can be exploited.

The woman who wielded the crowbar didn't just happen upon the image, she was a trucker who drove all the way from Montana incensed by sensationalizing media reports about a work that desecrated a religious symbol; the first time she encountered the work it was with the intention to destroy it. It is doubtful she even looked at the work once she identified it.

The Misadventures had been the subject of local and national controversy for a few weeks before the attack, because, among multiple other images from popular culture, it collaged an image of the head of Jesus Christ with the body of a woman engaged in a sexual act. The artist stated his intention as a criticism of the sexual abuse rampant in the Catholic Church. Whether you buy this interpretation or not, an image is not like a verbal statement in that its meaning is open for multiple interpretations. Those savvy enough to exploit this can mobilize their constituencies by interpreting the image as a deliberate attack on their values and beliefs: In this case they were successful enough to inspire the Montana trucker to violence.

One of the often-noted paradoxes of US censorship battles today is that, rather than suppressing a work, they give it more visibility. Indeed, not only did *The Misadventures* get exponentially more publicity because of the controversy and subsequent attack, but some of the best-known artwork in the last twenty years is work that has been the focus of censorship attempts. Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, and Robert Mapplethorpe's *X* P*ortfolio* have all successfully migrated from the specialized art niche to the much more widely read news press.

If to suppress an individual work were indeed the goal, censorship today miserably fails. But, if the goal is to assert power, mobilize the anger of key constituencies and force exhibiting institutions to second-guess themselves next time they are about to show a "controversial" work, then they are singularly successful.

Periods of iconoclasm, when images were destroyed on a massive scale in an effort to eradicate the dangerous symbolism they contain, recur through history and invariably accompany shifts in political and religious power. Political power battles find both expression and additional fuel in attacks on symbolic objects. Before the Taliban blew up the images of the Buddha in Bamiyan Valley in 2001, King Hezekiah purged the Temple of Jerusalem of idols and destroyed Moses' bronze serpent, early Christianity destroyed sculptures of the Roman gods, Protestant reformers attacked Catholic statues, Pueblo Indians burned and dismembered crucifixes in their war against Spanish colonizers, and the Soviet revolution destroyed churches. (Less than a century later images of Soviet leaders were themselves destroyed, proving that secular political idols can be just as hated – and potentially dangerous – as religious ones.)

The historical clash today is not so much between religions as between religion and secularism. Secular art today is as much part of the public sphere as religious art or political monuments, even more so. However, for the secular artist religious symbols are part of a shared cultural heritage and thus a language, a tool of communication. They can be used to say many things, including things that assault religious dogma. Within still living religious traditions, however, these same symbols have a fixed and vigilantly guarded meaning. An assault on these symbols – and be this assault no more than a non-traditional interpretation – is a threat to their dominance of religious values and beliefs.

The resurgence of religious fundamentalism around the world together with nationalist retrenchment in countries who view the incursion of Western neo-liberalism and secularism with hostility is inevitably bringing more and more clashes between secular art and religious dogma. These clashes occur in the West no less that in the East. But depending on how much political power religion wields in a specific place, as well as in how strong the rule of law is, they can result in deadly riots or in the suppression of art and punishment of curators, in physical attacks and threats or in the subtler pulling of the purse strings.

Religious groups in the US, notwithstanding almost two and a half centuries of separation of church and state, have never given up the desire to impose their values and beliefs on society at large. When direct pressure to suppress

what they disapprove of has failed, they have been forced to disguise it as something more palatable to a secular audience: as the need to uphold "decency" and the values of community. In the 19th century, due to a much more homogeneous mainstream culture, where an economic elite shared a set of values with an intellectual elite, religious values could still dominate disguised as universal values of "decency and morality"; in the late 20th century religious groups were finding themselves increasingly weaker and the values they espoused were no longer unquestioningly perceived as universal. Perceiving the loss of cultural and political hegemony in increasingly diverse and secular societies, religious groups needed to mobilize their constituencies and increase their influence. In the late 1980s a solution was found: target the arts!

The arts as a political weapon in the culture wars

The fight over what art public money should fund and what art public museums should exhibit became both common ground and organizing principle for a coalition between the religious right and fiscal conservatives. The former wanted to prevent any challenge to their dogma from entering the public sphere blessed by federal funds (and that included discussions of homosexuality, AIDS, sex, feminist rants, as well as criticism of the Church), the latter just didn't want federal funds to go to the arts (of all social programs they would consider "inessential" the arts were, perhaps, the most vulnerable). In a brilliant move, religious activists took hold of the rhetoric of taking offense and victimhood from feminism and identity politics and turned it to their own ends, fiscal conservatives just continued an established discourse of government waste. The result: the 1990s culture wars over public funding in the arts.

The work that was used to trigger right-wing activism was an image of a crucifix: Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ*, a provocatively titled but luminously beautiful photograph of a plastic crucifix in a golden fluid, declared to be the artist's urine. The photograph had been part of an exhibition that had travelled to ten cities without incident, and had closed by the end of January of 1989. Three months later the Rev. Donald E. Wildmon, a minister from Tupelo, Miss., founder of the American Family Association (formerly the National Federation for Decency), a conservative fundamentalist Christian advocacy organization, sent a letter to members of Congress and others singling out one photograph from the travelling exhibition, describing it as a "plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's urine" and claiming it represented "demeaning disrespect and desecration of Christ". A month later US Senator Alfonse D'Amato tore up the exhibition catalogue on the Senate floor and launched an attack on the federal arts funding agency, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

It was in the ensuing dramatic displays of congressional outrage over *Piss Christ* and, soon after, over the explicit homosexual images in photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's retrospective, that the main premise of the culture wars was formed: Restricting taxpayer money from supporting such "offensive" work was not censorship, because, after all, these artist were free to create the work on their own dime. It was, rather, a condition put on government sponsorship of the arts. The First Amendment in no way obliges government to provide funding for the arts and, if the NEA, which had supported both Andres Serrano and the Mapplethorpe retrospective, didn't bring its act together, it could easily be terminated.

The decade long struggle, enacted publicly in Congress and the media led, in 1995, to the termination of the NEA individual grants to artists program and, in 1998, to the upholding, by the US Supreme Court, of a clause requiring the NEA, when awarding grants, to take into consideration "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public."

In itself, the decency clause did not have much effect, but the relentless attacks of the culture wars left art institutions fearful of controversy and much more willing to censor themselves. The media success of attacks on art also further encouraged opportunistic politicians and religious leaders to seek popularity or expand their membership base by standing up for supposedly offended constituencies.

Thus, hoping to ride the momentum of the culture wars into a Senatorial seat, in 1997, then-New York Mayor Rudi Giuliani decided, as a Catholic himself, to take public offense at a mixed media work by British-Nigerian artist Chris Ofili to be displayed at the city-funded Brooklyn Museum of Art visiting exhibition, *Sensation*. But controversy can feed more than one politician's ambition: the Catholic League, an organization that exponentially grew its

membership while stirring up controversy over anything that could potentially be seen as offensive to Catholics, also immediately joined the fray.

There was no question of an individual encountering the work and responding with shock and offense: The controversy started before the show had even opened. A reporter for the New York tabloid, *The Daily News*, in the process of working on an article called *Brooklyn Gallery of Horror/ Gruesome Show Stirs Controversy*, described the work in the show to Giuliani's office and to Catholic League president Bill Donahue and asked for their response. [i] The response was immediate and outraged: strongly worded statements, press conferences asking the museum to remove the work from the show, mass protests against the exhibition – but also demonstrations in support of the museum – and, finally, a lawsuit.

In the process of sensationalizing it the work was entirely misrepresented as depicting dung "smeared" or "splattered" on the Virgin, when, in fact, there were three bejeweled clumps of what the artist said was elephant dung, placed at the foot of the work and one where the Virgin's breast would be. For the Nigerian/British Ofili, elephant dung reportedly had symbolic significance and was a recurring material in his work. When art is mobilized in the service of controversy, however, careful interpretation is counterproductive. That *The Holy Virgin* was one of the least provocative pieces in the show and its creator was himself a practicing Catholic did not slow down the production of outrage one little bit.

Guiliani failed in his attempt to suppress *The Holy Virgin Mary*, as well as in his attempt to evict the Museum from its city-owned space, but that did not stop him from grandstanding again a few years later when Renee Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, displayed again at the Brooklyn Museum, featured the artist, nude, in the position of Christ in the center of her photographic re-creation of the Last Supper. In response, and aware this time that he cannot force the Museum to remove the piece, Giuliani announced the formation of a "decency commission" to supervise programming at all city funded museums. The initiative was forgotten when the World Trade Center was hit on 9/11/2001 and the Mayor found a worthier crusade.

Controversies around art with religious content persist with some regularity, generally spurred by private religious groups or conservative – or just sensation-seeking – media. The groups protesting an artwork are invariably small, but their strident voice is amplified by media coverage and somehow becomes representative even though it may not be. At a distance the protesters are all we see: the vast majority who don't protest are not "newsworthy". Even though social studies[ii] say that the majority of the US population takes moderate positions on art controversies, the rhetoric of a culture war creates the impression of a nation deeply divided, where protesting religious groups loom larger than they really are. This rhetoric focuses on offended feelings and the misuse of tax dollars, but controversies always reveal a wealth of underlying tensions that far exceed the neat categories of a simple culture war. It is these long-standing tensions that account for the intensity of passion, which would seem excessive if it were just in reaction to a piece of artwork safely ensconced in a museum gallery.

The 2001 debate over Alma Lopez' *Our Lady*, a digital photo-collage of a defiant Virgin of Guadelupe, naked but for the flowers in which she was covered, exhibited at the Santa Fe Museum of International Folk Art, became a proxy for discussing issues of insider Latinos and outsider Anglos, and a flashpoint of an internal conflict between New Mexico traditional Latinos and less-traditionally bound ones like the artist, a gay woman using the symbols of Mexican Catholicism in ways designed to subvert a male patriarchal tradition.

The Santa Fe Museum held a town hall meeting to let the debate air itself – it even had to change the venue to accommodate the busloads of organized Catholics – but kept the work on display, albeit for a shortened duration. However, one of the most recent high-profile censorship incidents involving a museum is also, unfortunately, one in which the institution – in this case the venerable Smithsonian – took a particularly contemptible course.

A month into the 2010 *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* exhibition the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery a right wing media group published an inflammatory article attacking some of the works in the show, the Catholic League immediately declared offense and, soon after, two of the leading Republicans in Congress, Reps. John Bohner and Eric Cantor, threatened the Secretary of the Smithsonian with funding cuts if a

1987 video included in the show, *Fire in My Belly* by David Wojnarowicz, were not removed. Smithsonian Secretary Clough, in an overly hasty move, had the piece taken down within hours.

The stated reason for requesting the removal of the work was that the representation, in the video, of a crucifix with ants crawling on it was an outright insult to Catholics. This was not the case: Wojnarowicz may have hated the Catholic establishment, but, raised a Catholic himself, he identified with the suffering Christ. Yet, as appears to be the rule, interpreting the meaning of the piece was the last thing on the mind of its attackers. Besides, the true, yet unspoken, religious offense offered by the show was the very fact that the venerable institution like the Smithsonian had dared devote an exhibition to art by and about homosexuals, when the Catholic Church condemns homosexuality and when the country is locked in a political conflict over the legalization of gay marriage.

The focus on the crucifix and denial of the real source of offense is indicative of a cultural shift since the early 1990's culture wars, when federal arts funding was challenged by right-wing republicans in Congress specifically objecting to representations of homosexuality in some of the art funded by the NEA. Twenty years of gay and AIDS activism, attacks on homosexuality are much more careful (with some exceptions). Yet the discourse of believers taking offense at the abuse of their sacred symbols is rampant.

The chorus of voices trumpeting freedom of speech in the face of protest riots in the Middle East, which was mentioned at the start of this essay, is not entirely univocal: there are quite a few voices that emphasize the fact that, even in the US, free speech is not an absolute and that speech that is so flagrantly offensive as to cause riots should also be regulated.

The right to offend

In the abstract, free speech is an article of faith in the United States, yet many would hesitate if asked whether free speech includes "the right to offend." A disturbing 43 per cent of Americans do not think people should be allowed to say things in public that *might* be offensive to religious groups, according to a 2009 survey conducted by the First Amendment Center. The fact that something is offensive – or could be offensive to some group – has become a sufficient stand-alone moral (if not legal) justification for censorship.

Paradoxically, in the United States, where blasphemy laws go against the constitution, it is not the religious right, but the socially progressive left that pioneered the latest imperative not to offend. Concerned about equality and creating an even playing field in a country haunted by a history of slavery, oppression of women as well as of ethnic and sexual minorities, the left introduced political correctness as an acute awareness of the historically enshrined prejudices underlying social institutions. Political correctness brought about a wave of linguistic self-policing, one of the goals of which was to avoid offending various minorities. Even as the political right made fun of PC, the exacerbated sensitivity to offense it legitimized was a boon to religious groups who quickly appropriated the discourse of victimization.

The left objects to offensive material, which demeans women with sexist representations or perpetuates racist stereotypes by permitting the use of racist terms. The religious right is ever vigilant for anything they perceive as denigrating religious symbols. Each side claims that an important right is threatened by unrestricted offensive speech: Disrespect for women or ethnic and racial minorities is interpreted as an assault on their rights to equal protection under the law, while disrespect for religious symbols is interpreted as an infringement on religious liberty. So a balancing test is called for, where some constitutional rights (like freedom of speech) need to be curtailed in favor of other constitutional rights.

But is there really a conflict between these rights? Regulating speech in the service of equality is not only patronizing of the minority groups that are supposedly protected, it frequently affects precisely the speech of these groups: well meaning advocates for the prohibition of pornography should remember, for instance, that bans on sexually explicit material have disproportionately affected information about women's sexuality. Banning the freedom to offend religion may be the end of authentic religious liberty, as the Supreme Court insisted in *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, a 1940 landmark case defining free exercise of religion. In that case, Jesse Cantwell, a Jehovah's Witness, played a record with an anti-Catholic message in a Catholic neighborhood. He was arrested for "disturbing

the peace" and "incitement to riot," but the Court upheld Cantwell's right to proclaim his message, noting that "the tenets of one man may seem the rankest error to his neighbor." Indeed, the tenets of one religion often conflict with that of another: proclaiming them passionately may well offend, but it is also part and parcel of the right to practice one's religion freely.

It is impossible to do justice here to either the arguments or counterarguments for balancing rights. Suffice it to say that the discussion is ongoing that the camp of those who take exception to offensive speech is growing. While First Amendment law still makes no exception for offensive speech, the force of public opinion, hate speech codes in academia, and often-misunderstood harassment laws at the workplace, all encourage self-censorship. While regulating one's own speech so as not to offend others may be a good thing, the rhetoric of offense has also been used as justification to threaten institutions with physical violence or with loss of funding, thus triggering a kind of self-censorship that endangers the cultural life of the country.

Self-censorship: the rising tide of fear

In 1998, the Manhattan Theater Club – after briefly announcing a cancellation – decided to proceed with its production of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (a retelling of the Jesus story, with Jesus as a gay man living in 1950s Corpus Christi, TX) in spite of threats of violence and bomb threats. Security was tight and the protests remained peaceful. A mere three years later, in October 2001, warnings of possible protest and violent action by members of the Watts community were enough to cause the cancellation of Alex Donis' show *WAR* scheduled to for the Watts Towers Art Center. The show consisted of a series of paintings depicting pairs of LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) officers and gang members in same-sex dancing poses.

Had the attacks of 9/11 suddenly made violence more of a reality for Americans or were traumatic memories of the 1965 Watts riots still powerful? Perhaps both, but after 9/11 fear of violence certainly acquired a reality it didn't heretofore have. The explosion of riots triggered by the Danish Mohammed cartoons in 2005 exacerbated this fear. Most US press refused to re-print the cartoons in marked contrast to their previous publication of images of other controversial artwork.

