

No Offence?

Ellen Mara De Wachter

UK art institutions and
self-censorship

Jennet Thomas
*The Unspeakable Freedom
Device*, 2015

Courtesy
the artist and Grundy
Art Gallery,
Blackpool; cinematography:
Paul Tarrago



When Jennet Thomas's exhibition 'The Unspeakable Freedom Device' opened at the Grundy Art Gallery in Blackpool in early July, it was with a sense of delayed vindication. Although the project was initially devised in response to a specific moment in the UK's political calendar, it had been postponed for more than 10 months. The show featured the eponymous video: a dystopian science fiction with colour-coded cults and a Margaret Thatcher impersonator. Commissioned by the Grundy to be shown from September to November 2014 (the run-up to a local by-election), its plot follows the two protagonists on their way to the fictitious 'LIVING THATCHER DEVICE SHOW' at Blackpool's Winter Gardens, a venue famous for having hosted the annual

Conservative Party conference during the Thatcher years. Thomas's video caused controversy even before it was finished, when Blackpool councillors apparently became aware of an interview in which the artist had criticized the policies of the ruling, Conservative-led government. Citing the *purdah* period – the time between an announced election and the final election results, when central and local governments are forbidden from making any statements that could influence the outcome – the council postponed Thomas's show. The notion that the video could have swayed the public vote is unconvincing, but the Grundy, which is owned and operated by the local council, had little recourse against the ruling.

The episode recalled another Thatcher-related act of censorship from 2011, when John Russell was commissioned to create new work for a show at Focal Point Gallery in Southend-on-Sea. The artist had planned to suspend a vinyl banner bearing the name 'MARGARET THATCHER' from the bridge spanning the town's pedestrianized high street. But, as Russell recounted to me: 'The idea was blocked by the council. No reasons were reported back but it was made clear that it couldn't happen.' Russell adapted his proposal to a banner depicting a pair of eyes looking down the street. Eventually, he revealed that they 'were Thatcher's eyes – although I didn't make that clear at first'.

Thomas told me that the council's actions felt like a form of

'bullying'; they're also indicative of the lack of clear guidance around censorship in the UK. It's an issue that is prone to euphemism and secrecy, which makes the cases that do come to light all the more significant, in terms of their implications for freedom of expression in a country that purports to embrace liberal values. In addition to the censorship of existing works, there is evidence that a cocktail of pressures from officials, the public, sponsors and boards is encouraging arts institutions to 'self-censor': in other words, suppress the discussion or expression of certain ideas or themes, and programme 'safe' exhibitions. Of course, in an apparently polite and liberal regime, self-censorship can often be unconscious, especially when

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the contentious issues brought up by artworks are close to home. However, there is a grey area between self-editing, which we all do on a daily basis, and self-censorship. Artists and arts administrators are often unwilling to discuss the problem openly for fear of compromising crucial funding and putting colleagues' jobs at risk.

Jodie Ginsberg, CEO of the campaigning charity Index on Censorship, explained to me that 'the decision not to programme a piece of work is related to the fear of consequences: the fear of hostile media, fear of damaging funding relationships, fear of [causing] offence or fear of – or actual – violent protest as a reaction to an art work'. In 2013, Index on Censorship's conference 'Taking the Offensive' focused on 'institutional self-censorship' and was attended by 224 delegates from UK arts organizations, funders and artists. This July, the charity launched a series of 'law packs' aimed at arts professionals, to make clear their legal standing regarding public order, child protection, obscenity and racial and religious hatred, as well as recent counter-terrorism legislation, an area much debated in relation to broadcasting rights and teaching practices.

In March this year, the first-ever debate in the House of Commons on artistic freedom of expression was held. Jude Kelly, artistic director of the Southbank Centre in London, Munira Mirza, London's deputy mayor for education and culture, and Shami Chakrabarti, the director of Liberty, all spoke about a 'chilling rise in self-censorship' across art forms – from theatre and literature to contemporary art – and the potentially catastrophic effect this could have on culture in Britain.

A recent example: in September 2014, Brett Bailey's 'Exhibit B', a series of tableaux vivants based on the human zoos of the 19th century, was picketed on its opening night at London's Barbican by protesters who blockaded the street in front of the theatre. The police were brought in and the venue cancelled the show, citing 'the extreme nature of the protest and

John Russell
*Angel of History: I Can See
for Miles*, 2011

Courtesy
the artist, MOT International,
London and Brussels,
and Focal Point Gallery,
Southend-on-Sea

the serious threat to the safety of performers, audiences and staff'. As part of her work with Index on Censorship, Kelly spoke to the police about how to train officers to 'understand the freedom of speech we have built our society on'. Her sentiments were echoed by Prime Minister David Cameron in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings in January, when he declared: 'We should never give up the values that we believe in and defend as part of our democracy and civilization and believing in a free press, in freedom of expression, in the right of people to write and say what they believe.'

Next year, a project by the London-based Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour, *In the Future, They Ate From the Finest Porcelain* (2014), will tour to the New Art Exchange in Nottingham, the Bluecoat in Liverpool and Wolverhampton Art Gallery. The project grew out of an incident in 2011 in which Sansour was excluded from the shortlist for the Lacoste Elysée Prize by the Musée de l'Élysée in Lausanne because of demands from the museum's sponsors, Lacoste, who felt that her work was 'too pro-Palestinian'. Sansour's proposal had been to create a series of images of a 'vertical solution to

Palestinian statehood [...] a single skyscraper: the Nation Estate'. She issued a public statement about the debacle and gained international support for her position. The museum eventually cancelled the competition and severed all ties with Lacoste: a victory for the artist and for freedom of expression. As Søren Lind, Sansour's partner and main collaborator explained to me: 'It was a positive experience in the end because of the support for Larissa's work [...] had the reverse been the case, I'm not sure what would have happened to the practice.'

If Thomas's and Russell's critiques of neo-Thatcherism were unacceptable to local councillors, Sansour's imaginative take on Palestinian Statehood has received significant support from public institutions across the UK. Recent interest in art from contentious regions, such as the Middle East – specifically, in recent years, Syria – is reflected in publicly funded projects like the Shubbak festival of contemporary Arab culture, founded by the Mayor of London in 2011, and the British Council's exhibition 'Syria: Third Space', which toured from London to Brussels this year. Just as artists pick their battles when it comes to the subject matter for their work, so institutions and those in charge of funding seem to pick their minefields, and some events taking place beyond UK borders appear to be more fashionable than sensitive domestic issues around politics, economics or race. In facing this reticence to give voice to controversial local issues, Ginsberg encourages artists to 'be prepared to defend the work, and find producers who are willing to support it, share the risk [...] There are plenty out there – it is not all doom and gloom.'

These cases of interference from local governments, boards and corporate sponsors may seem relatively few when set against the abundant landscape of contemporary art production in Britain, but by discouraging curators and artists from taking a stand on controversial issues, they signal the presence of an insidious form of control. The problem requires transparency from institutions about the challenges they face with regard to censorship and self-censorship, and open discussion of new cases as they arise.

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