

Tuesday, Sept 19th, 2023, my work was reinstated. I went down to see it in the gallery, the labeling was incorrect and my performance clip was not added back into the group exhibition reel. When I asked to have my work reinstated properly, I was told the staff was informed not to touch it. No further correction would be made.

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Upon learning my work was reinstated, began circulating emails to the Directors and Staff at [redacted] and [redacted] Ccing me. The emails accused me of having stolen a print form the [redacted] and [redacted] My Lawyer determined that [redacted] and [redacted] were interfering with my contact with [redacted] The harassment and further tampering with relations and accusations made both [redacted] and [redacted] liable for damages, etc. My social media on Instagram began to accumulate private messages from people threatening me.

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Censorship has lasting effects for the community: The Director of the [redacted] remains in her position, and continues her practices of censoring: she ended an artist residency designed for local artists titled, [redacted] because I was the current [redacted] artist of the residency when I was censored. No future artists will ever receive this residency award. [redacted] promised the contract given to artists at the [redacted] would be redrafted to protect artists' right to free speech, however, it remains unchanged. Performance artists are now scrutinized when applying to the [redacted] I, personally, continue to receive hate speech and be filtered out of events due continuous, professional bullying. My lawyer recently wrote a demand letter on my behalf, on March 7, 2023, over six months after I was censored. Censorship is endless. Speak up.

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Over the weekend the [redacted] was closed, I couldn't contact anyone. I began to reach out to my City Council Member, lawyers, journalists and community organizers in the area. By Monday, Sept. 18th, 2023, the President, [redacted], informed me a special Board meeting would be held to discuss the events of my censorship. I was not invited, and it was unclear why I was censored.

5

Friday, Sept. 15th 2023, I was told in secret, at a happy hour, that my work had been removed from the gallery. I immediately emailed the President of the [redacted] He responded he too was just learning I had been censored.

4

Tuesday, Sept 12, 2023. The two resultant works from my performance were hung in the group exhibition. [redacted] Director of the private Gallery, [redacted] began to pressure the [redacted] staff to remove my work.

3

Proposed performance work, [redacted] to [redacted] call, submission deadline August 31, 2023.

Performed the work on Sept 9th, 2023, and received payment for the performance.

2

Limit Experience Part 1 Feature A Texas Censorship Story

1

Artists should be able to critique each other without fear of retaliation.

Artist ██████ experienced the opposite in ██████ last fall. Her honest criticism of landscape painting conventions and their social implications was met with immediate retaliation, not by conservative outsiders, but by the art community. Two galleries ██████, one community art center ██████, one publication ██████ and few individuals ██████ harassed or otherwise discredited Sophia beginning shortly after her performance and continuing to the present. Her criticism took the form of a performance piece at ██████ as part of the ██████ group performance show in the Fall of 2023. Part of the work involved strategically cutting up a print created by the Texas landscape artist ██████. The title of the work is "██████" and uses ██████ and his relationship with the ██████ as a jumping off place for asking serious questions about complacency, cronyism, and cringe deals between artists and wealthy Texas agencies and landowners in the Texas art community and beyond. She points out that land hoarded by rich ranches might better be used to create more affordable housing for a growing number of people who cannot afford rent and other basic living expenses. ██████ chose ██████ as an example because "he embodies the boyscout image the ██████ needs for its branding." She uses ██████ commissioned landscape lithographs as a contemporary example of harmful landscape practices, describing in her piece how ██████ landscapes support a good-ol' boy system that is preventing the everyday people of Texas access to land.

The work is aggressive and blunt. It purposefully eschews niceness in favor of strength and clarity. It is an earnest, aesthetic action made by a committed thinker and maker. In my opinion, artists are not bound by a law of agreeableness in the work that they make, and ██████ actions, while not "nice" are valid and bring up issues that should be discussed, not silenced. To convey strong statements, artists often set aside the urge to please and comfort others. I have included ██████ work in the *Limit Experience* project so that the nuances of her censorship can be examined and bigger problems concerning artistic freedom and limit-testing work in Texas can be extrapolated from the specifics of her situation. What she did was risky, and risk is a big part of the limit experience idea. Risk almost guarantees transgression, and Sophia certainly transgressed.

Within the dynamics of this controversy, I've located an argument that is of particular interest to me.

That is, the notion that ██████ the artist whose work lies at the center of the struggle, is the aggressor, and not the galleries that harassed her, not the publication that ignored the intellectual challenge posed by ██████ work and then allowed a comments section to proliferate with threats of rape and other shaming rhetoric, not the community art center that removed her work (which they had initially supported with enthusiasm) from the wall without notice.

The actions and sometimes direct statements of these institutions, businesses, writers, and individuals implied

"██████ is bad because she attacked another artist. Artists are supposed to support each other."

I feel that the reality is in fact the opposite. ██████ was attacked by an art community that did not want to engage the intelligent questions she posed in her work. Furthermore, artist to artist support sometimes takes the form of conflict and disagreement. Blind approval clearly has no value in a serious art community. The difference at play between each aggressive action, ██████ and the art community's, is the difference between a critique and an attack. They are not the same.