In 2009 Yale University outraged the academic and free speech communities by deciding to strip all images of Mohammed from *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, by Jytte Klausen, a scholarly review of the events surrounding the cartoon controversy. To justify the decision, University officials cited concerns that the book might stimulate violence "somewhere in the world," even though no actual threats had been received. In a Statement of Principle and Call to Action, national organizations like the American Association of University Professors and the National Coalition Against Censorship warned against the spread of pre-emptive self-censorship as a result of fear of violence:

> "... [O]ur long-standing commitment to the free exchange of ideas is in peril of falling victim to a spreading fear of violence. Not only have exhibitions been closed and performances canceled in response to real threats, but the mere possibility that someone, somewhere, might respond with violence has been advanced to justify suppressing words and images... The possibility of giving offense and provoking violence has entered the imagination of academic institutions, curators, publishers and the public at large, generating more and more incidents of preemptive self-censorship."

Yale was responding – or perhaps over-reacting – to a radically new world situation, where communications are instantaneous, but where cultural and political differences are still enormous. How do we know whether a book from an academic press may not be used to stimulate violence in some far away country with no free speech tradition and plenty of sectarian violence? And if we cannot know, should we self-censor?

In the meantime, religious groups were capitalizing on the climate of fear: In 2007, the private Manhattan gallery where Cosimo Cavallaro's chocolate life-size sculpture of Jesus, *My Sweet Lord* was to be exhibited in 2007 cancelled the show because it reportedly received death threats following a radio broadcast where Bill Donohue, President of the Catholic League, attacked the piece as "one of the worst assaults on Christian sensibilities ever."

The tactic of threatening violence is not the sole province of religious extremists. In 2008 the San Francisco Art Institute cancelled ***Don't Trust Me***, an exhibition by Algerian-born French artist Adel Abdessemed, consisting of video footage of animals being killed by a single blow from a sledgehammer, in response to threats of violence directed at staff members and their families by animal-rights activists.

When it happens in response to threats of violence, self-censorship remains highly visible, not so, however, when it materializes fears of lost funding. And with the worsening financial health of the country, such fears are well founded. The worst legacy of the culture wars of the 1990s is that it made arts funding into a politically vulnerable target.

While the First Amendment bars enraged public officials like former New York Mayor Giuliani from punishing a museum because of the content of its programming, there is nothing to stop legislators from slashing funds for the arts ostensibly because, at a time when public funds are limited, something needs to go. It was enough, in 2010, for a couple of leading Republicans in Congress to hint that the Smithsonian may face funding cuts if one of the works were not removed from a show at one of its member museums, for Smithsonian Secretary Clough to have the piece taken down within hours. Decisions to censor a show or even entirely cut it from a museum's programming are, most frequently, made earlier on in the process and remain hidden from the public; hence, the bulk of institutional self-censorship is invisible.

Even without a direct threat to their funding, art institutions are afraid of challenging legislatures. In 2006, for instance, The Ann Arbor Film Festival, the oldest experimental film festival in the country, had its state-funding cut because some legislators[iii] claimed it had violated the Michigan's prohibition on the use of public funds to support work that includes depictions of flag desecration, sex acts, or human waste on religious symbols. The prohibition was clearly unconstitutional. However, no art institution in the state was willing to challenge it for fear funding for arts and libraries, already under attack in Michigan, would be entirely terminated. Eventually, the ACLU filed suit on behalf of the Festival (which had already decided to forego state funding) and the state voluntarily dropped the funding restrictions.

Fear of lost funding on an institutional level is not limited to publicly funded institutions. Arguably it is even more of an issue in private institutions where donors may withdraw support at will and where no First Amendment imperatives prohibit them from discriminating against viewpoints they do not like. In 2008, for instance, the Spertus Museum in Chicago, a privately supported Jewish institution, was pressured to close down a show on maps and mapping when museum funders exercised their veto insisting the show was anti-Israel.

Institutional fears are replicated on the personal level: curators working on temporary contracts and untenured art professors curating student art shows regularly run into censorship, but blowing the whistle on such censorship and standing up for the artists involved can cost them their jobs. In 2011, the position of Elizabeth Dunbar, associate director and the only full-time curator of Arthouse in Austin, TX was terminated. Just before being fired Dunbar had taken the artists' side in two controversies involving the museum, one of which entailed the turning off of a video installation during prime viewing hours over concerns that it may be inappropriate for teens. The artist had never been consulted. After outcry, the installation was restored to view, but a guard was placed in front of it to prevent young people from entering. When cutting Dunbar's position, the institution cited budged cuts, though a 6.6 million renovation had just expanded its exhibition space threefold. One of the members of the institution's board resigned in protest.

What is trickiest about self-censorship is that the bulk of it remains unseen – but occasionally we see glimpses and the picture is alarming.

Coda

Attempts to regulate what the public sees are frequently inspired by religious beliefs. And controlling the use of religious symbols forms a rather small proportion of the material religious groups seek to regulate. The bulk of work generating controversy in the US today features nudes, gay and lesbian material and sexually explicit content. One

can easily trace the censorship of such work to the imperatives of certain monotheisms. Religion, after all, is not just about a particular story of creators and messiahs; it is also about regulating how life is lived.

Since the late 1980s, a rhetoric of offense focusing on the use of religious symbols, but by far not limited to them, has been harnessed to create larger-than-life media scandals and radicalize and mobilize religious constituencies. This perpetuates the impression of a sharply polarized country and, perhaps, even helps to bring about such a country. Worst of all, it becomes a contributing factor in the wave of fear that makes self-censorship the order of the day.

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Footnotes

[1] The mechanisms of the Middle Eastern protests over the *Innocence of Muslims* have been widely analyzed. Suffice it to note here that it was an Egyptian Salafist TV host, Sheikh Khaled Abdullah, who brought the video to the Egyptian audience on September 8 on the satellite-TV station al-Nas. (Not that the video's producers would have minded such exposure, they were just incapable of getting it.) The broadcast triggered Salafist-led protests that may have been anti-US and anti-Western on their face, but whose less obvious goal was to draw away supporters from the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's de facto ruling party.

[2] Steven C. Dubin, *How "Sensation" Became a Scandal,* Art in America, Jan 2000, 88, 1, p.53

[3] Princeton University's Center for Arts and Cultural Policy studies has produced some key research on the subject as part of their project Conflicts Over Art, Cultural Expression and Social Values in American Society, led by Paul DiMaggio. www.princeton.edu/~artspol/proj6.html

[4] Exploring the reasons Michigan legislators suddenly became interested in an experimental film festival reveals one more story of art being used as a political weapon. An essay written by a representative of the Mackinac Center, a libertarian organization, argued that taxpayers' dollars should not go to the arts. To build its argument, the essay named several films from the Ann Arbor Film Festival as exemplifying the type of content (implicitly scandalous) that state arts funding was supporting. It was after that essay circulated among state legislators that funding for the Ann Arbor Film Festival was threatened.

ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

EXCERPT OF '108 GODS' *SUPER KALI* *UPSIDE DOWN MOUNTAIN* *SUPER NATRAJ*

The rise and 'ban' of the collateral

How a young Nepali painters' works raised questions on artistic freedom in Kathmandu, the City of Temples.

BY KANCHAN G. BURATHOKI

ON TUESDAY AFTERNOON, 11 September 2012, when the exhibition 'The Rise of the Collateral' had only nine days left to conclude, after having been at display at Siddhartha Art Gallery in Kathmandu since 22 August, a group of men from the World Hindu Federation Nepal Chapter stormed into the gallery and threatened the artist with life for insulting Hindu gods and goddesses in his paintings.

They asked the artist, 27-year-old Manish Harijan if he knew what had happened to Late M. F. Husain in India for making profane paintings of Hindu deities. Husain had lived a life of self exile in the United Kingdom until his death last year. Harijan too, could face similar consequences, they declared.

Instead of providing security for the artist and the gallery, a group of policemen arrived at the gallery the same evening to seize Harijan's paintings and to arrest him. They too, were of the opinion that his paintings were blasphemous. Regardless of their personal judgments, neither did they have the right to take Harijan's works nor did they have proper papers to arrest him.

An official from the District Administration Office (DAO) of Kathmandu later arrived at the gallery and prepared documents to seal the space. No clarifications were made to the artist or to the gallery's Director Sangeeta Thapa, before they locked up Siddhartha Art Gallery with 11 paintings by Harijan inside it. The two were simply asked to report to the DAO the following morning at 10 am.

As the news of the incident spread in local and international media, it rippled a series of opinions and articles condemning the World Hindu Federation Nepal Chapter as well as raising concerns on freedom of expression in Nepal. Local artists came together to show their solidarity and support, while mixed reactions from people, for and against the artist, flooded online comment boxes and newspapers.

By the end of the week, several rumors were floating in the news, some of which had no reason or rhyme. Things had relatively simmered down. A month has passed by and the events that followed the incident in Nepal's contemporary art scene, since then, have taken several twists and turns – the ending of which is as unexpected as the attack on the artist and his artworks, themselves.

"At first, I thought it was a bit funny and I was trying to explain my works to the men from World Hindu Federation," narrated Harijan, three weeks after the incident. "But when they said that they would burn my paintings and mentioned M F Husain, I realized that they were serious. That's when I got scared and decided to back off."

The group of men was led by executive board member of WHF and former Colonel of Nepal Army, Hem Bahadur Karki. It was around mid-afternoon when they arrived. At that time, Harijan was discussing his works with fellow Nepali artist, Jupiter Pradhan. "Had I been alone in the gallery, they would have beaten me up," said Harijan, describing the then tense atmosphere and still feeling uneasy about it. It was later known, through the Gallery's staff, that the men had been visiting the Gallery and taking pictures of the paintings since the past few days.

Although security was eventually arranged for him, Harijan stayed at different places for two weeks before moving back to his rented space, where he lives by himself. He also switched off his cell phone for a week and avoided all media attention.

The youngest of eight siblings, Harijan comes from a village in the western part of Nepal. He moved to Kathmandu in 2005 and enrolled at the Lalit Kala Campus (Fine Arts Campus) in the intermediate level. After two years, he joined Kathmandu University Center for Arts & Design (KUarts) from where he graduated with a Bachelors of Fine Arts degree in 2011. Currently, he works as an art teacher at Kendriya Vidyalaya, a school run by the Embassy of India in Kathmandu. Harijan's sisters are in the village and his brothers, who are working in the Gulf, are all unaware of the incident.

A religious attack?

The Rise of the Collateral is a series of works made as part of the residency he was awarded by Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre (KCAC) in September 2011. The centre has been providing residency grants to local and visiting artists since 2009 and Director Thapa is a co-founder of KCAC.

Harijan received Nepalese Rupees 30,000 (approximately 365 US dollars) for the eight-month long program, unlike accusations made by WHF that Harijan was a 'Dalit Christian' who had been paid by Department for International Department (DFID) of the UK government to make sacrilegious paintings.

'Harijan' as a caste belongs to the Dalit group in Nepal, who were traditionally considered untouchables. Assumptions were, therefore, also made that his paintings expressed his suppressed anger towards the Hindu caste system.

While one local writer turned the incident into a caste-based issue, Harijan rebuked, “I grew up in a very broadminded community, where I never experienced any discrimination. I identify foremost as an artist and that’s how I would like to remain.”

More importantly, Harijan also identifies as a Hindu and this plays a crucial role in the content of his works.

“I draw inspirations from my own culture and religion,” Harijan stated. “These paintings collectively comment and question the influences of the West on our culture. It is a combination and therefore, collateral of the East and the West.”

When the DAO locked the gallery on 11 September, it was still unknown what WHF had exactly found offensive in Harijan’s works. Later it was revealed that a complaint against Harijan, Siddhartha Art Gallery and KCAC had been officially filed at the DAO on 7 September by a woman named Sindhu Pathak, a WHF member. Pathak had filed a request to the DAO to close the exhibition; to seize the offensive paintings; to investigate the artist, the gallery and KCAC; and to punish them as per the law.

The two page complaint outlines a total of six paintings as offensive – ‘Super Natraj’, ‘Super Kali’, ‘God creates us, god loves us’, ‘Upside down mountain’, ‘Real Buddha’, ‘108 Gods’ and ‘Captain America playing with Bhairab.’

Among the most talked about work is ***Super Kali***. The painting depicts a female figure in black with multiple hands and snakes for hair. She wears a superwoman costume and shows a middle finger. Pathak’s complain stated that ***Super Kali*** was a vulgar work which insulted all women and Goddess Kali, especially because of the middle finger which is a ‘form of the male sexual organ’.

“It was never my intention to insult or disrespect anyone through my paintings. People have misinterpreted my paintings and once they understand the actual meaning, they will not find it offensive, shocking or extreme,” reiterated Harijan.

“We live in a patriarchal society where women face various discriminations,” explained Harijan in a statement of his artworks submitted to the DAO. “The painting is about the rise of feminine energy against such discriminations. It brings together our traditional symbol of feminine power, Goddess Kali, with the Western world’s symbol of super natural power.”

Super Kali represents an urban Nepali woman in the mixed forms of Goddess Kali (East) and Superwoman (West). It is not Goddess Kali being represented as a Super Woman or vice versa, as has been the understanding.

Hundreds of Hindu temples and shrines, big and small, in Kathmandu have explicit sculptures and paintings of gods and goddesses in sexual union. They've been a part of our religion and culture since centuries. "If art is going to be banned then what about our traditional religious works? How do you define vulgar? Where and how can you draw a line?" questioned artist Ashmina Ranjit, at one of the gatherings campaigning for the freedom of expression.

In response to the call for ban of Harijan's painting, a Facebook group titled 'Let's Censor ART' was created by Nepali artists. People posted images of traditional sculptures and paintings that were 'censored' by digitally adding clothes to them.

Similarly, *Super Natraj* shows an ordinary man, emulating the posture of Natraj – Lord Shiva in the form of a cosmic dancer – in Superman's costume. Once again, the painting is of a man with traditional Hindu beliefs but who is also drawn towards a foreign culture. The man holds a lotus in one hand, and a gun in the other. "Each person has two sides, a violent one and a peaceful one," Harijan put in.

Talking about super heroes, the artist revealed, "I come from a poor family and I couldn't afford to buy comics as a child but knew about super heroes in Indian comic books." It was only in Kathmandu that he learnt more about super heroes. In *108 Gods* Harijan has painted 108 super heroes, the references for which was taken from DC and Marvel

comic websites. “I have also done a simulation of Jirapat Tatsanasomboon’s painting in *Captain America playing with Bhairab,”* he added. Tatsanasomboon, a Thai artist, is also known for his superhero paintings.

Another major painting in question was *Upside down mountain*. A muscular man is flying across the sky, with an upside down mountain in one hand and a bottle in the other. The narrative is derived from the Hindu epic of Ramayana in which Hanuman, a revered deity, carries an entire mountain when he can’t find the particular herb he is asked to bring.

“The mountain in my painting is upside down, barren and dry because of global warming,” said Harijan and continued, “The herb ‘Sanjivani’ is inside the bottle but many overlooked this and thought that the man was carrying a bottle of alcohol. The herb is a metaphor for *amrit* (nectar of immortality) that could save the world.”

‘Jeopardize harmonious relations’

Article 12 (3, a) of Nepal’s Interim Constitution guarantees every citizen the ‘freedom of opinion and expression’. However, it also states that:

> ‘…nothing in sub-clause (a) shall be deemed to prevent the making of laws to impose reasonable restrictions on any act which may undermine the sovereignty and integrity of Nepal, or which may jeopardize the harmonious relations subsisting among the peoples of various castes, tribes, religion or communities…’

“As much as I am allowed to express my thoughts, people are also allowed to disagree and debate. But there shouldn’t be censorship,” said Harijan. “There would be no meaning if a person can’t express himself or herself. God, the form of gods, the philosophy of religion and even super heroes – were all created by man. Why censor something that man himself created?”

“Experimentation is important for new discourses in art and in my works, I am trying to connect my culture and religion to the contemporary context,” Harijan stated and further opinioned, “The misinterpretation of my works goes to show how much of a narrow-minded society we live in.”

