

# City Press

## Columnists

### **Art under siege: We are not dead**

[Lesley Perkes @City\\_Press](#) 27 October 2013 6:00



Steven Cohen's Paris performance just moments before his arrest. Artists retain enormous power to challenge the status quo, thus structures of power clamp down on their subversiveness. Picture: Marc Damage

The banning and arrest of artists proves how much power they actually have. But will fear of losing funding lead to silence, asks **Lesley Perkes**

At the time of writing, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot has been removed to an even more remote prison after a second hunger strike in a month to protest against the brutal treatment she and her fellow prisoners were receiving in the Russian labour camp to which she was sent – for a song.

She is laying her life on the line in front of us. In her closing statement at her trial, Nadezhda spoke of many artists and thinkers who have been brutalised for making their work, among them the avant garde group of Oberiu poets, purged in the Soviet derangement of the 1930s, of whom she said:

“Their search for sense at the edge of meaning was ultimately realised at the cost of their lives, swept away in the senseless Great Terror that’s impossible to explain ... The cost of taking part in creating history is always staggeringly high for people, for their very lives. But that taking part is the very spice of human life. Being poor while bestowing riches on many, having nothing but possessing everything. It is believed that the Oberiu dissidents are dead, but they live on. They are persecuted but they do not die.”

In September this year, South African artist Steven Cohen was detained and charged for “sexual exhibitionism” in Paris.

The arrest was made during a performance work featuring his body, spectacularly costumed as a flightless bird, weighed down by the heaviest (and highest) of shoes, dancing in the public space around the Eiffel Tower in Paris, with a beauty of a rooster attached to his penis by means of a long ribbon.

No doubt Cohen’s work Coq/Cock is deliberate. He is brilliant. No one is going to accuse him of not considering the potential consequences. He knows.

Look at this photograph of the performance for evidence of meticulous planning. The work is a brave, solitary and stylish defiance of what is “generally” considered out of bounds and fearful.

It is a riveting extravagance, discomfiting perhaps, certainly for some, and, I think, funny. But it is much more than that.

With so much safely decorative street art, some of which is wonderful, I am enamoured by the way this image, a myth, a fantastical storybook character, an illustration almost, dances purposefully into public space.

A generous spectacle, a surprise, a wonderful madness, a mockery, a discussion about what is covered up and why – Cohen’s piece confronts the “general” inurement that enables the outright theft of our public space, and, as a consequence, of our minds.

Most interesting is that Steven’s public work includes its response, so his performance is not over yet.

The significance of the arrest, in “high culture Paris” of all places, and the French court date, coincidentally, is on South Africa’s Reconciliation Day.

This adds another fantastical layer to the provocation. How will Cohen appear in front of France? And how will we?

I am sorely hoping artists, arts audiences and caring folk around the world will support him and come out in force to defy the law that makes it possible to charge him. The artist tells me he does not intend to plead – guilty or otherwise.

In a statement on his website, he writes of his work:

“It is a gift to the people outside of the work and they usually acknowledge it lovingly. I have been removed by the police several times, detained and removed by various authorities often, removed by extremists in swastikas once and I have been beaten up twice. These are the risks of unfrozen visual art. It is real art feeding off and eaten by time.”

The artist is not dead.

And still, after so long and the oppression of imagination by apartheid, it is no spring for the arts right now in South Africa either. Last month, the FNB Joburg Art Fair organisers removed Ayanda Mabulu's painting about the massacre at Marikana, on the grounds that they felt they had to "balance the interests of the artists and the fair's supporting business and government partners".

The balancing act weighed heavily on the side of "not art".

As you may know by now, the work was put up again after the featured artist, world-renowned photographer David Goldblatt, removed his show in solidarity to support free expression. The message was clear: there is no art fair without artists – even with all the business and government support in the world.

