

Frieze

Features /



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A Roundtable on Free Speech

As the world tips towards more reactionary and fascist regimes, what does it mean to call for artistic freedoms that implicitly reproduce oppression?

Freedom at the Expense of Others

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On 23 January, artist and writer Hannah Black, independent curator Howie Chen and artist Ajay Kurian arrived at Frieze's New York office to discuss free speech and artistic expression. Jamillah James, curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA, and Suhail Malik, co-director of the MFA Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK, joined by telephone. Organized by Chen, the resulting roundtable addressed 'recent ruptures in the art world' that have 'revealed sobering glimpses into how the project of artistic freedom' has been co-opted by the far right. These include an exhibition by a self-styled neo-fascist at a gallery in downtown New York last year, protests against which were dismissed by some as anti-freedom of expression; several recent shows that made use of cultural appropriation; and even a far-right gallery in London, which closed in 2017 after sustained protests against its programme. In the following discussion, the five participants attempt to account for – and critique – the troubling legacies of the avant-garde, the political history of free speech in the US and the far right's interest in contemporary art.

– **Andrew Durbin**, senior editor, frieze

Howie Chen Recent ruptures in the art world have revealed sobering glimpses into how the project of artistic freedom has undergone significant transformations oriented toward the reactionary, libertarian assertion of the individual. Underlying these controversies – from the showing of self-styled neo-fascist artist Boyd Rice at Greenspon Gallery in New York in 2018 to the far-right, London-based gallery LD50, which was forced to close in 2017 – claims of 'free speech' have been an effective rhetorical manoeuvre, leveraging narratives of artistic autonomy to neutralize open critique and to legitimate regressive and structurally racist situations. In each case, artists, institutions and the public have insisted on the privilege of artistic freedom, even when it comes at the expense of others.

These scenarios have put artists of colour into a position where they must defend a history and expression different from the dominant order while simultaneously affirming the spirit of art. As the world tips towards more reactionary and fascist regimes, what does it mean to call for artistic freedoms that implicitly reproduce oppression?

Ajay Kurian Part of what has bothered me is that, despite these cultural shifts – in which museums and galleries have begun to move towards greater inclusivity with calls for different voices to complicate a singular vision of art history – there's still a strong contingent in the art world that is quite reactionary. Alongside this institutional refocusing, we must also acknowledge that the way people manoeuvre around the argument of 'free speech' goes hand in hand with existent racism, xenophobia and sexism. Something that has surprised me in the last few years is the extent to which the people whom I considered peers, not only in art but in their politics, have proved themselves not to be by defending some of these reactionary artists.

Hannah Black When we talk about free speech, it already feels like we're ceding ground to the right. I find it hard to believe that there's so much faith in the idea of some Habermasian public sphere, where everyone speaks freely. It's obviously not real.

HC In a way, to talk about free speech is to engage in a rhetorical distraction within an existing order.

HB Free speech bears the traces of its specific history as a concept, which is entangled with the material histories of domination that were attendant to the earlier stages of US democracy – or any democracy, perhaps.

AK Yes. How reactionary forces utilize the concept of free speech isn't just symptomatic of structural degradation, it's foundational. To even talk about the First Amendment of the US Bill of Rights is to speak about the origins of a decrepit form of democracy that never delivered on the promise of egalitarian free speech in the first place. It was always already situated within the form of domination.

I haven't read Michel Foucault for a long time, but I was thinking about how he tracks, in his lectures of the late 1970s at the Collège de France, a monumental shift in sovereign power. In the 17th century, the king, queen or president determined life and death in an immediate fashion; whereas, with the advent of liberalism and new forms of biopolitical governance, there has been a move to a soft agency, in which the power of the sovereign is distributed into various systems of indirect governance. The need to kill has gone; now, a system can simply 'let die'. An individual isn't responsible for what lives, but a system can perpetuate life or, as Foucault says, can 'make live'. What do people preserve? What are they spending their energies fighting for versus the things they remain utterly silent about?

HC Suhail, in the wake of the controversy around LD50 gallery in London, you succinctly outlined how contemporary art is particularly susceptible to hosting and reproducing regressive positions. How does this mesh with the counter-normative narrative of art – about pushing boundaries and being open?