Regardless of wherever in the world he maybe, Harijan said that he would continue to paint similar subjects and motifs because his culture and religion will always influence and inspire his art. “Who knows, in the future, they may have an even stronger presence in my work?” he mused.

Harijan is not the first person to make references to gods and goddesses or to question Hinduism in contemporary Nepali art. Artist Asha Dangol has painted several time deities holding guns, grenades and sickles in their multiple hands. In 2009, Ragini Upadhyay Grela painted a goddess with computer wires for hair and a light bulb for her third eye as she sat atop a computer monitor instead of a lotus flower. Ashmina Ranjit has openly derided, through her performances, the discriminations Hindu women face during menstruation.

Neither is Superman a new idea. Only last year itself, Laxman Karmacharya exhibited a painting that showed deity Bhairav flying across the cityscape in a superman costume. The work was titled ‘S. Bhairavman’.

There has never been such a severe attack on art and artist in Nepal due to religious issues. “Previously, artist Chandra Man Maskey had been imprisoned for ridiculing the then Rana rulers. But since then, no artist or art institution in Nepal has ever been incarcerated or investigated by the state,” informed Gallery Director Thapa.

Nonetheless, one can’t say that we haven’t had any opposition due to religious concerns. In 2010, French artist Karl Knapp’s monumental Buddha was banned from being exhibited at the Patan Durbar Square by locals of the area. Knapp’s Buddha was constructed out of recycled plastic bags collected from garbage dumps. It was a commentary on the growing pollution of the city. Locals, however, took it as an insult to Lord Buddha and their faith. Even so, the work was still exhibited at a different location and no damage was done.

A political attack?

More than the issue of religion and hurting people’s sentiments, Thapa feels that her family’s political connection maybe the foremost reason of WHF’s attack on Harijan and her Gallery.

Thapa is the daughter-in-law of former Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa and her father too has been a Congress member for many years. The former PM had recently announced that their party would not accept reinstating Nepal, which became a secular Federal Democratic Republic in 2008, as a Hindu Kingdom.

“I feel that the WHF found something to further their political agenda in order to emerge as a defender of old values and faith in the changed political scenario of Nepal,” she expressed and continued, “The work happened to be in my gallery and it gave them an opportunity to politically embarrass my father and father-in-law. Lastly, Manish also happened to be a Harijan which dragged in the issue of caste.”

Peaceful protest

On the evening of September 12, artists and supporters gathered at the gallery to discuss what the incident could mean to Nepali art. Despite the tension, many agreed that it was an achievement for contemporary Nepali arts and that it should take be as an opportunity to fight for the freedom of expression.

The following morning, September 13, a peaceful protest was staged in front of the DAO, while Harijan and Thapa were in a meeting with the Chief District Officer, Chudamani Sharma.

“Unlike what we had expected, no one from WHF was present at the meeting, but in a way I think that worked to our advantage and we diffused a situation that could have been worse,” said Thapa. It was late afternoon when the two came out of the DAO’s office, announcing that the Gallery would be reopened and none of Manish’s works would be seized. It was a moment of victory for all artists.

Unfortunately, it only lasted momentarily.

Gallery closure and artist silenced

Among the five agreements made between DAO and Harijan and Thapa, are points that outline that ‘the debated paintings will not be shown in public again’ and ‘any works offending any religion will not be made or sold’ by the artist and the Gallery.

Artists, who were supporting and campaigning for the artist, the Gallery and for the freedom of expression, feel that signing the agreement was a big blow to the artist community and to contemporary Nepali arts. In a way, they feel betrayed by both Harijan and Thapa.

"Given the time and situation, I feel that I did the right thing because not signing it could have worsened the debate – it would have become political, religious as well as ethnical," defended Thapa. "And we have all seen the kind of violence such issues have spurred in our neighboring countries India and Bangladesh. I think that artists failed to understand the larger political consequences."

At the moment, Nepal has a Film Censor Board, there are no such other censorship boards for fields of art, literature or music. The last thing artists want is a censorship board for the arts. Artists believe that signing the document gives reasons to WHF and other groups to censor art, in the future. It appears as if the art community has given in and lost the debate.

Criticisms are now being thrown at both Harijan and Thapa as well as to the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), which is the government body for fine arts in Nepal. NAFA, to their own embarrassment, stayed quiet the whole time. Harijan is now staying away from the conversation altogether, while Thapa has decided to completely shut down the gallery after March 2013.

"If the artists are saying such things then why should I run the gallery?" she reasoned. This decision comes as major throwback to artist and as sad news to contemporary Nepali arts. Siddhartha Art Gallery was opened by Thapa in 1987. It is one of the oldest running galleries of Nepal and has contributed immensely to the arts.

Amidst the bewilderment, a group of artists are still going forward with their campaign for freedom of expression. "We have been already been given the freedom of expression as a part of our basic human rights and we should be able to freely exercise the right," said artist Ranjit. "We are going to work for the awareness of our rights by holding lectures, discussions and workshops. We also need to learn how to approach such situations in the future."

"This incident had the potential to strengthen the arts in Nepal but it has ended on a bitter note," shared Sujan Chitrakar, who was also one of the forerunners in campaign for Harijan and the Gallery. "Shutting down the gallery just like that, after 25 years, is very childish."

Chitrakar is also the Academic Program Coordinator at KUarts, where Harijan was his student.

"In the future, an artist should only create controversial works if he/she has the conviction to articulate what it is about," he stated in a serious tone. "That person should be able to take responsibility of the work or should not make such works at all."

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ALL THAT IS **BANNED** IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

SI HAN

FILM FESTIVAL POSTER

'WANT ART FREEDOM'

'CHINA/AVANT-GARDE'

The invisible red line
– maneuvering Chinese art censorship

Art can both reflect and shape reality. It is the fear of this power to amplify and produce meaning which inspires censorship. In their quest for freedom of expression, Chinese artists have had to face a variety of censorship strategies. Some are rooted in politics, while others hold to conservative moral and aesthetic codes. This paper refers to specific art works, artists and exhibitions, discussing how the current threshold of acceptability is being challenged by Chinese artists.

BY SI HAN

ON 27 SEPTEMBER 1979, a group of young artists hung up their works on the fences of a park right outside the National Art Gallery in Beijing. The styles of the paintings and sculptures were varied, mostly influenced by the Western modernism – which was artistically forbidden and political incorrect during most of the time since the new China was established thirty years ago. None of the participants were accepted as an artist at that time; they were all amateurs who enjoyed creating art but did not belong to the official system – government supported artists with salaries and art institutions behind them, the ones who were setting the norms of aesthetic codes and standards of art.

Two days later, the exhibition, scheduled for a whole week, was forced to close down. The artists and their supporters, however, refused to accept their fate and organized a demonstration. From the few black and white photographs which survived till today, we can see one documenting the sculptor Wang Keping holding a placard with five characters written in ink: *Want art freedom* (thestarsart.com).
This is the first time in the modern history of Chinese art that the quest of freedom of art was clearly stated and shouted out aloud.

The demonstration led to fruitful results, due to the organisers' skilful negotiation with the government. During the following three years, this group of artists were allowed to exhibit their works a few times within the walls of China's most important official art institution, until the group was disbanded and several of the key members went abroad, among others Ai Weiwei, who later became famous as an artist and human rights fighter.

This group of artists were called "Stars Group". Several of the key members were also involved in the Democracy Wall movement around that time. Hence, the first confrontation between Chinese artists and the state since the beginning of the People's Republic obtained a political colour and dimension. The name of this group, "Stars", can be

seen a metaphor. When the Sun goes down, that's when we all turn to the stars. The Sun refers to Mao who had died three years earlier. The Stars are the artists who started the struggle for their individual rights to hear, to see, and to speak – as Wang Kepings "Silence" tries to express (shigebao.com).

Demonstration is one way to fight against censorship of art. The Stars exhibition is a brave, however a rare example. At that time, no one could foresee what the Chinese art scene would become in the following three decades.

Three restrictions of art: political, moral and aesthetic codes

In February 1989, ten years after the Stars Exhibition, another controversial and groundbreaking show titled "China/Avant-Garde" took place in the National Art Gallery in Beijing (artasiapacific.com). It basically covered the whole Chinese modern art movement during the 1980s across the whole country, with performance, installation, political pop art, and experimental wash and ink. Many of the works were provocative and dramatically different from the traditional aesthetics of social realism, propaganda art or traditional ink and wash painting.

However, this exhibition, scheduled for two weeks, was also short-lived and closed on the same day it was opened. The direct reason was a piece of performance art by Xiao Lu, when she with a handgun shot at her own work called "Dialogue".

It took a year for the committee led by the curator Gao Minglu before they reached an agreement on the exhibition with the gallery and the official culture institutions behind it. As revealed in an internal document many years later, the show was allowed under the following three conditions:

1. It is not allowed to exhibit works being against the Party and the Four Cardinal Principles.
2. It is not allowed to exhibit pornographic or obscene works.
3. Performance Art is not allowed.

Gao was not satisfied with these restrictions, especially the third one on performance art. But he compromised and agreed to exhibit performance art represented by still photos. Not all artists obeyed, such as Xiao Lu, one of the 186 artists in the show.

What I am most interested in, for the purpose of this article, is the three conditions raised in the agreement. They actually illustrate three major fields of difficulties which Chinese artists have had to face during the last thirty years, and provide a key to the understanding of the variety of art censorship strategies in China:

- Political censorship of art
- Moral censorship of art
- Aesthetic censorship of art

Political censorship of art

The censorship of political content of art is perhaps what we pay most attention to in the West. The latest example is Ai Weiwei. Even though the initial charge against him is economic crime, it is not hard to guess that it was Ai's political statements which irritated the government, partly through his works. Two of his photographs were widely circulated in 2011 via the internet. *Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle* has a title in Chinese which also phonetically sounds similar to "F*** your mother, the Party Central Committee", a sentence which in writing would be completely different – this kind of play on words can only be done and understood in Chinese. *One Tiger with Eight Breasts* (artinfo.com) shows the artist with four women, all of them naked. One plus eight is nine, the netizens interpreted it as the nine members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of CCP. Gao Brothers sculpture of Mao kneeling on the ground with a gesture of confession is another example.

To criticize the party and its leading members, their ideology, and the legal ground for their reign seems to be a clear red line that Ai Weiwei and Gao Brothers have crossed, and thus their works got banned. However, no one from

the government has ever been able to give them a clear explanation why such art are improper, since any such explanation can be countered by the freedom of speech stated in the constitution. Political censorship is in this respect a bit similar to torture or terrorism: the rules of the game are never made clear to those who suffer.

Moral censorship of art

The most frequent censorship of art is rooted in the moral sphere. The naked body, sex, and sexuality are sensitive subjects.

The naked body is a relatively new artistic phenomenon in China. Live model sketch classes began at art academies when the last imperial dynasty had ended, in 1912, but this occurred with great care and amidst much controversy. During the greater part of the Mao era, nudity was forbidden in painting and photography. It was considered too personal, too Western and too pornographic. In the past few decades, Chinese artists have consciously used their nudity to confront taboos of human desires. Nudity does attract the Chinese eyes. Ai Weiwei's ***One Tiger with Eight Breasts*** was once investigated for pornography. Though it was obvious just an excuse, the direct charge holds to the conservative moral codes.

Sex seems to be a topic which Chinese prefer not to talk about, despite the Confucian statement: "sex and food, these are where the greatest human desires exist." In literature, such as the Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan's novels, descriptions of sex are nowadays well-accepted. But in art, depiction of sex can be easily accused of being pornographic. Exhibiting, printing or spreading such kind of works can be risky.

The young photographer Ren Hang is one of the daring artists, whose works of naked body and sex acts reminds us of those of Wolfgang Tillmans. No one in Beijing dared to print Ren's photos.

Ren Hang - 2008

The fear was that it would be considered as "spreading pornographic material", a criminal offense in China. He publishes his photos on the website, but whenever he starts a new site it is quite quickly shut down. But once one has been shut down, he immediately starts a new one; it is a game of cat and mouse. The internet plays a decisive part in allowing artists to reach out and find their audience, inside China and beyond.

Sexuality has become a subject which many younger artists have started to touch upon during the last fifteen years. It stems from two important changes in legislation: the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997 and its removal from the list of mental illnesses in 2001. Among the 27 artists I was able to present in the exhibition Secret

Love focusing on LGBT-related art, the answers vary when they were asked if such an exhibition would be possible to show in China. Some of them are sure that it would cause trouble, while others see no problem at all. The suggestion was: just do it. Well, if you never try, you will never know. Beside the methods mentioned previously: ***demonstration***, ***negotiation***, and ***playing game of cat and mouse***, ***just do it*** seems to be yet another strategy to manoeuvring Chinese art censorship and cross any imagined or real red line.

Aesthetic censorship of art

Aesthetic censorship of art is a field which is often being overlooked. The convention of art itself has also been used as a censorship strategy and may limit the freedom of expression in art.

Before the late 1970s, the dominant aesthetic standard was socialist realism. Impressionism, for example, was seen as bourgeois and not accepted. Artists were not free to choose whatever style they preferred to use or wanted to borrow from the history of western art. Styles of art were an ideological issue. The paintings by Ai Weiwei and many members of the Stars group around 1980s were purely impressionist landscapes, nothing political. The controversy of their art lied in that they challenged the system which had set the formal convention of art.

Xiao Lu's gunshot which led to the sudden "death" of the China/Avant-Garde exhibition in 1989 shows the difficulties performance art have had in China. In 1995, the famous artist Ma Liuming was arrested when he performed his "Lunch series" in Beijing East Village.

After more than two decades of struggle the Chinese artists finally obtained the formal and stylistic freedom of making art. The growing art market also contributed to this triumph. To what degree new art can be accepted by the official art institutions outside the metropolitans is, however, yet to be seen.

Film censorship

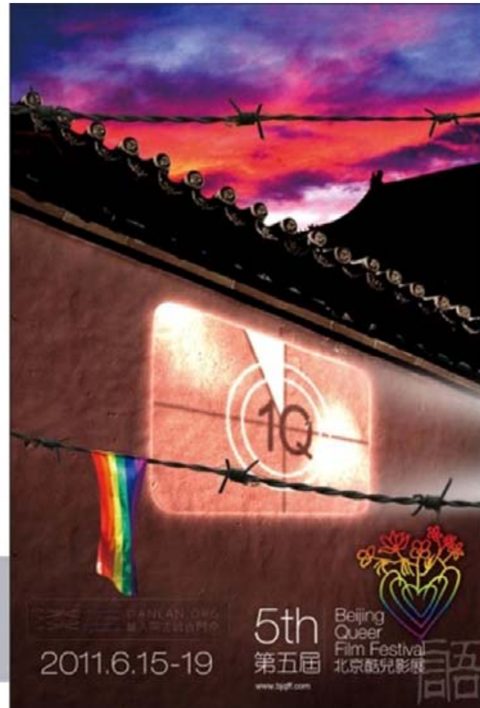
A few more lines need to be written about film censorship. Art and film are related, if we consider both as visual culture. But there are special rules for film. The censorship of films is regulated by SARFT – The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. An English translation of the regulation can be found here (info.hktdc.com). It is important to notice that the term "censorship" (*shen cha* in Chinese) is used by the Chinese authority. The regulation provides us the clearest answer to the question of where the red lines lies in the film industry. Here, I focus on LGBT-related films.

In Secret Love, I show a few independent documentary films. What I did not take up in the exhibition is the multitude of feature films with gay, lesbian and transsexual people produced in China since 1996. The first gay film was Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace*, which was followed by other so-called underground films, but it has not been possible to show them in cinemas or on TV in China. This is also true for other similar films from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West – Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* is also among the films which cannot be shown. You can buy pirate copies or download them from the internet; prohibited material is often popular in China. Nevertheless, a forbidden film loses its potential to reach out and affect a broader audience. Attempts at organising public viewings of these films have been made. One example is the Beijing Queer Film Festival, which is on its fifth round since 2001. The organiser, Yang Yang and her team have met with resistance and difficulties at every the festival time after time.