There are also no film festivals without movies, though on the opening night of the recent festival in Durban, none of the other participating film makers made much of a fuss about the banning of the premiere of Jahmil Qubeka's *Of Good Report*. None of the other films were withdrawn by their makers. Instead, by all accounts, the audience ate finger food and gossiped about the debacle, albeit in disquieted tones, as if it was normal. Of course, this is because it is.

To complicate matters, Ayanda Mabulu had other work on the art fair that stayed up for all to see even when his painting about Marikana was removed. One of his gallerists, Leigh-Anne Niehaus of Commune.1, told me that their investment, financial and otherwise, in their young gallery and in Mabulu's career, played a part in their decision to keep the other work up.

She wondered whether the organisers would have asked them to remove the Marikana painting had Commune.1 been a more established gallery. We both remained wondering whether they would have shut shop if that had been the case, because none of the galleries did – and yet not one of them would exist without art.

Albeit that some artists came out in support after the fact, which may have had more to do with how fast events unfolded than with their true feelings, David Goldblatt tells me he is concerned about the lack of significant protest from the arts world. He says that during apartheid a similar circumstance would have motivated a major outcry.

Discussing this with colleagues, I am reminded more than once that few of us can "afford" the protest, neither the risk of upsetting power, nor the time off. But then what can we afford?

I know what it feels like to be bullied by self-important officials in "bored rooms" when standing up for the arts – while colleagues keep quiet in case they are next in line. In one instance, I was told to shut up about an artist's rights that were being mutilated before my eyes because, said the bully, "this is a national project now".

Simultaneously, a colleague passed me a note, reading: "Stop fighting with them ... we are losing the gig". The gig. She did not understand that we had already lost.

If we compromise our integrity for the sake of good relationships that may bring us funding or work why choose to be an artist? If we say we are not interested in the politics, what will we say when it becomes interested in us? Be careful, that still life with apples may pick up on the vivid red of an appropriated beret – and then what will you do when accused of being on the wrong side?

It does not help when fellow arts workers tell each other to keep quiet about our dreams for the sake of pragmatic discussion about the "arts sector". In an environment

that is against free expression, where the language of economists prevails despite their obvious inability to bail out anyone who actually needs it, discretion is not always a practical approach to advocacy.

In January 2011, Ibn al-Dheeb Al-Ajami, a poet from Qatar, published a poem titled Tunisian Jasmine, where he expressed support for the uprising there. Here is a translated excerpt:

“How long will the people remain  
ignorant of their own strength,  
while a despot makes decrees and appointments,  
the will of the people all but forgotten?”

For this, the poet was sentenced to life imprisonment. He is in jail now. After two years in solitary confinement, his sentence has just been reduced to 15 years. I wonder if he is allowed pen and paper.

Arts, humanities and social services budgets are increasingly decimated everywhere, to make way for the far more important business of war and the institutionalised derangement that goes with it. What better time for artists to make challenging work and for us to actively resist all attempts at censorship? If fear keeps us passive we may as well move to North Korea. Worse, we may not need to move.

I have some respect for the organisers of the FNB Joburg Art Fair, as to sustain any annual arts event in South Africa is a serious feat – and by all accounts the fair is critically profitable for gallerists. But it was a catastrophic decision to remove Mabulu’s painting about Marikana.

Although they deny being “put” under pressure from their partners, there is little doubt the fair organisers made the decision because the pressure exists. It is invisible, often, and it is easy to deny. But it is pervasive and it is, to my mind, the reason why Mabulu’s other work stayed up for the duration of the fair, why no other film makers withdrew their films at the festival, and why Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Ibn al-Dheeb Al-Ajami are still in prison.

We do not need to resign ourselves to living in a world in which the bottom line is the only one, and badly drawn at that. We are alive.

Sources: The translated excerpt of the poem Tunisian Jasmine is available [here](#)

» Perkes is the CEO of artatwork, a public arts action dis-organisation in Joburg. Read more about art and freedom [here](#).

<http://www.citypress.co.za/columnists/art-siege-dead/>