Suhail Malik It's related, I think, to the legacy of the avant-garde. But, before elaborating on that, we also need to think about how and why art is a really good venue for the far right to exploit. That's not so far from the history of the avant-garde, which had an avowedly neo-fascist tendency, particularly in the first half of the 20th century. That tendency dissipated and became difficult to articulate directly after World War II – also because of the demise of the kinds of modernism that neo-fascist avant-gardism signed up for. Today, that demise is the move away from a programmatic modernism to contemporary art. Instead of presenting a prescriptive message heralded by a daring avant-garde movement, however, contemporary art restricts itself to claims of individual, and therefore innumerable plural, assertions. The 'hearing of new voices no matter what' assertion that is central to contemporary art's self-legitimation, then, is not only a mutation of the avant-garde claim against standardization and limited thought; it is also a best-case liberalism.

The difficulty for contemporary art when confronted with far-right entryism now is that free speech is assumed to be the basis for the plurality of individual voices. Even if a message of violent oppression is being espoused, doing so on the basis of free speech gives you a pass. The trick mobilized by the far right is to position their noxious, violence-baiting assertions as the 'at-last-free' views of individuals who would be oppressed otherwise. Like every other anxious liberal, contemporary art as a historically defined set of praxes is defenceless against this claim because it has relied on that position for its own validity. Where struggles in the contemporary art sector can be more generally instructive is in considering how to counter the articulation of toxic views without sacrificing the very thing that makes contemporary art what it is.

HB I've been trying to think about the appropriative vitalism of modernism as a constitutive trace of contemporary art. I'm wondering whether this era of critique, of noticing the ways modern art has historically relied on racial thinking – its borrowing from a perceived outside full of nourishing but incoherent energies – might actualize something you've been talking about for a while, Suhail, which is the abolition of contemporary art as such. In a sense, the Western discovery of abstraction is more about a specific Western history of figuration; abstraction was arrived at through an injection of this different visual language that comes via the colonial encounter. There's an example in Peter Linebaugh's *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000) about rich people eating medicine made from the dead bodies of poor people and 'Libyans'. Maybe that's a literal expression of the same process, in which certain forms of visual innovation are made possible by borrowing from an outside.

In a way, the right-wing fear – 'Why are you being so mean to art?!' – is correct. Making art accountable to the history of race is actually an attack on a foundational structure of how modern and contemporary art has worked.

HC Maybe we can think about the reactionary modes of cultural and representational appropriation that are occurring in art now as symptomatic of an entropic Western system: the artistic gesture as a deliberate grab of what is perceived as outside of the artist's purview – whether it is claiming the 'free' use of certain imagery, subject matter or even positions of victimhood.

SM Vitalism was common to both left- and right-wing modernist avant-gardes: what remains of it in contemporary art is the commitment to subverting or countermanding the fixity and stabilization of norms and standards. While the free speech of the public sphere was an attempt to act independently of despotic power (the monarch, the church, etc.) and so was directed to undo imposed requirements of absolute power, it also established new standards and norms – those of the bourgeoisie, who were in turn attacked by the avant-garde. It's worth remembering that this establishment of free speech – which set the template for the argument against censorship – wasn't just everyone spouting off whatever they wanted. Free speech was validated as a way to undo the despotism of absolute power and establish a collective sense of what the rational, good thing to do would be. This

conclusion was reached thanks to people speaking freely to one another. It assumed the commonplace, which is certainly culturally specific and relied economically on colonial extraction and a rapidly developing mercantile capitalism. Free speech in this formation assumes, and is directed to, a set of normative structures that would be improved by a collective use of common intelligence. Contrast this to the demands for free speech today, especially as it is propagandistically performed by the far right, in which anything that is said is, per se, a testimony to freedom. Of course, that's a cloak to give their vicious messages validity. Two things are striking: first, that free speech as an end in itself makes no sense in terms of the history of the public sphere that originally supported it; free speech that doesn't contribute to collective intelligence goes against the imperatives of the public sphere. Second, that such a stance is more or less an avant-gardism.

HB When Greenspon Gallery was criticized for showing art by Boyd Rice, I was naively surprised by the reactions of some of the people I know socially in the art world. At best, you could say that they didn't seem that bothered if they were aligning themselves with a fascist or not, which seems extraordinary to me. Why would they rush to defend someone who is celebrated on Stormfront forums as a white-power inspiration? But what's being defended is a norm of transgression. What they are supporting in the name of transgression is actually an intensely restrictive norm that paradoxically and wrongly understands itself as transgressive. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why some of these otherwise hard-to-understand pro-fascist political positions develop.