In the regulation by SARFT, it is stated clearly, among other conditions, that films containing any of the following contents must be cut or altered:

Showing obscene and vulgar content, exposing scenes of promiscuity, rape, prostitution, sexual acts, perversion, homosexuality, masturbation and private body parts including the male or female genitalia; containing dirty and vulgar dialogues, songs, background music and sound effects

Despite the fact that homosexuality is no longer illegal in China since 1997, films containing such content are not allowed to be shown publicly according to SARFT, the institution which issues the permit for any film to be shown publicly. This is a bizarre situation. The law should be respected and the regulation is not logical even from the point of view of Chinese law – perhaps this is one thing which international efforts such as a conference like this could point finger on and helps to develop a strategy to counter censorship for the film makers in China.



Poster of Beijing Queer Film Festival

Epilogue

Rapid and radical economic growth has been taking place in China during the past decades, bringing large-scale, pervasive social change. Consciousness of individual rights is increasing, and in this process, traditional conservative approaches and values are also changing. This rapid development is reflected in the visual arts, which in turn can affect the social processes and contribute to the formation of a new, different reality. Political censorship of art is only one of several aspects. Moral and aesthetic codes set more difficulties for the freedom of expression in the visual culture in China. I believe that the increasing awareness of individual rights and respect for human desires will finally change the landscape of art and set it free. In this process, fighters in the front line are needed, but it requires also many, many more to stand behind.

***Si Han** is a curator of the Chinese collections at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm and he is a guest professor at China Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing. He is the curator of the Secret Love exhibition, which opened in the fall 2012 and is the first major exhibition of Chinese contemporary art on the subject of taboo love.*

Photos:

Ren Hang, *Untitled*, Photography, 2008

Poster, Fifth Beijing Queer Film Festival, 2011

ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

Sham MCs *Bilad el-Sham* *Latlateh* *Darwish of Latlateh*

Fear, threats and self-censorship among Syrian rappers

Syrian rappers are split about how to engage in the fronts of an uprising that have turned to civil war. President Bashar al-Assad's fear-based society is making everyone think twice.

***Refugees of Rap*, a group of rappers from the Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk in Syria, has a new album ready for release about a Syrian revolution they thought would have materialised in 2011. But with the escalating violence, they hold back, afraid of retaliation from the Syrian government. *Al Sayyed Darwish* from Homs has moved to Lebanon to release a pro-revolution album of his group *Latlateh* there. So has *Assasi Nun Fuse* from Aleppo, but he has his politics turned down, while *Sham MCs* in Damascus are attempting to party the war away.**

by Janne Louise Andersen

Refugees of Rap is four rappers of Syrian, Palestinian and Algerian background from the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk Camp in Damascus. They began making music in 2005, have performed all over Syria and across the Levant, and have released two albums *Laj2e Al-Rap* [Refugees Of Rap] in 2007 and *Face 2 Face* in 2010.

I met them in Damascus in February 2010, and when I heard the camp was under attack from the Syrian army in August 2012, I began a series of skype-interviews with the 25-year-old rapper Yaser from the group.

When I log on for our first skype-interview on 3 September 2012, Yaser asks on the chat if we can postpone the interview a little. But when he returns and turns on his webcam, I can see that something is utterly wrong.

A rocket has struck close to his house and killed his uncle and grandfather as they are waiting for a taxi that will take them to Lebanon.

There is a shrill crying in the background, it comes from his aunt.

Through Yaser's webcam I can see two children at the window looking down on the street, but their mother, Yaser's sister, yells that it's unsafe and pulls them away.

Yaser's brows are furrowed and his shoulders sag. He is constantly distracted by his family around him and the sounds from the street. He answers my questions in a weak voice. Little resembles of the self-assured grinning rapper I met to years earlier.

Dissident songs in hiding online

The group has had an album ready for release for months.

"We have about 10 songs, all critical of the government, but we have so far not dared to release them anywhere," Yaser says.

The rappers recorded the songs the past year in a brand new UN-funded studio in the camp, which they call ***Sout Al Shaab*** – The Voice of the People. Here, they have also held hip-hop workshops for the children of the camp. But since a rocket struck next to the studio, they are all just sitting at home with their families, following the news and writing rap lyrics.

Since the killing of Ibrahim Qashoush, a protest singer who in July 2011 was found in a river with his vocal chords ripped out, the group doesn't keep physical copies of their music anywhere.

"That was a message that if you want to sing about the regime, we take your throat. And you can go and die, but what about the rest of the family?" Yaser says and refers to the parents of pianist Malek Jandali, who were beaten a few days after Jandali performed at a pro-democracy rally for Syria in front of the White House in Washington D.C. in September 2011.

"Did you hear that?" he suddenly asks.

Another rocket hit the camp.

There's new crying in the background. Then the connection is lost. The power is gone. When it comes back five hours later, Yaser says that another resident has been killed. He sends me bloody images of his dead uncle and the destruction in the camp.

"It's so hard to feel what we feel right now. My heart is beating so fast and my adrenaline is pumping. All the streets are empty," he says.

And then the connection is lost again.

Holding back

The intense shelling and assassinations by snipers on roofs had been going on for two months since Syrian refugees started coming to the camp for shelter and treatment at the camp hospital. When the residents of the camp, mainly Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, accommodated them, the government saw it as siding with the opposition. They also claimed that the FSA was operating from inside the camp, and that's when the rockets started dropping.

Yaser wants to share some of their lyrics and begins to recite:

> ***The era of silence is over.***
> ***Why does injustice come from just one man?***
> ***You should stand up and say it straight from your heart,***
> ***and wake up from your nightmare.***
> ***There is nothing to fear.***
> ***You can say what you want,***
> ***the era of silence is over.***

The message of the lyrics mostly seems like wishful thinking for Yaser and the group who say they are holding back their dissident music, until they are sure that their families are safe from government reprisals.

But they have been waiting for a long time and they are growing impatient.

"I feel like I want to say something. The regime is so f… evil. Now, no one goes to prison anymore, they just get killed. The chair is not forever, he should leave," Yaser says.

During the shelling, he says, he puts on a beat, takes his pen and starts writing.

Dead people on the road, dead people under the road, the smell of death is all over my wall.
24 and the dead follow us everywhere.
We are citizens we don't have weapons, so why are you killing us?
We shout for freedom, so why are you shouting with your gun?
We will get our freedom if you want it or not.
Shelling and rockets go down on our neighborhood, but we prefer to be free than to be a slave for you.

"Baba, baba!" It's Yaser's niece four-year-old Selina, who runs to the door where her father has just entered. Everyone is crying.

"We thought one of them had died," Yaser says and joins them.

Censored on tv

Three days later, Yaser's sister and her husband have fled to Lebanon. Yaser and his parents also want to leave but for now they stay with an uncle in Hamra area in Damascus, where Yaser says it's safer.

Meanwhile his 18-year-old brother has been arrested.

"They took my brother from the university." Yaser is upset. "We've talked to everyone to know where he is. He didn't do anything. He wrote a lot of things on Facebook, but I write more than that."

Before the uprising you were on Syrian radio and tv?

"Yeah, maybe because we were the first hip-hop group."

Were you also critical of the government then?

"In 2006 we performed *Lies,* a song saying, 'in this life there's no mercy, our situation only goes backwards and it's the past talking. In 100 years I will be as poor as now.' The tv journalist asked us why we used those words. We lied and said that the song is about society, but the real critique is what's happening on the political level."

Yaser says that before going on air, the producer would give them a note saying that they weren't allowed to talk about the Intelligence or about politics.

"We wanted to perform a song that included the words freedom and democracy and they put an X on it," Yaser says. *Mamnou3* – not permitted.

Your fans knew?

"They know we want to say something but that we can't. On 29 January 2011 was our last interview. Since then we said we were busy."

When was your last concert?

"We didn't do any concerts since the beginning of the revolution, only two in the camp and one in Egypt. The shows here are all connected to the government and we don't want to support that."

He tells me that they've had fights with many rappers from Aleppo and Damascus.

"We used to work together before this situation. But they want to do concerts and bad things to support the president."

Why do you think they would do that?

"I think because they want to be famous or want to get some money. I don't know if they love him or if they are just afraid of him. "

You think they love him?

"No, I think they are afraid.

We wrote a statement on Facebook on 1 April 2011 saying that rap is not for saying good things about the president. Rap is to talk about what the people want, and the pain of your people."

That caused uproar on Facebook. "You are liars. We hate you and your music," people responded. But Yaser says he later received reconciliatory messages from many of them apologising and declaring support.

A month later, Yaser's brother is still in prison. And the refugee camp Yarmouk has been taken over by government forces that patrol the streets.

Are you afraid that they will find out about your music and your sympathies?

"I think our names are out there because we were saying things on Facebook and participated in demos and concerts outside of Syria and so on. There are rumors that they are going to take over and start looking for people. It's calm right now but I think there will be another round."

The group is currently using their contacts to set up concerts outside of Syria, so they can leave and finally release their album.

"Before we were on our music all day, all night. Now everything has stopped," and then, Yaser says, "I have to go, another rocket hit the camp."

www.reverbnation.com/refugeesofrap

Sham MCs: Playing it safe

Sham MCs is a six rapper-large group from Damascus [Sham] that was established in 2007. They have been in the center of the online arguments about rappers' loyalties in the ongoing conflict because of a series of YouTube videos that have Sham MCs' songs set to glorifying pictures of Bashar al-Assad.

But 23-year-old *Mic Son* from Sham MCs says they never wrote songs directly to praise the president. In a skype-interview on 12 October 2012, he insists that people whom they have no relations to (the user called *Rap4SyriAalAssad*) created these videos and that these patriotic songs were written before the uprising.

"Our last show was in 2010. It's dangerous to go anywhere. People would attack us," says Mic Son who lives in what he calls of a 'safe area' of Damascus.

When I ask him if they today regret haven written them in the first place, he says he can't answer that.

Mic Son also refuses to declare any kind of sympathy with either of the sides.

In fact, Sham MCs latest song, an upbeat track called *Die to Party* – which made many people criticise them on Facebook for the message to party in spite of the war – carries a cover picture of a man loosing his mind with the flag of the regime coming out of his one ear, and the flag of the opposition coming out of the other.

He says that after its release many people criticised them on Facebook for the song's message to party in spite of the war and violence. Mic Son says he feels misunderstood and that Sham MCs' main mission is to cheer people up with their music, especially in the current situation.

"Many didn't even take time to listen to it. People here don't want to hear that," he says.

The group would like to leave Syria to pursue their music carrier abroad in safety and where there's an audience more forthcoming to their music and aspirations than what Mic Son finds to be the case in Syria today.

"When we leave I think we might do something related to the situation because of the different environment. We are dead here. Our talent is buried," he says.

www.reverbnation.com/shammcs

Al Sayyed Darwish: Circle of fear

The position of Sham MCs to stay neutral didn't go well with *Al Sayyed Darwish* also known as MC Rage or simply *Hani*, a former member of the group.

"I think it's the time to speak. Comparing with other people and what they are risking to protest the regime, it's nothing to write a verse," he says sitting at a café in Beirut, where he moved to a month before this interview on 2 October 2012. Hani is wearing a black t-shirt with an image of an alert dog and camouflaged pants.

"After the revolution I think hip-hop in the Arab world started getting respect. Also regular people are in need for someone to say what they think. It's a must for an MC to talk about revolution," says the journalist-turned-rapper who today is part of the group *Latlateh*, which also includes the Syrian rappers Watar and Bu Kolthoum.

Hani left Syria when he was informed his name was spotted on lists of the Syrian intelligence, which had been leaked to activists in Homs.

He got a phone call with the words, "Allah ysalmak." That was his cue. His friend had been arrested and Hani was next.

"No one is putting pressure on you to pick a side; it's my conscience that I should pick a side. I'm seeing all these things happening, I should pick a side. For me, whether you decide you are with the regime, at least you picked a side and you are willing to say the truth about it, but don't be *on* the side."

Do you understand why colleagues of yours are too afraid to pick a side?

"Yes. But when you are on the grey side, you are more scared about everyone. It's a circle of fear. When they arrest you for two days and you experience the whole thing, you break down another wall of fear."

Hani should know, he has been arrested a number of times, once by mistake. He was arrested, taken to the intelligence detention center and exposed to electric torture for two days, until the investigators found out that he wasn't the man they were looking for.

"Just think of it as being your father or brother giving you a beating," the officer told him before sending him home.

Then two months before he left Syria he was out walking with a friend in Damascus when a policeman stopped them. "Give us your ID and mobile phones," he demanded. The officer then found videos of demonstrations on Hani's friend's phone.

"Do you stand with these photos?" the officer asked him. When the friend couldn't give him a clear answer, the officer told him to give him his number so they could sit down in a coffee shop and talk about his political views.

Days later, the same policeman saw Hani in the street.

"Take me to the place you live in."

"I have to call in advance then," replied Hani who was staying in a house with many residents.

"Why, you don't want them to think you're a rat?" The officer asked.

"Well yeah, obviously," Hani answered.

When the officer saw Hani wasn't cooperating, he put him in the backseat of the car, blindfolded him and drove him took to a place where rockets were being fired on the Free Syrian Army.

"I am blinded, I can't see. I don't know what's going on. No one is talking to me. The only thing I can hear is ***boof! boof! boof!***" Hani imitates the sound of rockets being fired.

Then a guy sits next to him asking him if he fasts. [It was during Ramadan.]

"I told him I did although I don't." So the officer grabbed a bottle of water, shook it and started drinking loudly.

After an hour they let him go.

"This experience for me was more terrifying than the other experience. This guy took me for nothing just because he could," Hani says.

He also got arrested in 2008 for not voting for Bashar al-Assad.

A friend asked him if he wasn't voting. "Come on, is that even voting, let him go fuck himself," Hani replied. But his friend turned out to be an agent, so Hani got arrested for 12 hours.

He was sat in a chair in a big room where an officer drew a border around his body on the wall.

"Don't even try to move," he was told.

There was water dropping from the ceiling right unto his head.

"After 20 minutes you start feeling it's like a big hammer banging against your head," Hani recalls.

Every once in a while a guy opened the door.

"You're Hani? You're gonna get fucked."

"You're Hani? You're in serious shit!," and similar remarks.

After eight hours Hani decided he was going to sleep. When he nodded off, an officer opened the door. Hani was relieved, thinking; "Finally the guys are going to hit me and send me back home."

But they didn't. They sent him to the door and told him to go to the nearest place to vote – which he didn't.

"So it's been like that for a while. But the revolution broke the first wall of fear and then the other walls started to fall one by one."

But obviously you wouldn't want to experience that again?

"No. But if I got arrested at least I know where I'm going, what's coming and what's the mentality of the people there.

Hani still has concerns about his safety though.

"Maybe they will persecute us in three years like they did with the Muslim Brotherhood. They kept following them until 1996."

It's risking the lives of family and friends

In deed, Hani is still careful and requests that some information can't go on the record – if not for his own wellbeing then for his family and friends. They are still in Homs.

"It's their decision that we don't want to leave to go somewhere else. And really, as a Syrian guy or girl you are in danger whatever your directions are. I didn't start making music until six months ago when I was in Damascus. It was too dangerous, and I'd be jeopardising everyone. If they arrested me I know 70 names [of activists], and no one knows what you would or you wouldn't say under torture. So it's not something to test."

He says since the uprising the authority made it illegal to perform in a public place without a permit.

What's the risk?

"If you got caught they might arrest you. There isn't a law really. You can stay like a month in one of the intelligence institutes without being charged with anything. For me that's a big risk, not just for me, but for all the people that I know. Now, it's actually not the government keeping us from performing. There's death, people starving. You can't make an event and expect people to show up."

An album on the way

Hani admits that he is also in Beirut for business. *Latlateh* is about to release their new album 'Khatalid' – Third Line – with the Lebanese label *Strong Hold Music*.

Hani explains that the album reflects on the past two years in the Arab World, the political conflicts and specifically about revolutions.

One of the tracks called '*1,2,3'* is originally a song that children are taught in school. But the music and the lyrics of the group have transformed it to a somber and dark song where the three rappers explain why they are with a revolution of the Syrian society.