A critique has intellectual, aesthetic, artistic and social merit, while an attack does not because it is purely personal and self-seeking in nature.

In my opinion, the retaliation ██████ experienced is an attack, while ██████ artwork is a critique. The art community simply gaslit ██████ when they accused her of "attacking" ██████ when she had, in fact, posed an intellectual challenge.

The differing motives underlying each party's action makes this clear. To me it is clear that ██████ motive was to start an intellectual debate in the Texas art community through a carefully crafted artwork. The motive of the institutions that attacked her was to silence her, belittle her and trivialize her practice, villainize her, and generally discredit her. They did this to serve their own interests, which include selling ██████ work, staying on good terms with popular galleries, not offending or bothering people who pay for and attend and fund and lend credit to institutions, not hurting people's feelings, and more motives that are about self-preservation rather than art.

██████ action is credible because it is an aesthetic, intellectual argument that takes the form of an artwork, and not simply a personal, disapproving, self-interested retaliation.

To address the issue of the cutting up of ██████ print, which has been a primary focus of other writing on this incident, we should look to recent art history. Appropriating another artist's work through a destructive act is a common postmodern practice. The outrage around the destruction of the print is a red herring meant to divert attention away from ██████ intellectual challenge towards her character instead. She is a disruptive woman who didn't behave politely, and that is all we are supposed to see. From this analysis, it becomes clear that the aim of this argument is to discredit ██████ not to situate the controversy in art history or intellectual discourse.

The fact that the discourse has been focused on ██████ as a villain not only reveals the self-interested motivations of the galleries, publications, individuals and other institutions who attacked her, but also illuminates the misogynistic and backwards mindset of the Texas art community. For all the lefty rhetoric, this is a conservative community, like the rest of the art world.

██████ is not a villain, she's a thinker and an artist. She critiqued landscape painters who don't think about the implications of their work. She challenged them to do better. She used ██████ as an example. He's a good example because he's well known regionally.

██████ expressed dismay at the fact that ██████ wasn't nice to him. She didn't say what he would have wanted her to say on the topic of his landscape painting. She didn't make it easy for him to receive the criticism. She didn't consult with him to get his approval before making her critique of his art practice.

The galleries and institutions were dismayed because it disrupted the bland narrative around ██████ that they use to entice buyers. The argument is that ██████ should have been sweet and well behaved. This is an uninformed position, revealing a total disengagement with the last several hundred years of art history and, on that note, history and politics in general, especially recently and especially in Texas. Again, this position and the resulting retaliatory acts against ██████ lack intellectual merit.

Furthermore, it's not as though the sentiment that women do not have to be nice or well behaved is unfamiliar. It's literally a bumper sticker that soccer mom's statewide proudly adhere to vehicles from Prius to Navigator. "Well behaved women rarely make history." Artists, also, do not need to be nice or well behaved, whatever their gender. Obviously, we approve of this idea in theory and in history but not in practice and not in the present. It is a frustrating reality that we in the Texas art community readily spout rhetoric of support, inclusion, celebration of difference, willingness to take on tough subjects, and the like, but when unambiguous action is taken—when the message is specific and pointed rather than vague and nice—the wordy show evaporates into thin air. Artists like ██████ are made to feel isolated and threatened when they are clear about their ideas. The message is blatant. Maintain the status quo.

Sophia tried to create something meaningful in a community that is incapable of self-reflection and that can't tolerate criticism.

Such an atmosphere prevents the creation of serious artworks. These conditions should disturb those committed to fostering an environment supportive of forward thinking projects and new ideas.

It is not true that in order to be supportive artists must agree with each other or handle each others ideas with kid gloves. It's not true that we have to play nice. Niceness isn't goodness. It isn't kindness. It's a truism that sometimes reality is hard to face. We shouldn't be so surprised when it doesn't feel good to look at works that state uncomfortable truths. Sometimes those truths are hard to deliver, as ██████ experienced over the last few months as the result of making a real, challenging artwork. Her willingness to critique a tangible situation using a physical artwork rather than generalizing till context is lost is part of what propelled this project to the limit, and is something I am interested in exploring further as my project develops. Are specific points of reference in life and culture more likely to produce limit testing works and reactions from the community?

Along with this, the seeming inability of the Texas art community to tolerate criticism comes only partially from personal sensitivity to aggressive art making tactics. ██████ hurt feelings, described by ██████ in her ██████ article on ██████ performance, do not explain the vitriol directed at ██████. More likely, reasons for such defensiveness include protection of personal resources including social networks and access to money.

The real reason that honest criticism and relevant artworks are censored in Texas has to do with upholding a network of mutually beneficial relationships among Texas' art institutions. Broad approval of all works made by certain artists is necessary for this network to profit.

This essay has so far presumed that the Texas art community is a thinking community, but ██████ silencing belies a larger issue concerning the intellectual rigor of this place and its art. Do Texas artists really have the freedom to think about the art they make if certain thoughts are destined to be censored?

--Jessamyn Plotts