HC I would go even further: these people are not just being counter-normative for the sake of it. These transgressions seem to rely on the perspective that liberal ideology is now the constrictive norm of the art world, that to be counter-liberal is somehow identified as being avant garde or, at least, masquerading as avant-garde. The other interesting twist is that, historically, in art, the counter-normative position is adopted from a place of powerlessness. This new quasi avant-garde is no longer marginal but located deep in the art world. In fact, you can make the argument that this counter-normative stance emanates from a position of real power. With Rice and the artist who he showed alongside, Darja Bajagic', or even the recent Kai Althoff show at Tramps in New York's Chinatown, there is already a robust art-world apparatus – social, critical, institutional, market – that supports problematic positions of appropriation and even gentrification.

AK It's fascinating. When people do learn the impulses and historical motifs of how freedom articulates itself, those girding structures fall by the wayside and an aesthetic without context plants itself instead. Punk music immediately comes to mind or Kanye West's embrace of Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' ha]t. Decontextualization appears to be so foundational to contemporary art-making that, when you attempt to rescue context or history, it feels too responsible, like you're tattling on the cool kids, when it's actually an attempt to keep us from ignorance.

Jamillah James After years of being part of the experimental music scene, I'm reminded that this notion of coolness is still very much at play in our various corners of the world. Coolness functions as a way to counter what is an officially acceptable way of behaving. Rice has been a spectre in experimental music for a number of years and people have tried to call him out during that time, but not very successfully because he has many defenders who argue that we should let him make his work or writings because they're cool, or because he's affiliated with this person or this act or this band. It becomes cultural currency. There will always be those artists who reveal a conservative undercurrent in the art world, even as their work dresses itself with coolness. As one of the few black women in that scene at the time, having to hear that bullshit over the years has been really tiring. So, when it traffics into the art world, it's exciting to see people actually calling it out, but also disheartening how many people defend it as well.

HB My friend, the artist Kandis Williams, said the other day: 'That's always been white-boy cool: it's one-third Nazi, one-third architect and one-third NBA.' But I was still surprised by the reactions to Rice. Maybe I was naive to be. No one seemed to have heard of no-platforming, which isn't to say that people have to agree with that as a strategy, but it was striking to me that such a fairly basic left concept was so unfamiliar. In terms of a critique of capitalism, few people seem to have read anything more in-depth than Mark Fisher and a lot of people don't understand the critique of Fordism, so their critique is basically a plea to return to Fordism and the family wage. They don't understand or care that capitalism didn't suddenly start being bad with the advent of what's been sloppily called neoliberalism. They don't understand the profound links between capitalism and fascism. Maybe art schools are partly to blame, plus the long tail of McCarthyism.

AK The people who wanted to speak up during the controversy around Rice's show declined to do so because social media, where many public debates now takes place, is so toxic. And there is no other way to be heard in a situation like that – or so it would seem. The voices that countered the prevailing narrative of free speech and censorship once again fell mostly along racial lines, with many white artists not only supporting the show but making it their cause to fight for the sanctity of an artist's voice – as if their liberty were ever in question.

Many artists of colour whom I spoke to were in agreement that it wasn't about curtailing freedom. The graphic designer for Rice's Greenspon show posted the flyer he'd made on his Instagram account and wrote that people wouldn't get to see it because of the 'brown goblins' of New York. And I thought: good, I'm not crazy! I knew that at the heart of this was loosely veiled racism dressed as edgy and – importantly – formal art, but here it was finally exposed. Yet, his post made no splash, despite coverage from Artnews. Instead, the conversation turned around the idea that there was some secret email network of artists powerful enough to shut down exhibitions; that the real problem was them, not a washed-up neo-Nazi who was given a show at a reputable New York gallery.

HC There seem to be differing concepts of free speech in these cases, which are inconsistently enforced and distributed. For example, people are anti-censorship over an exhibition or artwork but are also intolerant of conversations on a private mailing list or protests in an open letter, or even a painting. The public unease and press censorship of Hamishi Farah's Representation of Arlo (2018) – which, in response to Dana Schutz's

controversial painting of 14-year-old lynching victim Emmett Till, *Open Casket* (2016), depicted Schutz's son – underlined the different freedoms, representations and transgressions allowed in the art world.

JJ Censorship and critique are two completely different things. If you're calling something out as racist or sexist or misogynist, then that's entirely different from what artists – particularly those of colour, women and LGBTQ – have endured for trying to advance what we understand as free speech. Time and again, cultural workers in the arts have been held to completely different standards. Free speech isn't necessarily free for some of us. There will always be greater consequences for calling things out than for just letting them develop unquestioned.