Isn't it difficult to rhyme about something as abstract as revolution?
"It's something you are experiencing everyday. Like, thinking 24/7 about the friends you lost, and experiencing what other people are experiencing, getting shot at, getting followed by the *shabi7a* [government loyalists], hiding in people's places. The paper understands you more than anyone, because it doesn't have another opinion, it's healing, and writing is a cure."

So Hani continues writing and he has the full backing of his family to pursue his music carrier while being vocal about his thoughts on the current situation. His mother who is an English teacher is even translating all his lyrics into English. *Ya Deeb* is one of them:

It feels like the first time I see her, broken, sad and lost she was,
I grabbed the chair to steady my hands, I don't want to lose control of them.
My brain is improvising poems, my nerve-endings are damaged, I'm shaking.
I try to focus, to be calm, feeling like my body organs are committing civil disobedience against me.
My rage rode my shoulders like a demon.
But people's faces allowed me to pull myself together. The beauty is breathless.
I'll try to kiss her so she breathes again, because death is a tiny tale that doesn't grow except in our mouths.
The darkness rolled a cigarette of worries for a boy to smoke,
and while awaiting his parents, he signs adoption papers.
Evening arrives, intoxicated blood runs through my veins, shots on the right, cries on the left.
I remember the neighbor's voice shouting at her children, shutting her doors
because the war has neared the doors.
Listen, I'm not telling a story to amuse you. I'm stating a reality to wake your conscience.
I left the circle of death and lost was my face. I know where it is, I hid it with them.
If I could kiss their foreheads and write one line between their eyes it would be: 'Al Saud' are the old 'qibleh' [the Muslim direction for prayer], now Homs is the 'qibleh' Pray!

www.reverbnation.com/latlateh

Assasi Nun Fuse: Don't believe the media

In another coffee shop in Beirut I meet 25-year-old *Zac* from Aleppo – also known as *Assasi Nun Fuse*. He begins the interview by saying that he will not be talking about politics.

Zac was rapping on his own in Aleppo since 2002 until he met the Algerian raï singer Cheb Wahid and they formed the duo *Bilad El-Sham.*

'Clinic of Bilad El-Sham' is the title of their upcoming album to be released in October 2012, where they have sampled traditional and modern oriental music, raï and tarabiya songs by famous Arab artists such as Umm Kulthoum and Mohamed Mounir.

The songs on this album are, like the premise of the interview, focused on the social and daily problems of young Syrians – the lack of opportunities and the brain-drain of Assasi's peers; customs and traditions in families; and the conditions for modern arts and the music scene – all issues that Zac has been struggling with and eventually lead him to leave Syria and settle in Beirut.

"I don't trust any of the media anymore," Zac says. He has a song on the upcoming album called 'The Media is Lying' – a notion I have heard expressed by most of the Syrians I've spoken to.

That same morning, the Old City of Aleppo was shelled, leaving big parts completely destroyed.

"I was crying when I saw the pictures, it's where I grew up," Zac says.

This is the first time during the interview he allows some emotion to shine through. Like so many other Syrians, he has learned how to navigate around the forbidden subjects – the issues *mamnou3.*

In an Al Jazeera documentary about Arab rap that features him and a fellow rapper Abdul Rahman aka ***Murder Eyez***, Rahman says;

"There are a lot of things we are not allowed to speak about, because of what we call our 'social limitations.' [...] Here, we are controlled by social, moral, security and family rules. We have to stay within these limits and never break out. [...] Otherwise society will turn its back on us. If I talk about a minister or an ambassador in my society, I'll be at odds with ... uhm," the rapper is struggling to find a proper way of articulating what he is not allowed to say ... "the big potato!" Rahman says, referring to the Syrian president and then breaks out in laughter.

While Rahman speaks in the film, Zac looks uncomfortable.

Zac served two and a half years of military service – training children in basket ball in the military sports clubs in Damascus in 2007. His younger brother is currently enlisted. Zac doesn't say it, but it's not hard to tell that his primary concern is for his brother and his family in Aleppo, so we focus on the music of Bilad el-Sham.

www.reverbnation.com/biladelsham

Artists at the forefront of change

At the moment, no one knows if President Bashar al-Assad will succeed in defeating the Free Syrian Army, silence the opposition, and restore his law and order – what will then be the destiny of those artists who got carried away on the wings of change and broke away from their 'social limitations'?

It might be that many of the walls of fear have fallen, but many are still erect.

What does it mean to be on the right side of history – morally or existentially?

It seems too soon to say if the 'era of silence' is in deed over as predicted by Refugees of Rap, but for every artist who finds the courage to break the silence, there is a fan base ready to be lead. And the Syrian hip-hop scene is targeting the generation that knows, that fear does not have to be the social glue of society.

Janne Louise Andersen *is a journalist based in the US and the Middle East, and covers Arab art and culture primarily for Rolling Stone Middle East.*

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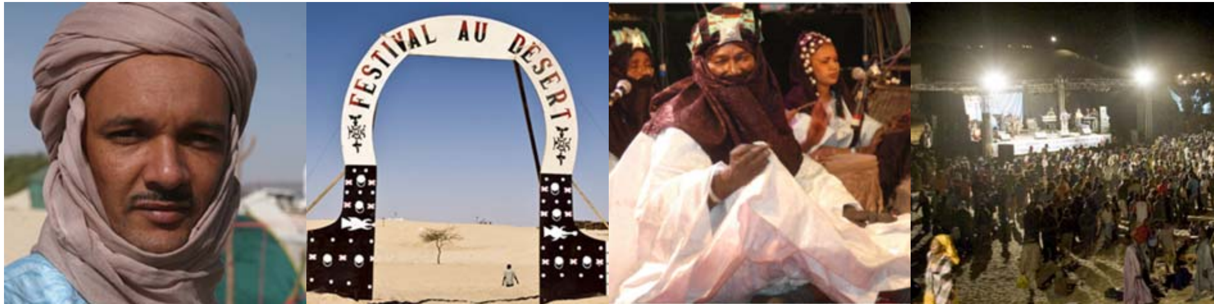


MANNY ANSAR *FESTIVAL GATE* *TARTIT* *FESTIVAL VENUE*

Mali: The day the music stopped

"We do not want Satan's music," said an Islamist spokesman as he banned the broadcasting of all western music from his stronghold in Gao, a city that finds itself within the most literal and brutal Sharia jurisdiction in the world today; the 'red zone' in northern Mali. The region is also home to the world-renowned 'Festival in the Desert' whose director Manny Ansar remains confident that no one can kill Malian music. "We're dealing with people who don't know what they're doing and who won't win," he told journalist Andy Morgan.

BY ANDY MORGAN

ON WEDNESDAY 22 AUGUST 2012, the following announcement was made by Osama Ould Abdel Kader, a spokesperson for MUJAO based in the city of Gao:

"We, the mujahedeen of Gao, of Timbuktu and Kidal, henceforward forbid the broadcasting of any western music on all radios in this Islamic territory. This ban takes effect from today, Wednesday. We do not want Satan's music. In its place, there will be Quranic verses. Sharia demands this. What God commands must be done."

In Gao, a group of teenagers sits around a ghetto blaster listening to Bob Marley. A Landcruiser pick-up loaded with tooled-up Islamic police comes by and seeing the reggae fans, stops and accosts them.

"This music is *haram* [1]," says one of the MUJAO men as he yanks the cassette out of the blaster and crushes it under his feet. "Listen to this instead," he barks, handing the startled reggae fans a tape of Cheikh Abderrahmane Soudais, the highly revered Quranic chanter from Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

In Timbuktu, a young teenager receives a call on his mobile phone while he's standing on a street corner in the town centre. As the tinny ringtone sends out a looping riff lifted from a song by local singer Seckou Maiga, it's overheard by a group of Ansar ud-Dine soldiers who are standing nearby. One of them, not much older than the teenager with the phone, breaks off from the group and strides over. "Hey! Give me that here!" he orders. The youth hands over his phone slowly, his face blank and grim. Giving his shoulders an impatient shrug to better seat his AK47, the Ansar ud-Dine fighter opens the back of the phone, picks out the SIM card, and grinds it into the dust with his feet. He then gives the phone back in pieces. "None of that Godless music, understand?!!"

In Kidal, a group of women gather on the dirt airstrip to the east of the town. They sit close, at least thirty of them, in a large huddle of shimmering indigo robes. One women starts to beat the *tindé* drum, whilst another sprinkles water on its goatskin to keep it taut and resonant. Their chanting ululating rise up to the hazy skies and send old poetry out to the flat horizons; calling, responding, propelling, forward, me, you, us, all, together. The tindé is the mitochondrial DNA of all Touareg music. Its horizontal beat powers the communal joy of major feasts and gatherings in Touareg lands. Like so much traditional Touareg music, it is played by women and only women. The tindé is an essential ingredient in the glue that binds female society together and gives it power and confidence. But as the men gather around to watch, as they've been used to doing for as long as they can remember, Ansar ud-Dine militiamen with black headbands and AK47s strapped to their chests slice into the crowd and shatter it into angry fragments, shouting at the men to keep away from the women and go home. Then they order the women to stop what they're doing and go back to their homes as well. The mood bursts, and the joy ekes away to be replaced by surliness and frustration.

On the outskirts of Gao, a local *takamba* musician is stopped at a checkpoint on one of the major roads out of town. Takamba is the sound of Gao. With its loping rhythms, sensual dance, skyward vocals and raw cranked-up *teherdents* (lute) and guitars, it has long been the preferred style of musical entertainment at weddings, baptisms and Tabeski feasts in the town and the surrounding country. It's a style that also unifies the Touareg and Songhai people, often at odds with each other, as it is performed and consumed by people from both ethnic groups. Gao without takamba would be like Rio without samba; hard to imagine. Our musician is on his way to a wedding in a village outside Gao, his car laden with instruments and equipment. At the checkpoint he is ordered to step down from his car by a MUJAO militiaman who then proceeds to search it. All the instruments are taken out and piled up by the side of the road; guitars, teherdent, amps, speakers, calabashes. The pile is doused in petrol and set alight. The musician is too scared to shout out, or cry, or flee. There are guns everywhere. He just stands and watches as his livelihood goes up in flames. If he makes a scene or shows any emotion, he knows that his own life would be in danger.[2]

In Timbuktu a posse of local Islamist militiamen turns up at a radio station and takes out four large hessian rice bags. They proceed to fill them up with music cassettes, hundred and hundreds of them, an entire archive of local musical culture, painstakingly collected over a decade or more. The station manager stands by, distraught, knowing that all this music, that has been a gift to the world and an ember of pride in local hearts, will be lost forever.

In Gao a family watches a programme called 'Mini Star' on television. It's a Malian adaptation of the X-factor idea, in which young up and coming singers and musicians imitate the greats of Malian music; Salif Keita, Ali Farka Toure, Mangala Camara, Sekouba Bambino and others. The performances are judged by a panel and each week a group is eliminated by popular vote. TV is an important means for broadcasting new music in Mali. TV is the family's window on the world. The weather is hot in Gao and all the windows of the family home are open. A patrol of Islamic policemen hear the sound of music coming from the TV as they pass by the house. They double back and enter the premises, grabbing the TV and smashing it out on cracked paving stones of the yard with the butts of their rifles. The family are warned that next time they'll get the whip.

These are just a few snapshots of musical life in the most literal and brutal Sharia jurisdiction in the world today. The MUJAO declaration of 22 August was disingenuous for several reasons. First, music had been effectively banned in the north for several months already. The declaration only gave that ban a rubber stamp. Secondly, when the declaration spoke of 'western' music, Satan's music, it did in fact mean all most form of music; modern, traditional, electrified, acoustic, foreign and local. Only Sheikh Abderrahmane Soudais and his ilk were deemed entirely *halal*.

The festival in the desert

"The first time I heard the word *wahhabiya*," remembers Manny Ansar, director of the Festival in the Desert, "was when I was a child in the 1970s. People talked about them as if they were some kind of scary sect. I remember that adults would say to us 'Hey, children, be careful. Those people give children money to lead them astray. Don't take it and don't listen to them.'"

A scary sect. If only it had stayed that way. Before the mid 1990s, political Islam and violent religious extremism hardly blipped the cultural radar of northern Mali. There was conflict in the north of course, but it all related either to the nationalist ambitions of the Touareg, or Kel Tamashek, as they prefer to be known, or to inter-ethnic strife between Touareg and Songhoi, Touareg and Arab or even between certain Touareg tribes clans, often stoked by manipulative politicians and leaders.

If there was a political philosophy that guided Iyad Ag Ghali and the Mouvement Populaire de l'Azawad (MPA) when they fought the great rebellion of 1990 it was a kind of Berber version of Nasserist Arab nationalism which had been nurtured in Libyan training camps during the 1980s. Mainly, it was just a deep desire for autonomy and the right to defend Tamashek culture, the Tamashek language, Tamashek rights and the freedom that the nomad will always carry in his heart. It was a fight for earth, history, family and identity. Islam was part of all these but not the overriding part, not the defining part.

After the Tamanrasset accords of 6 January 1991 which put an end to the rebellion, many Touareg musicians began to 'resurface' and reintegrate into normal civilian life. Members of Tinariwen who had taken part in the rebellion found themselves in Bamako or Kidal, playing music, hanging out, doing what they could to earn a living and survive. Manny Ansar was Tinariwen's manager at the time. He remembers a whole group of Touareg musicians, ex-rebel leaders and *ishumar* [3] who spent time together, in each other's houses, out in the bush or, if they were in Bamako, out along the banks of the Niger, where it was quiet and the nature and solitude reminded them of home. Life was convivial. There was music. Women felt free to come and go. Some people smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol. The bonds between them, their music and their culture seemed strong and unbreakable.

No one quite knows why some senior Touareg figures from the northeast, including Iyad Ag Ghali, began to succumb to the message of Pakistani preachers belonging to Tablighi Jama'at. Perhaps it was due to a general disillusion with the nationalist cause, fuelled by the bitter in fighting and recrimination between different Tamashek tribes and clans that followed the Tamanrasset Accords and the National Pact of 1994. Perhaps they were sick of petty politics and yearned for something loftier, purer, holier. Perhaps the very notion of dividing up Muslims into nation states seemed suddenly ungodly. The Wahhabi have always preached that national boundaries are a Western imposition, designed to divide and weaken the Islamic *umma*, which should by rights exist in one borderless and divinely ruled polity.

"The Pakistani Salafists came through Bamako," Manny remembers. "People saw them with their beards and their white robes. They were nice people. Then they went up to Kidal and that's where certain Touareg leaders came into contact with them."

It's hard to establish the precise date when all this happened, perhaps sometime in 1995 or just afterwards. Manny remembers that everything happened very slowly and gradually.

"There was a kind of psychological preparation, done in a really friendly way," he says. "Then certain friends started to distance themselves bit by bit from our circle, people who had liked partying and beautiful women. They were still friends and we would still meet and talk about the situation of the country and the Touareg, but one felt that they were drifting away. They started to disapprove of my lifestyle, the travelling, my friendships with westerners, the festivals, musicians, alcohol, the life of pleasure. They still had respect, esteem, even friendship towards me but my lifestyle didn't suit them any more. They left very gently."

When they came back from their trips to Pakistan and Mecca, the dedication of these daw'ah devotees deepened.

"They were really like monks," Manny remembers, "dressed in white, very simple, eating the minimum, praying all the time, unconcerned about life's problems except spreading messages of peace, togetherness and, of course, God. The first thing that shocked us is that they asked their wives not to shake hands with men any more. Suddenly you would stop seeing their women at all. They would stay in another room where they entertained their women friends."

Meanwhile, Manny had helped to launch the Festival in the Desert in January 2001 at Tin Essako, a tiny little village to the east of Kidal. The festival came about thanks to an immense team effort involving Manny and his EFES association, Tinariwen, the French group Lo'Jo and various other French and Malian funders and supporters. The only threat felt during that first edition was that of petty criminality and banditry.

The year before some Dutch tourists had been attacked and murdered up near Tessalit, north of Kidal. On the way up to the festival itself, the truck transporting a small PA system that had been flown in from France was stopped by armed bandits. It took the verbal skill and courage of Kheddou Ag Ossade, one of the core members of Tinariwen who later went on to form the group Terakaft, to dissuade the muggers from taking the equipment and thereby ruining the festival.

A smaller event took place a year later in Tessalit, but it was the third Festival in the Desert in January 2003, and the first in the silky white dunes of Essakane which were to become the festival's permanent home, that really established the event's worldwide reputation. The number of visitors, both local and international, had tripled or even quadrupled. Well-known names like Robert Plant were present. The stage looked like a proper stage. The sound was of the same professional standard as a festival in Europe. The festival had 'arrived'.

And still no sign of any Islamists.

A month after the festival, the GSPC kidnapped 32 European hostages in the Tassili region of southern Algeria, between Illizi and Djanet. It was the first major crisis involving the kidnapping of western tourists that the Sahara had ever known. Fifteen of the hostages were sent down into Mali, where they were held prisoner while the chief of the GSPC *katiba* or cell, Amari Saïfi aka Abderrazak El Para, negotiated a ransom with the Malian, Swiss and German governments. A team of northern 'notables', including Iyad Ag Ghali and Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, were sent to speak to El Para and his men. Links were forged and promises were made then that lead eventually through many a twist and turn to the unholy Islamist takeover of 2012.

But it wasn't until four years later that The Festival in the Desert began to really feel the Islamist presence in the north.

"2007…that's when the red lines were first drawn," Manny remembers, "and the Foreign ministries in Europe and America began to issue all kinds of warnings against travelling to the north of Mali." It was also the year when the GSPC changed its name to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. Their presence in the Malian Sahara began to be more overt. "The Al Qaida people were wandering around the desert at that time," Manny continues. "But they weren't aggressive. They visited the camps near Essakane and said, 'don't worry, we're Muslims like you.' But then later, their argument began to change. The first alert was when they said, 'we've got nothing against you. We just have the same enemy, which is the West, the non-believers.' That's when I understood that things were going to get difficult, because our festival was based on people coming from all over the world, without distinction."

And then, in 2008 the kidnapping started again with the capture of two Austrian tourists in southern Tunisia. In January 2009, four more tourists were seized on their way back from another music festival called Tamadacht, that took place just after the Festival in the Desert in Anderamboukane, a small town up against Mali's eastern frontier with Niger. A Swiss couple and an elderly German women were eventually freed after many hellish months spent in a makeshift Al Qaida desert camp. The fourth hostage however wasn't so lucky. Edwin Dyer had lived in Austria for over three decades, but had retained his British passport out of loyalty to his the land of his fathers and to the royal family. It was to be his death warrant. The British government flatly refused to negotiate with Al Qaida or pay any kind of ransom. They also rejected Al Qaida's demand to free the Jordanian preacher and jurist Abu Qatada, who was then imprisoned in a British jail. The Al Qaida emir Abou Zeid had Edwin Dyer beheaded on 31 May 2009.

"Things got much worse after the assassination of Edwin Dyer," Manny tells me. "I remember it well. Plenty of people got Tamadacht and the Festival in the Desert mixed up, and thought that Dyer had been to our festival."

"I never received any direct threats from Al Qaida," Manny asserts. "But through third parties, we learnt some people, Touareg and Arabs who were sympathetic to their way of thinking, were beginning to have an aggressive attitude towards us. 'What you're trying to do is haram,' they told people I knew. 'In the middle of Islamic lands you invite non-believers who come and drink alcohol and commit sins on our dunes.'

Once there were even some who came to the Festival site to express their opinion in one of the conferences, or just walk around. But people told me to take no notice. 'They're just trying to make themselves important. Let them talk and they'll go away,' I was told."

Other objectors went up to senior figures in the Kel Antessar, the Touareg tribe that Manny belongs to and said, "Your children are going too far." The Kel Antessar are a revered clan in the Timbuktu / Essakane region, who can trace their lineage back to the Prophet and who have provided the southern Sahara with many of its marabouts and holy men. "Our clan are considered to be the defenders of Islam," Manny tells me. "They brought Islam to this part of the world. I remember one of the clan leaders saying to me, 'You know people are complaining about you. They're saying that you're spreading debauchery, that you've created some kind of Sodom and Gomorrah in Essakane. Just be careful. I know what you're doing is beneficial to for the Sahara. But take care of our image.' But it was just about morality and good behaviour, not really about jihad or any anti-western sentiment."

Manny had to increase security measures year on year. More soldiers would encircle the Essakane site, camping out beyond the dunes. And each year, Manny called people he knew in the Touareg rebel movement to ask if it was safe to stage the Festival. They were people with wide connections, who knew the currents and pressure points of Saharan politics. Their answer was always affirmative.

All this was taking place amidst in a zeitgeist of fear and antagonism between the West and the Muslim world. The Festival in the Desert was right on the front line. "Everything was connected," Manny says. "The international community, the warnings, Afghanistan, Al Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria. It was getting worse and worse internationally, and one also felt that the pressure was increasing locally. Al Qaida was getting closer to Essakane. Old friends in Kidal were distancing themselves and becoming radicalised. Mali was getting worried. There was trafficking. Slowly, the screws were tightening."

Then, in the summer of 2009, Manny received a phone call from President Amadou Toumani Toure himself, asking him to move the festival within Timbuktu city limits for safety reasons. The foreign ministry warnings were getting ever more strident. In 2010, Hilary Clinton issued a signed document advising all Americans against travelling to Timbuktu and especially, Manny quotes, "'*not to the world-renowned Festival in the Desert.'* I kept it because it's such a good piece of publicity," he says with a chuckle.

And yet, no one involved with the Festival was kidnapped or murdered. “That was strange,” says Manny. “The festival existed in the same red zone as all the trafficking, and all the other stuff. But they left us alone. I think that Al Qaida didn’t want to affront the locals. This festival was considered to be a Touareg festival so to attack it meant attacking the tribes that lived in the area. They knew that the organisers belonged to a very respected tribe and it was a bad idea to attack their guests. But there was never any kind of agreement between us, never even any word from the Islamists along the lines of ‘don’t worry, we won’t attack you.’ There were even those who said that, as we’re a family of marabouts, we made prayers and benedictions to block off the road to the festival and keep the Islamists away.”

In January 2012, at the last Festival in Desert that will probably grace the city of Timbuktu for a while, Bono asked Manny to call off the soldiers who were protecting him. “I said to the military, ‘Look, if he wants to go off like that, just let him do it.’ He used to wander off in the dunes; we would take tea there. People think I had some kind of divine force to protect my visitors. And finally, I almost ask myself if it isn’t true. Imagine, Bono kidnapped!”

On 30 March 2012, Timbuktu was overtaken by Ansar ud-Dine, AQIM and some units from the MNLA. The takeover effectively evicted The Festival in the Desert from its desert home. At first Manny was very pessimistic, and wondered if it wasn’t time to lay the whole enterprise to rest. Then, as musicians from the north started to turn up in Bamako, often with their entire families, begging Manny to find them work, and after talking to his team of co-workers, his friends and his international backers and supporters, he realised that this wasn’t the time to give up. Quite the opposite:

“As I’m a pacifist through and through, against all arms and violence, which I wouldn’t even use against my greatest enemy, I understood that my only way to resist was to continue to be involved in music, to continue promoting festivals. It was my way of fighting back and showing that you can’t kill music just because Timbuktu has been occupied, that Touareg and Malian music will be heard even more and even further afield. If they’ve closed the doors of Timbuktu we’ll open up the rest of the world. We’ll go and sing in Tokyo. We’ll play ***igbayen***[4] in Rio de Janeiro, we’ll sound the tindé drum in Dubai and dance the takamba in Toronto, right up until the day we return to Timbuktu. That’s our message. To say that, no, you want us to stop… well, on the contrary. Before our music was heard in Essakane, at the Tamadacht Festival or in Essouk. Today it’ll be heard in all the big festivals in the world. So it’s the opposite of what you, the Islamists, want. It’s our victory and your defeat.”

I ask Manny for his reaction to the MUJAO declaration banning music.

“The MUJAO can exist,” he answers, “but not among this people. Everything is transmitted in Mali through music, through poetry. So instead of making me panic, at least that declaration told me that we’re dealing with people who don’t know what they’re doing and who won’t win. They don’t understand the culture that they’re operating in and they don’t try to understand it either. Mali without music is impossible. Life would have no meaning for the people, because music is their daily reality. It’s the only thing that many have to distract and amuse themselves. They have no television. They have no Internet. They don’t play chess. They don’t gamble. Music is the only thing that makes live worth living.”

Andy Morgan *is a British freelance writer and journalist. This piece is an extract of a an extended feature on the impact of the crisis in Mali on the country's musicians, writers, actors, dancers, fashion designers and cultural activists.*

Photos: *Courtesy of the Festival au Désert*

Footnotes

[1] Forbidden by Islamic law.

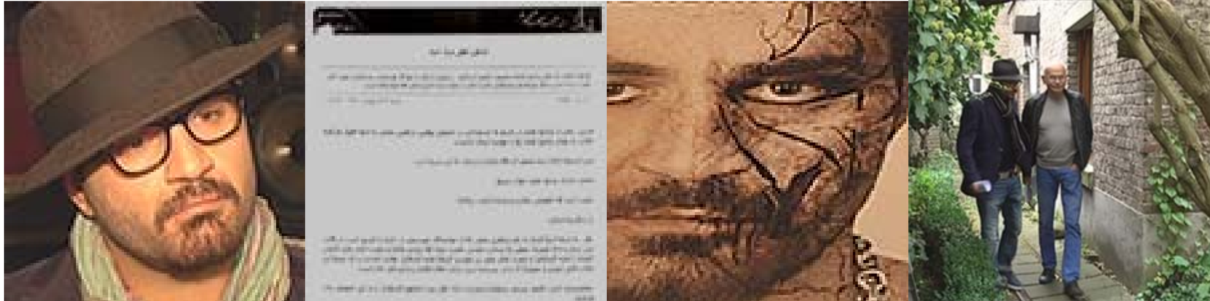
[2] All these incidents were reported to me either by the people involved or by third parties living in Mali. I have deliberately not used anyone's real name to protect the subjects and their families.

[3] A Tamashek adaptation of the French word 'chomeur'. Ishumar was the collective noun for the young Touareg men who left their homes in Mali and Niger in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to drought and lack of opportunity to find work in Algeria, Libya, Burkina Faso and beyond. It was these men who became the footsoldiers of the rebellions of 1990.

[4] A form of traditional Touareg music from the Timbuktu region

ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression



SHAHIN NAJAFI THE FATWA ALBUM COVER EXCERPT NAJAFI AND WALLRAFF

Iranian musician responds upright to death threats

This interview with Shahin Najafi and Günter Wallraff took place five months after a fatwa – a death sentence – was issued against the singer and rapper Shahin Najafi. It proclaimed him an apostate for recording the rap-song '*Ay Naghi*' and sentenced him to death under Islamic law. The assault ensured that the name 'Shahin Najafi' is now better known around the world than that of many other Iranian musician in exile. But this wasn't of any great help to his artistic career.

BY ELKE SAFAEI-RAD

SHAHIN NAJAFI lives in hiding, primarily in Germany. For the interview he appeared out of nowhere. With a three-day-old beard, dressed in jeans, jacket and a stylish hat. He actually looked like Marlon Brando as 'the young Don Corleone' in *The Godfather.*

Najafi was accompanied by his mentor Günter Wallraff with whom he played a game of chess before settling down for the interview. Najafi was easy-going and candid, by no means a hunted victim. Considering what he has been through, this seems amazing.

What's more, Najafi appears not to have lost his energy when talking about his past, his music and his political conviction. In conversation, he enjoys getting lost in philosophical and political eras, before returning to the original question. He is ready to conquer new frontiers. He set off for a tour, his first concerts after the fatwa had been declared, which is taking him around the US.

Shahin Najafi was born in Bandar-e Anzali, a harbour town at Iran's Caspian Sea in 1980, on the eve of the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was the youngest of eight brothers and sisters. His father died when Najafi was still a young boy.

Najafi spent his childhood and school days in Bandar-e Anzali where he finished secondary school. He then went to Teheran where he studied social science. Najafi recalls as a child been very fond of the call to prayer of the muezzin. By the age of 12, he was trained to be a Koran singer. Through out his teen years, he improved his skills and talent.
It was only during his military service that Najafi became more radical as he tried to deal with the political system of Iran. Since then he is in conflict with Iran's regime which Najafi considers inhuman and bigoted.

Interviewer: *Mr Najafi, it has now been more than five months since a 'fatwa' was declared against you and since then you have found yourself living on the run. How do you cope with it?*

Shahin Najafi: I'm really convinced that the essential nature of all of us is to adapt ourselves to many diverse living conditions. Right from the beginning, after having seen what happened, I understood that my life had changed, completely changed. And I was ready to adapt to it.

How did you feel when you first stumbled on the fatwa on an Iranian webpage?

Najafi: Well, I just felt a lot of very conflicting feelings. Somehow it was paradoxical. On the one hand, the whole situation seemed totally ridiculous. On the other hand, I felt much anxiety. Frankly, I was desperate, wondering what would happen next? I felt strongly irritated, as I was very much worried about my family in Iran. And I also had a feeling that I had been literally attacked and wounded, like someone who had been shot or stabbed. So at that time I could feel it physically with much intensity.

Before the fatwa was declared have you ever felt threatened here in Germany with such intensity?

Najafi: No, never. There had always been threats against me on the Internet by people from Iran or from other people from abroad. But I always knew that they were not going to seriously get involved.

You are living in hiding and have to put up with a lot of security. Is there any sort of ordinary life for you? Can you go out at all?

Najafi: Sometimes, but it all depends on the security. I mean that I am protected from a lot of things that are happening around me. But I don't expect this situation to last very long.

Are you able to live without a sense of fear?

Najafi: It seems to be a bit paranoid but when I sleep in the night it seems that a film is happening, you know. I turn to the wall and slowly close my eyes and wait for someone to slit my throat. Then I laugh at myself and somehow fall

asleep. If you call that fear then it does indeed happen that I occasionally have a laugh about been frightened.

Do you think that you get the support and protection you need from for instance your friends, by people from the local community?

Najafi: Yes, I get a lot of support. But I also want to say how important it is giving a political example for solidarity, you know. Because my case is not an isolated case. And that is a very important aspect. One has to understand that this isn't meant just for me. It can happen to anyone, anywhere. It reminds me of a poem by Pablo Neruda, you know. The poem goes like this:
'When the communist were arrested I wasn't a communist.
When the protectors of the constitution were arrested I wasn't a protector of the constitution.
When I was arrested there was nobody to defend me.'
So for me solidarity is very important and I rather wanted to get this kind of 'protection' off myself. I very much have this idea that the debate about human rights is purely academic, as long as there is no solidarity.

How much are the exiled Iranians really behind you?

Najafi: Well, I saw all kind of videos and commentaries on Youtube. And they obviously demonstrated in different places like Stockholm, Berlin, Amsterdam, London, even in Canada. It felt good to me. So it's a sign of solidarity. It came as quite as a surprise to me, you know. Because in these times there are so many things for Iranians whom you better not speak publicly about. First of all, many of them have families in Iran. And the last thing they want to do is to cause problems for theirs families. As they want to go to Iran and meet theirs relatives, spend an ordinary time with them. About five million Iranians live abroad, you know. If spending a good time in Iran was less precious to them, I think the country would be better off today. I mean we saw the Green Movement, ten thousands of people in the streets and the fact that people protested all over the country. I think and I'm also worried that most exile Iranians living their life abroad have kind of lost their interest for the political development of Iran.

Some Ayatollahs called you blasphemous, but a lot of ordinary people also feel irritated by your songs. What is the reason that you give them such a sense of irritation?