At the end of the day, whether people choose to protest a museum because its board members support abhorrent causes or not, things will continue regardless; institutions will find money another way. With musicians and the music industry, when people protest shows or don't buy tickets, that impacts the club owner very directly; museums are more resilient, unfortunately. But I hope that people still feel invested and speak up; don't let people of colour in the art world do all the heavy lifting in calling these things out.

HC Music has a better clearing house for this type of conflict. When the same issues leaked into the art world, it became evident that there weren't adequate tools, concepts or strategies to articulate the problem for everyone involved. Instead, it was reduced to questions of who had the right to free speech and artistic expression; that if you don't unconditionally support it, somehow art will die. It was on these grounds that those who expressed concern over the exhibition were neutralized and counter-trolled. Protests over museum funding are met with the same arguments: if we vet financial backing, institutions will have no money and artists will starve. This attitude weirdly conflates the 'free' spirit of art with neoliberalism; art and capital, in this formulation, need to be radically unobstructed. It's a cynical position because it doesn't acknowledge the possibility of real discourse and structural reform in art.

SM I find myself in the unusual position of wanting to defend the art world because my sense is that manifestations of the far right in art become major issues. Very quickly, there's a fairly clear intention in terms of revulsion, antagonism and mobilization against these eruptions. And what happens through these reactions is an implicit articulation of the critical norms in the contemporary art space. For me, this is actually encouraging. The issue raised by the closure of LD50 was: either free speech or protest against far-right entryism into and through art. Protests don't happen around every show: only when there's a presentation of racist, homophobic or sexist work. And, importantly, these protests seem to articulate norms and expectations in the field of art, especially as to what its critical imperative should be. The question is: what actually are our norms?

HB I want to inject a slight note of scepticism. Based on what you're saying, you'd have to conclude that the most strongly held norm of the art world is not to be cruel to animals.

HC There certainly seemed to be a swifter institutional response to animal-cruelty protests over the Guggenheim's 2017 show 'Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World' than to controversies in the art world involving race.

There is a gap between what we understand as evolutions in criticality – the idea that with each controversy there is some reaction and reform within the critical discourse, as Suhail describes – and the real, lived experience of these events, especially from the position of the protester. As Ajay laid out earlier, when somebody contests, they are invariably in the minority and instantly put on the back foot in terms of rhetoric and the response to their protest; then, they disappear. The victor is the dominant artist, the institution. The asymmetrical power relationships are maintained; it's just business as usual.

SM My sense is that, if this far-right entryism through art is to be effectively contested, we need to be clear what art's norms are and should be. Unless we articulate them and start enforcing them, then we're going to stay on the back foot, especially around free-speech claims. Liberalism won't help anyone here. The successful campaign against LD50, which made it very clear that there was no space for galleries to be presenting near-fascist practices and discourses in London, taught some valuable lessons. The organizers of the campaign are to be congratulated for setting such a clear standard.

HB Unfortunately, it didn't play out like that here in New York. People in London did a much better job in their response. Here, it's not the case that the right is always seen as bad. Maybe that reflects a difference in material conditions in the two cities, or it might be that some people just aren't trying hard enough.

HC It does feel different here: the emergence of a post-critical nihilism has made both New York-based critique and mainstream liberalism its 'edge lord' target.

HB I almost want to say that maybe it's fine for everyone to be an edge lord. The problem is that there are existing situations of violence and it's a time of intense historical wonderment and reckoning that we're in right now, which has lent extra urgency to these questions. Sometimes, a critique is being made not as a specific moral attack on one individual artist, but to open up a set of questions. Sometimes, circumstances present us with some Walter Benjamin-style dialectical image and, suddenly, we can somehow see all the way back through history, and it's here with us. The subject of race is so heavy that it makes people feel frightened and contemptuous. But I think these questions could be read much more lightly, even playfully. Perhaps playfully is the wrong term, but then I think about how I'm asked to see swastikas as a playful and provocative use of imagery. These moments of historical eruption are interesting in that they are not only moral claims. I often feel ambivalent about the way these intensities get re-contained as basically uninteresting moral dilemmas about the ethics of art.

AK If we're talking about norms, then there has to be more to a position than just adopting an unhinged, negative standpoint.

HB I love negativity.

AK Negativity is absolutely necessary but, without context, it can also be the engine of repression. There's no escaping that possibility, but I think it helps to understand negativity as tactically useful rather than as an end in itself.

HB In terms of pro-transgression people, I'm not saying they're all necessarily baby boomers, but I think they carry the trace of that generation, which believes – regardless of how established and knitted into the social fabric you become – you still inherently represent a force of transgression. The thing that makes these people uncomfortable about certain strategies deployed by artists of colour or queer artists is that they're too affirmative: these are artworks that don't look like art because they affirm collective identity or history, or they aspire to be therapeutic interventions. That is my maximally generous reading of what some people's issue with the current prevailing mode of critique in art is. It's an issue I also sometimes struggle with in my own work.

The affirmative nature of many strategies used by artists of colour is, to an extent, problematic for some of the norms of transgression within contemporary art. These strategies are not formally transgressive, in that they don't rely on explicit negation, but they do have a literally, technically transgressive relationship to some of the operations of a predominantly white-coded contemporary art. I'm also thinking of the ways that black American art has, to some extent, a parallel history quarantined from white US art history in order to obfuscate the reliance of the latter on the former.

AK This is a tangle that I've also been thinking about: is there a space where you're not bound to history but you acknowledge your place in it and what you're up against? It's hard to describe but, sometimes, that affirmation – specifically thinking about marginalized communities and how they necessarily have to affirm one another and affirm history – feels almost too much of a responsibility. How do you find a place where you can be irreverent or irresponsible while understanding the dialectic between individual and history, structure and contingency? There's no speech that doesn't come with baggage. And, if we can start to give sense to the baggage, then that could also empower people to speak differently.

HC Circling back to the beginning of the conversation, perhaps the current instinct to transgress norms, either by the right or the left, is born out of a collective frustration with the ham-fisted way liberal critique has manifested in institutions. For example, how can museums seek to represent everyone but also underwrite the narrative of artistic individualism? There is an underlying contradiction here. How can institutions also reform and become more complex?

JJ I think there just has to be a commitment for people to want to do that. As someone who works in museums, I can tell you that the institutional system has its own structure, norms and codes of conduct; it often operates in a vacuum. People are very reticent to push against that. I've been in rooms full of curators who are uncomfortable with the idea of having to do extra research or to reach out – even just to try to make shows in a way that's socially responsible and includes more stakeholders. Things are accelerating now, in large part due to social media enabling these frank and necessary conversations. Still, it seems institutions are very slow to embrace any change. As much as we'd like to see it move faster, I fear it's going to be inch by inch.

SM Until recently, my assumption – and I think that of others as well – was that most people in the art world are critically minded, left(ish) liberals. But, as these incidents in New York, London and elsewhere have shown, we can't make that assumption anymore.

This issue comes up increasingly when teaching emerging artists: what to say to students who are endorsing views sympathetic to the far right, ethno-nationalism, white supremacy, Trumpism and the rest of it? Condone the work because it reflects the students' interests? Engage with these proposals on their own terms, as though we didn't have commitments of our own? Or maintain that it has no validity because art has been part of historically progressive tendencies (with qualifications, of course) which are to be maintained? This last is no longer an automatic position.

AK The problem is I'm not even sure people on the left know what they stand for. Sometimes that's the case but, maybe because there's been such cognitive dissonance on the left, at times it appears a little confused, as if they don't know the stakes, or they simply throw their hands up in the air.

HC It may appear that people are stultified but it might also be the case that the system is rigged against those who have something to protest. I then wonder: how do we misidentify ourselves as being the censor? Those logics are inherent to this rhetorical argument: if you are the censor, you're going to kill art and, by default, destroy culture. In this context, freedom is presented as a zero-sum game.

HB 'Identity politics' is another disaster phrase that I don't want to use. But insofar as identity politics is an idea of a pure representative function – where you get artists of colour to work in galleries and that automatically means you have good politics – it is a problem in art. Different artists of colour have different political or anti-political viewpoints. And curators or institutions should be able to distinguish between these and not assume that the work's politics are entirely captured by the artist's identity. I often feel depressingly unsure whether curators and white art audiences can distinguish between someone like me – I see my work as informed by Marxist and black radical

traditions, which are to the left of liberalism – and someone who has what I'd view as a more classically liberal stance, someone who is invested primarily in inclusion and cultural activism. Of course, that's partly my fault if my work isn't clearly conveying my position, but I think there's also a systemic issue at work here. I'm curious to hear Jamillah's opinion but I feel some curators and institutions aren't keeping up.

HC I do think it is a deficiency in curatorial and critical discourse to adequately communicate the subtleties of artistic production today, especially when it is about race and representation. It takes effective critical tools to communicate that to the public, through programming or text or whatever. As a curator, Jamillah, is that something on your mind in terms of presenting artists from different subject positions? How do you create nuanced difference?