Najafi: I really don't know. Those people you are talking about are just part of a certain scene. They don't care about human rights, they don't care about what happens around them. They are part of the regime which feeds them.
And there are the others, you know. If you try to tell them what life is like for instance in the South of Teheran it looks to them weird. You understand that they really don't know very much. And what's more they don't want to understand anything. People who believe in a sort of superior nation, where life is ok, except for the fact that the veil is compulsory. Blind men and women who shield themselves away from any criticism. I would very much like to send them to the Kurdish region of Iran, to Sistan or Belutschistan where I was. Make them see, for example, what living without running water means. And yes, let them see Khorramshahr, where millions of people died during the first Gulf war and where people still live today under indescribable conditions. Yes, that is Iran. And all that can be found in my songs, you know.

So that is one reason why others than the mullahs want to banish your songs, right?

Najafi: Yes, sort of.

Günter Wallraff: Real art has through all times been objectionable, has been controversial, has encouraged resistance, has generally never been harmless. And especially under dictatorships and I'm thinking of Germany and

the 'Third Reich'. With the majority of the population who entertained themselves with folksongs while the holocaust was happening. These people just wanted to see the sunny side of life in order to be distracted about the horror that was occurring around them. And this is also the case with Shahin's songs and his music, meeting exactly a central nerve. And if today he was applauded by everybody he would have to ask himself: What am I doing wrong? Why am I so misunderstood? But he is already actually understood!

Mr. Najafi, artists can create any type of work that their talent, means and imagination can come up with, whether it offends certain people or not?

Najafi: You know, if my music was forbidden because it was considered provocative then it would have something to do with my audience and their understanding of themselves and would have nothing to do with me as an artist. I create something but for a lot of people that is of little interest. Then I create something and loads of people take to the barricades. To give an example, some time ago I produced a song about people who we would in Iran call 'bourgeois'. It was a type of satire. Their reaction was the same as the Ayathollas' response to '*Ay Naghi*' – 'forbidden'! Because the so-called bourgeoisie felt they were made to look foolish. In fact, they aren't really citizens in the sense that they participate in public life. All they care about is fun and a posh life. That they got so excited about my song, boiling over with such indignation which was grossly disproportionate. You would actually think, as they have a good life they would actually be above this. This was not the case, really wicked!

Let's talk about your song 'Ay Naghi', a string of sardonic observations about Iranian society, topped by an Internet video that shows a mosque in the shape of a woman's breast. Don't you think that's provocative? Did you mean to provoke?

Najafi: No, it's not at all about that. You know it is actually about what is happening in Iran's holy places...
[Najafi is vehemently being interrupted by Günter Wallraff.]

Wallraff: The opposite is the case. Who ever feels offended probably requires a kind of therapy. First of all the breast is a symbol, a feminine symbol which represents vitality and also eroticism. And then the gay pride flag, at the same

time stands for minority rights. I mean to say the mosque in the shape of a woman's breast topped by a gay pride flag could also be the best publicity ever for a form of Islam which evolved from absolutism to tolerance, to compassion, to peace, you know. But it's probably a sort of utopia.

Najafi: Yes, really

Wallraff: And I must say I find your question quite objectionable. That you with your question imply that one must feel offended. I must say that you should analyse your real motif and intention… that you as a female feel provoked. True?

Concerning my own feelings this is not personal. You completely …

Wallraff: You didn't mean that? Sorry. Misunderstood you!

…..completely misunderstood. It's all about art. In art shape and design are open signs.

Wallraff: I mean art is always visionary. If it wasn't, it would be a backward looking art form.

Let us just talk about art. Yes, and art is unequivocal. So everybody will individually decode signs and symbols. There is no objectivity in art, right?

Najafi: Yes, with art we have absolute freedom and can use all metaphors, symbols that exist within art and we can use them metaphorically. I mean to say, every subject is suitable for art. What matters is what the artist makes of it.

But that is not how things happen in Iran?

Najafi: Yes, but I am not trying to compromise on issues where there can be no compromise. The reflection of a piece of art work can be very conflicting. I mean a symbol like a woman's breast and a gay pride flag are not offensive to me. But it gave rise to a lot of hatred. My view is, the problem is that the problem is other people's perception.

Wallraff: Misogynists

Najafi: Yes, of course. Do you know what is actually happening in Iran's mosques? What happens to children? Pedophiles that abuse them. Women who are sexually abused. The domes of mosques and holy places are a symbol for that, you know. The white dove that used to be on the dome is no longer there. Now there are black ravens, symbolic for the predicament of the country. And there is another thing not known in the West which takes place in these mosques. It is called '*sigheh*' a kind of temporary marriage, sanctioned by sharia law that allows men to have as many sexual partners as they want but discriminates against women. The state does not defend women. In fact, the mosque in the '*Naghi*' video stands for the rights of women in the sense that temporary marriage should no longer be sanctioned.

Wallraff: I mean it's nothing but prostitution, isn't it?

Najafi: Of course.

Wallraff : And mullahs are pimps.

Let's stay with religion. How do you deal with religion that does not allow people who have a different view to them? That in the worst scenario punishes them with the death sentence?

Wallraff: Such a religion we should firstly detach from a belief structure that has a dogmatic terror nuance, religious fascism. That is what I call it: Iran is almost in its entirety a fascistic religious society. And religion is used to suppress others. So we have to make that known. We should not any more look at it with a considerate and religious aspect, but more as an instrument of terror to suppress and censure people and all those who deviate from their norms. With Islam no one can say: I want to have the right to choose another religion. I want to leave – he is then considered to be an apostate. My late friend Abu Zayd, a religious scholar who adhered to a liberal form of Islam, incidentally he was very devout was threatened with a fatwa and death. His happy marriage with a cosmopolitan, renowned sociologist was forcibly divorced. He had to immigrate to Germany. In those days, I had a lot of contact with him, got him membership to International PEN and then in Lejden in Holland he got a professorship. We need such people and they also need our protection and he was really a devout person.

Najafi: Whether it's Turkey, Egypt or Iran. You have to look deeper. What is it really about? Is it really about religion or something else? A truthful believer behaves differently. He does not want death. Because that is not in Islam and also not in Shia. A true believer has religious obligations and does not demand the death sentence. And I mean to say it is about other priorities in certain scenarios. About power and control, you know. And as far as discussion is concerned with these people, it is not possible. They are radical politicians and Islamists. They don't want discussion. You have to fight them politically. I mean, I'm concerned about free artistic expression. I want to use everything around me to express myself that develops tolerance and that is something that an Islamic society still has to learn. They have to finally understand that artistic confrontation with religion has nothing to do with insulting.

What began with the attack on Rushdie's 'Satanic Verses' has become common. Many countries have become more and more censorious with works of art. Interestingly, to this day nobody bothers about lifting the ban on Rushdies 'Satanic Verses'. Do you think the book should be available for instance in India, Pakistan or Iran?

Najafi: Yes, of course. It is a must, go!

Wallraff: I mean, it belongs there. It would have a liberating power and maybe bring people in those countries to a form of awareness, as fundamentalists who imagine themselves to be the holders of the absolute truth, who don't understand fun who are deadly serious with their absolutist teaching. Literature does not spread that. It does not happen. Just, that there are no open public debates, only death – even in Turkey. So I would say, just like biblical societies spread the bible in countries where it was not allowed to be read, so you should also allow this book to spread behind the scenes in such countries.

I would like to return to art and the tension between art and religion. Art gives shape and form

Wallraff: And content also has relevance!

Initially there is design and shape. The content is essentially seen through the observer on a scale from 'I like it' to 'It ought to be banned'. Can the artist say like Theodor Adorno: The bars are in the eyes of the beholder. What about the artist's responsibility to society?

Wallraff: Which society?

The society, in which we live.

Wallraff: For goodness' sake. Art would be dead. It would be the end of all art. Art is always, I would say in a utopian sense, a visionary sense sometimes possible, sometimes not. Design alone is often l'art pour l'art, when this particular art doesn't transport anything. I don't want to dispute that there is top quality abstract art also in music, with paintings. With literature it's already there. I was myself impressed much by Dada. Influenced only up to a certain time, before it became mainstream. Then it became empty and increasingly academic and it lost its power. And when art gets stagnant and loses its bite especially in times of oppression, in dictatorial times, it's I would say a renunciation, a disclosure. That happens to many who meander around. To lose afterwards their importance and then land on the scrap heap of literary history. And almost all art that worked in a certain time was controversial, was a form of intervention, had a structure. This of course should not be ignored and still today such social content is again transported. The artist is someone who either through cowardice, inertia or financial concerns comes to an arrangement. This is seen with certain individual cases, there are those who do not realise that they prostitute themselves and those who do. And from our perspective, art has a form of flexibility. Everything is possible and I would say this does not happen, when art is oppressed. It is a sort of yardstick.

Mr. Najafi, is the artist really free in the sense that every subject is suitable for art, as you implied?

Najafi: Yes, I think the artist is free, as far as I understand art. There are no boundaries. But like I said the artist as a human is influenced by his surroundings and the time he lives in. That has in turn an influence on art. Art can subconsciously and without hindrance establish borders. But how their size is measured that can make a difference. In view of this, my freedom is not boundless. But that only relates to me as a human being, it does not relate to my work. I, for instance, would never ever humiliate women in my work or portray them being humiliated. That is also the case with racial groups or ethnic minorities and for all the religions of the world. Whether Muslim, Jewish, Christian or Bahai, I would never make a caricature of a person based on religion. In that respect, I have made my borders. So what I am saying is that moral values relate to the artist, artistic values relate to the work.

Proceeding on the assumption that art in shape and form is absolutely free, don't we then have to acknowledge this stupid little film that originated from America, probably far removed from being any kind of art. Don't we then have to acknowledge that in principle a film like that has to be possible?

Wallraff: Yes, but we have to have a different approach. The entire Internet is full of this kind of stuff. We actually would have to get rid of the Internet. But the extremists will always find a pretext. I mean, it is no coincidence that it was churned out on the 11th September although the film was around for months. And this is the point: I would suggest, a tasteless, irrelevant story that is not of interest for any form of discussion, and people who want to 'sex it up' and pump it into a world event. With them, there is something not quite right. They have to ask themselves: Why do we take exception to it? Initiating this stuff into our heads. What kind of wrong understanding of God do we have? Such a person has to be therapeutically understood and has to be called to account, when all of a sudden this tastelessness is being pumped into a world event. But I have to say, if they are looking for a new cause they will find one straight away – tomorrow. But regarding this, as I said in an interview – it is of course a bit utopian – the entire media, all satirical magazines, all magazines, all newspapers should now produce all kind of high-quality caricatures, in abundance and flood the place with them as extremists can't demonstrate every day. Some time or other it will be like what happened here with advertisements. Not long ago a lot of adverts that are found today in almost all magazines would have been forbidden as 'pornography'. Today they are hardly considered obscene. For those who don't want to see it they just to look away. The others stimulate themselves a little bit. And for the third party they just get a little bored.

Mr.Wallraff, surely not trashy is the work by Salman Rushdie. If you look at the developments – since 23 years he

lives under threat, the fatwa has not been lifted and it looks like, that as of recent pressure has again been placed upon him. The bounty has been increased, as I read whilst doing my research. Why do you think this happened? What is the reason?

Wallraff: Presently an offensive is been carried out, you know, yes an offensive by Islamists, Salafists from these countries who need an enemy. They need a personified portrayal of an enemy. The Western world would be enough in this respect, but there is always a reason to bring certain individuals into focus. Presently, Salman Rushdie with an autobiography is in the public spotlight.

A sort of projected surface?

Wallraff: Yes, they try to do that. And an apology was not forthcoming. Salman Rushdie says it was the biggest mistake of his life, that he out of consideration for the security services he did not write a more challenging piece of work. Against this background, Shahin must be really, really careful. Fortunately he sees it like a sort of challenge. Salman Rushdie never used a disguise. It probably would have been a sort of self-abandonment, something that he couldn't have done, which is understandable. So he always needed a huge amount of security. Shahin has a more playful dimension, is more enterprising.

Mr. Najafi, the politicisation of Islam actually began in the 1980s with Khomeini. Why do you think that pressure is placed on Salman Rushdie today, after he lived for many years seemingly without being troubled?

Najafi: I think that the reasons are purely political. The fatwa against Salman Rushdie had political reasons. And as a result his predicament was internationalised. Soon after, there were further cases like the death threats against Nagie from Turkey and some other poets and writers. In each of these cases the fatwa was politically motivated. It had as always nothing to do with religion and the violation of religious feelings. That is what we always have to remember, you know. We have to ask ourselves, what is really happening there? At the moment, we are witnessing the 'Arab Spring'. Ok, they want democracy, they have the political attention and sympathy of the West. That must upset the religious powers in such countries. Why do they suddenly turn their attention to Salman Rushdie? His case was brought up to date. The bounty on his head was increased. The focus of simple religious people has been diverted. Concerning Salman Rushdie, what is the reason for the increased bounty other than what happened in the past? If they had wanted to kill Salman Rushdie, then they would have done it years ago. I think the whole thing is staged.

Wallraff: I think, it is also related to the politics found in Iran. Presently, there is at the moment an aggressive clique that tries to get their way which is also related to the atomic build up.

As a diversion?

Wallraff: Not only a diversion but also it reaches as far as the destruction of Israel which is constantly mentioned and threatened. It has not happened just once that there is now talk of a first strike. That they say that there they must be prepared for the destruction of their nuclear facilities. So a first strike capability should be kept. And we must not forget that the Iranian secret services massacred abroad 160 members of the opposition until 2006. In the country itself we don't know the number at all – many thousands.

You have repeatedly stood for the cause of persecuted artists. What is your motivation?

Wallraff: That for me is a personal ideal. When a person is persecuted and threatened with death, naturally I stand up for them. I take them on board and do everything possible to bring them out of harms way.

And you mean to say that Shahin Najafi should also be very careful like the more well known Salman Rushdie. As Salman Rushdie is again the centre of attention Shahin Najafi should also be very careful?

Wallraff: Yes, the more he gets attention and that hopefully happens as an artist, the more he's unfortunately in danger. Fortunately, we have here protection and security which I don't want to talk about in detail. But he really has to take care. He is in great danger.

Elke Safaei-Rad *is a German journalist based in Cologne. She began freelancing regularly for German, Austrian and French broadcasters in 1996. Since then, she has mainly reported from the Middle East and Africa on culturally and politically related issues. Elke Safaei-Rad's report on the fatwa against Shahin Najafi was broadcasted on Austrian tv in the fall of 2012.*

ALL THAT IS BANNED IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression

JABER AL AZMEH: 'WOUNDS' POSTER FROM A PROTEST IN KAFER NBL, SYRIA 'VOLUNTEER' 'MY REQUEST IS FREEDOM'

Syria: Art, creative resistance and active citizenship

The links between creative resistance and active citizenship, art and civic conscience have been a strong component of the Syrian uprising. Finally, citizens have turned into peer-creators and users, who have now the tools to express their creativity.

BY DONATELLA DELLA RATTA

DURING THE EARLY DAYS of a freezing winter 2011, some colored posters featuring a brand-new advertising campaign from a world-famous telephone brand mushroomed in Damascus. The posters introduced the newest 3G enabled smartphone, displaying a Twitter timeline where "tweeps" (avatars of people) were engaged in light conversations about food, clothes, and lifestyles. These "tweets" chatted about stuff like:

"It's Friday – any recommendation on a good film?"

"Need food? Anyone going for lunch in NH?"; and were written in English.

Yet, the slogan that matched the twitter conversation was in Arabic. In English, it sounded like "quintessentially social"; something that carried with the brand new phone and an always-on mobile Internet connection the promise of new friendships, exciting love affairs, maybe future business deals to be.

The smartphone campaign connected the latest, fashionable tech-gadget to an idea of sociality strictly related to the newest social network, Twitter, still quite unknown in Syria. Technology consumption was associated with an alleged quintessential idea of sociality: going out with friends, talking about food, buying new fashionable clothes, *twitting*.

The “quintessentially social” campaign spoke to a safe middle-upper class target, urban elites who were familiar with the English language; they probably knew of Twitter and would have been able to purchase the latest tech-chic gadget to stay always connected. It was probably the same crowd that had populated the new stylish cafés that popped up all across Damascus (and in Aleppo and Lattakia) drinking *latte*, smoking apple-flavored hubble-bubbles and checking emails using the widely available free wi-fi connections.

A 2007 ban blocking YouTube and Facebook had been lifted in February 2011, opening up the “quintessentially social” world of new technology to public consumption and promising new freedoms to those who were able to purchase it.

Just few weeks after the telephone campaign’s billboards had appeared, the first *Twestival* (a physical meet-up of Twitter users, happening simultaneously all across the world) was organized in Damascus for the first time. The festival logo featured the famous bird symbolizing Twitter while flying up free towards the sky and carrying bright ideas. Scheduled for 24 March 2011, the Damascus Twestival never took place; Syrian security apparatus had probably deemed inappropriate and dangerous to allow such a tech gathering to be held just after the first protest erupted in the Syrian capital on 15 March 2011.

Some more weeks passed: the killing of protesters intensified, the protests themselves intensified, and the smartphone posters quickly disappeared to make space to a new advertising campaign. Billboards featured a colored raised hand declaring:

“Whether progressive or conservative, I am with the law,”

“Whether girl or boy, I am with the law,”

“Whether rational or emotional, I am with the law” and similar other slogans, all matched with multi-colored, raised hands. At some point, with all these colored hands raised everywhere in public spaces, cities had a sort of Orwellian atmosphere; as if a sort of “Big Brother” was watching citizens and reminding them to comply with the law. It was a clear message sent to prevent people from hitting the streets and protesting again.

Yet, soon thereafter, other colored raised hands mushroomed over the Internet.

“I am free,” said one raised hand on a Facebook group.

“I lost my shoes”, echoed another – suggesting that the shoes had been thrown at the dictator, a way to express scorn and dissent in the Arab world.

“I am not Indian,” joked another poster, using a popular expression meaning “I am not stupid”, “you cannot fool me”.

These “dissident” raised hands were multiple answers to the “I am with the law” statement; they re-affirmed people’s dissent and expressed defiance vis-à-vis an idea of “law” and “lawlessness” which was unilaterally imposed on citizens by the regime.

At some point, probably realizing the ambiguity of the word “law” in a country like Syria where rule of law hardly exists, the campaign was re-designed in order to take a more neutral, sober form. This time the raised hand simply said: “I am with Syria.”

The colours used were those of the Syrian national flag — red, white, black, and green — and the slogan declared: “My demand is your demand.”

It was probably safer to try to win citizens’ hearts and minds by appealing to a middle-way, a generic form of “nationalism”, as if all the demands of Syrian people would have to be exactly the same.

Yet the new, more accommodating campaign registered another novel wave of user-generated responses over the Internet, and this time not only in virtual spaces. Armed with a marker and probably at nighttime, some citizens took

the courage to descend from the virtual alleys of Facebook to the real streets of Syria. They deleted the second half of the slogan – "My demand is your demand" – and changed it into: "My demand is freedom."

Since those early months of 2011, the raised-hands' ***meme*** has been reproduced, re-manipulated, shared, remixed for more than one year and half. By looking at the campaign's remixes generated by unknown users one could easily guess the "temperature" of the Syrian street on a given topic, at a given moment.

Some of the remixed posters say "I want to be martyred", expressing the position of those who are willing to die for Syria. Other user-generated posters feature two hands that are about to shake each: "Whether anti or pro-regime, you are still my brother and we care for the country", the slogan says, evoking a middle ground solution to the crisis. Even pro-regime positions are featured in the user-generated "raised hands" campaign; such as a poster with Bashar al Asad's picture stating "Whether you like it or not, I love him".

The latest remixes of the campaign, spotted on Facebook few weeks ago, show tens of colored hands, raised all together declaring "I want to help"; or encouraging other people to join the humanitarian efforts by saying "volunteer!". In many areas that have been hit by the regime's crackdown on protests and devastated by the clashes between the regular army and the Free Syrian army, these loosely organized volunteer efforts re-grouping all those

who are willing to help keeping the country together, whatever their political positions are, signal that Syrian civil society is active on the ground and engaged in joint humanitarian efforts which very rarely are reported by the media.

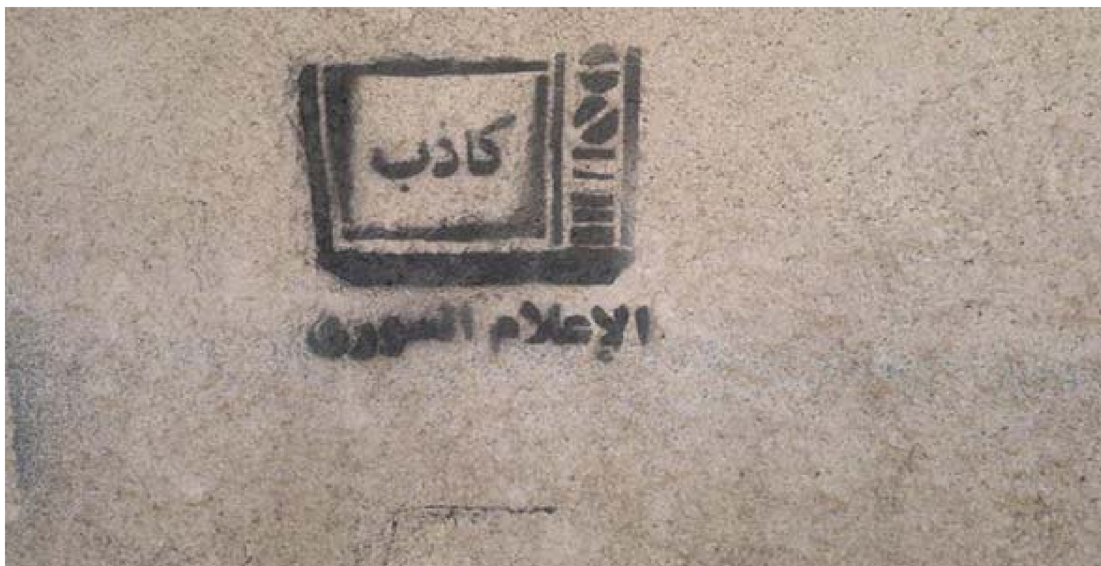
The "raised hands" campaign is one of the brightest examples of how creative forms generated by anonymous users – whether cartoons, mesh-ups, political posters or remixed ***memes*** – express the Syrians' renewed willingness to manifest their opinions throughout peer-creation. More than that, it signals the existence of a citizens' forum, a space where all sorts of opinions and political positions are represented and debated.

"Quintessentially social" tech tools like mobiles are not used to exchange information about food, clothes and hangouts as foreseen in the 2011 smartphone's ads campaign targeted on the upper-middle class; unexpectedly, they have become tools in the hands of the broader Syrian population, including the have-nots, to document and share the events unfolding in the country. Internet, and particularly social networks have turned into the places where both manifestations of Syria's creative dissent and expressions of an existing active citizenry are proliferating.

Anonymous communities of Syrians using irony and dark comedy to express their defiance in a creative way have been mushrooming over the Internet for the past year and half.

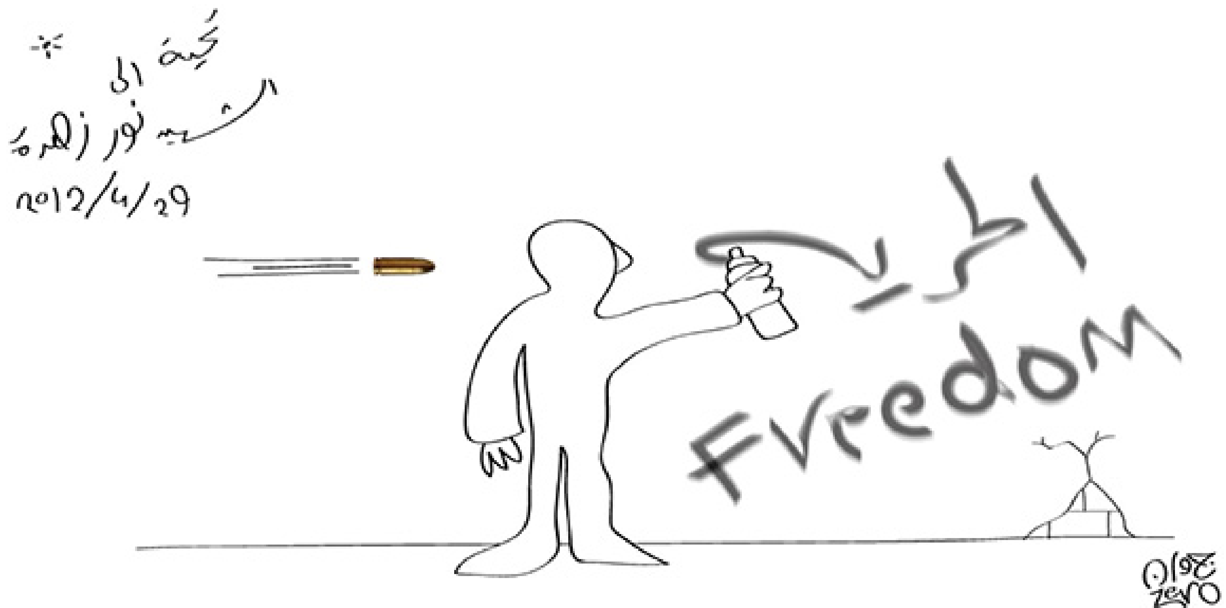
In early 2011, the ***Chinese Revolution Facebook page*** was one of the first and most followed groups in the Syrian uprising to use satire to convey ideas of political dissent. The virtual community used to narrate the first demonstrations – and the first killings of protesters - as if the events were unfolding in China, using caricatures of Bashar al Asad and his cousin Rami Makhlouf dressed in traditional Chinese clothes and mocking the regime who pretended the legitimate requests of freedom and dignity to be a foreign conspiracy. Through their irony and dark humor, the "Chinese" revolutionaries were not only expressing dissent in a creative way, by producing cartoons, caricatures, jokes, etc.; they were also signaling their civic awareness, re-affirming their rights as citizens to manifest their own views and take part to the country's political process.

Other groups, like ***Ayyam al hurriyya*** (Freedom days) combined a fine mastering of video animation techniques with civic messages and calls to civil disobedience. Their YouTube channel, where videos are uploaded weekly, contains clips that document tactics of civil disobedience in Syria (such as drawing defiant anti-regime graffiti; distributing forbidden leaflets; building road blocks, etc); but also creative animations explaining the importance of forgiving in order to re-build the nation and preserve the unity of the country.



Communities of defiant artists have also organized creative virtual campaigns on the Internet that then turned into real actions on the ground. Such as the ***Freedom Graffiti Week***; a campaign with Syrian illustrators, mostly resident outside the country, designing all sort of defiant graffiti, later reproduced by "spray-men" on the ground. One of this graffiti, featuring a television screen displaying the slogan "Syrian media are liars" (a tribute to one of the most

popular chants of the Syrian uprising), has been painted everywhere, from Syrian city walls to posters shown during street demonstrations. The latest campaign launched by the Facebook group features the faces of prominent Syrian historical personalities, like Sultan al Atrash and Shukri al-Quwatli, and carries the sign “where are you?”, clearly lamenting the absence of a strong but fair leadership in the revolution.
Some Syrian spray-men have paid with their own lives for these apparently insignificant acts of creative dissidence, as it happened to Nour Hatem Zahra, a young Damascene graffiti maker who was assassinated in April 2012 while painting the city’s walls with his drawings. Juan Zero, another Syrian artist, has given a bitter representation of Nour’s destiny, picturing him being hit by a bullet while spraying the word “freedom”.



Despite the violence – which has been dramatically rising in this second half of 2012 – and the bombings, killings, displacement of civilians that take place on a daily basis in Syria, defiant citizens still manage to find their ways to express dissent in amazingly creative ways. In a quasi-media blackout, Syrian creative resistance is blossoming on the Internet.

Creative resistance

Already existing communities of artists are continuously alimenting their creative productions; like the ***Arts and Freedom*** collective, which, among many others, hosts the work of photographer Jaber al Azmeh; the cartoonists and illustrators’ group Comic 4 Syria; the masked video-artist ***Anzeh Walo Tarat*** who has been producing a satirical news bulletin mocking the Syrian regime since August 2011; or the successful puppet show ***Top goon: diaries of a little dictator,*** by ***Masasit Mati***, which has reached its second season on YouTube.

Besides this, many new formed Syrian creative groups are sprouting out on the Internet, carrying a unique message which combines irony and satire with non-violent resistance and civil disobedience. Although, as Top goon’s director Jameel recently clarified in a public event held at the Hermitage museum in Amsterdam, “non-violence does not mean that the Syrian people should not have the right to legitimate defense when they are brutally attacked. Pacifism should stay as the ultimate goal and should always inspire and guide the Syrian uprising”.

Many artists are trying to use creativity and art as an antidote to a much feared disintegration of the Syrian society, exposed to daily violence and threatened by sectarian hate. The Facebook group ***Syrian Animation***’s latest cartoon, called ‘My home is my brother’s home’, suggests helping those who lost their homes and who are in need of humanitarian aid. Many humanitarian campaigns that use creativity and art to engage Syrians in nation building and cross-sectarian solidarity are populating Facebook, calling for mutual help. Yet, this humanitarian and creative side of

the Syrian uprising is almost unknown to the majority of Arab and international media, too concentrated on images of civil war and sectarian strife to be able to scout these little gems of innovative creative resistance.

Probably acknowledging the mainstream media's poor estimation of this creative phenomenon, and realizing the challenges that Facebook's chaotic flow of information poses to archiving material and giving the overflowing Syria's content its right context, a group of Syrian activists has launched *Mashrou' Dawlaty*, the most comprehensive database of the country's creative resistance so far.

The most important Syrian artists who emerged from the uprising are listed there, their works classified and displayed: from videos to graffiti, from posters to comics, including audio clips of different music genres. Any user involved in content production can contribute to enriching the database by sending his/her works online.

Dawlaty is not only the biggest archive of user-generated creativity from the Syrian uprising, a repository where the enormous amount of writings, drawings, filming produced so far can finally be displayed, helping people realizing the relevance and the extent of this creative resistance's phenomenon. The project also gives visibility to the non-violent movement and to its wide posters and video content production. It declares to be aiming at working to build a civil state based on human rights, the rule of law and citizenship's awareness.

So far, the link between creative resistance and active citizenship, art and civic conscience has been a strong component of the Syrian uprising. Finally, citizens have turned into peer-creators and users, who have now the tools to express their creativity.

Donatella Della Ratta *is a Ph.D. fellow at Copenhagen University in Denmark and at the Danish Institute in Damascus, Syria. Her Ph.D. work revolves around the production and distribution of Syrian tv drama.*
After falling in love with the Arab world and its cultures more than 15 years ago, Donatella has specialised in Arab media issues. She has published several chapters in collective books on Arab tv industries and two monographs on Pan Arab satellite channels.

Donatella is also an affiliate at Harvard University, Berkman Center for Internet and Society. She blogs on Arab media at mediaoriente.com and tweets avidly on the Arab world, tech and society at twitter.com with the username: @donatelladr

Since 2008 Donatella has been (happily and proudly) managing the Arabic speaking community at Creative Commons and she has actively contributed to many technology-focused events held in the Arab world.

Photos:
The Nokia picture: photo by Donatella Della Ratta, licensed under creativecommons.org
The Twestival logo: unknown artist
The first raised hand (blue), 'I am with the law': photo by Donatella Della Ratta, creativecommons.org
The second raised hand (green), 'My request is freedom', unknown artist
The four hands, 'Whether opposition or pro-regime, you're still my brother': unknown artist
The graffiti, 'Syrian media are liars': unknown artist
The Freedom cartoon, tribute to martyr Nour Hatem Zahra: by Juan Zero

www.artsfreedom.org