HB Or, how do you not collapse politics and identity in this moment?

JJ One of the things that I do, which I think is quite helpful and might be a departure from other institutions, is refusing to name the marker of difference that the artists may have. So, we're not holding artists of colour or queer artists to separate standards or treating how we introduce their work to an audience differently than we would a white, male artist. We wouldn't ordinarily state in the didactic or press materials that an artist was white and male, so we avoid doing so with other artists unless it is explicitly necessary to the work.

It's not just operating with that standard, however: it's also being very clear with my colleagues at the institution about the ways in which we should be discussing or highlighting the work, rather than focusing on seeing it specifically and almost exclusively through the lens of identity. I think there are ways to show the work that grapple with those ideas without being overly direct about it. I'm trying to find new means of bringing those conversations to the fore so that the audience can approach the work in a more sophisticated way: starting with the object or the image and then fully unpacking the ideas it might contain.

HB Towards the end of last year, it was revealed that Warren B. Kandors, a Whitney Museum vice chair, had profited from the sale of tear gas and rubber bullets used in Palestine, Ferguson and at the US/Mexico border through his ownership of defence manufacturer Safariland. In 2014, a loosely analogous controversy came up around the Zabłudowicz Collection in London. Their family fortune originated in Soltamn Systems – an Israeli defence contractor founded by Poju Zabłudowicz's father, Shlomo – and Poju Zabłudowicz himself served as the founder and chairman of BICOM, a British-Israeli lobbyist group. The standard defence against boycotting these institutions is an accusation of naivety: 'All the money is bad; there are no good sources of art money.' But the question isn't if violence is normal or not; trying to render the normal violence of capitalism outrageous and unacceptable is a political process. Feminist efforts to address the problem of rape are good examples of this. Rape isn't a problem because it's unusual; exactly the opposite.

Many artists have defended working with Zabłudowicz on the basis that they had to make money wherever they could. Marina Vishmidt wrote that this position is a 'fetishism of "material conditions" [that] acts to excuse its subjects from any political agency whatsoever.' And I think I agree. On the other hand, it's fun to see art institutions as providing informal reparations through giving money to black and indigenous artists. Except it's not reparations, not only because there are intense class barriers to entry into the art world, but also because the whole political question of reparations would have to be worked out formally, I mean in terms of their actual form.

JJ I think there needs to be a move away from operating on a model of scarcity – as if a donor or institution or opportunity is going to be the one and only, so therefore you can't be critical about the money that's supporting your work.

HC Suhail, you have mentioned the importance of developing criteria, or even counter strategies, in dealing with reactionary and far-right modes in art. How do you envisage this?

SM The core question for me is whether it's actually possible to establish collective formation within the art world. This seems unlikely, and not just because its diverse political commitments don't mesh well – the liberal contention – but because of material conditions. Firstly, it is global. Secondly, it's distributed. And thirdly, it holds every possible position. All of which have mitigated against any political (rather than commercial or exhibitionary) common stance, never mind collectivism or commitment.

Confronting an existential threat like far-right entryism in and through art might, in fact, first require a hard split in the art world. On the one hand, anything goes and there are no criteria, demands or broad claims. Contemporary art has evolved into this system; the only norms are commercial, infrastructural and directed towards growth. But there's another art field which is more attentive to what's being presented, why and to whom it matters. At the moment, contemporary art reproduces these two dynamics at once: the latter is the origin story it tells itself as a meaning-rich and carefully transformative praxis; the former is its commercial and power reality. Of course, contemporary art needs both to reproduce itself successfully, but it's in the process of unravelling.

To concede free speech for its own sake, on individual terms, leaves leftist collective demands and counter-positions against far-right advocates on the back foot. It's worth considering if the very basis and principles of free speech need to be redressed. In a way, the free speech claim is like the right to bear arms in the US, which was formulated as a means of protecting against the possibility of despotic rule. It made sense about 250 years ago, got hardwired into the US constitution with the Bill of Rights, but has now outlived its purpose – even as some cling fervently to it for reasons well outside of its original drafting. Like the right to bear arms, advocates of free speech invert its purpose to legitimize a distributed despotism 'from below'.

As long as we're holding onto that deeply embedded version of free speech, to which liberalism has had to concede if not endorse, we can't begin to act against the far right's adaptation of that claim as a political tactic. Establishing what the norms of the critical art world should be is one step towards countermanding the far right and its entryism. While it may be hard to understand and establish such norms, at this point it's imperative we do so.

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