

Frieze Curatorial Summit: It Belongs to Me!

Curation, Censorship and the Resurgent Far Right

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This year's Frieze Curatorial Summit, organised by the Contemporary Art Society, coincided with the centenary of the founding of the Bauhaus, which gave the discussion its theme. We often associate the Bauhaus with a progressive/modernist vision, collective ethos and radical experimentation in art and design, but it's worth remembering that it was forced to close in 1933 due to rising pressure from the Nazi regime. 'It Belongs to Me!' is allegedly what Ludwig Mies van Rohe, the last director of the Bauhaus, said to the Gestapo guards on the day they turned up at the school to find it closing down.

Mindful of these legacies, the summit sought to stimulate broader conversations among international art professionals from Brazil, Turkey and Scotland and raise questions on the investment of both liberal/progressive and reactionary/populist elements in the shaping of the cultural sphere. Contemporary artist and educator Liam Gillick was the moderator of a panel that included Brazilian curator and researcher Júlia Rebouças, Eoin Dara, Head of Exhibitions at Dundee Contemporary Arts and the award-winning Turkish novelist, academic and political scientist Elif Shafak whose novel *10 Mins 38 Secs In This Strange World* is shortlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize.

In his opening comments, Gillick expressed his unhesitant desire to take part, stating that for artists and writers 'the political is central to all of the urgent issues that we face'. Júlia Rebouças outlined Brazil's ongoing crisis, spurred by the parliamentary coup of 2016 that assisted the rise to power of Jair Bolsonaro's ultra-nationalist regime, which has affected censorship on numerous LGBTQ+ exhibitions and cultural events. Rebouças referred to protests in 2016 concerning LGBTQ+ and feminist artworks in exhibitions in Rio and Porto Alegre. The adoption of a far-right rhetoric paved the way for Bolsonaro's 2018 corporately funded presidential success, which he ran on a populist campaign that promised to protect traditional family values. During his presidency, Brazil saw the dissolution of the Ministry of Culture and experienced efforts to flout constitutional censorship protections under so-called 'content control'. While this constitutes clear evidence of a conservative-led culture war, Rebouças identified sites of resistance in current practices as opportunities to share experiences and to tell how one looks for 'solutions, possibilities and paths, ideas, enlightenments, to listen, or to talk' and ways to challenge 'how hate, anger and intolerance has been used to justify bellicose politics.'

Eoin Dara's position was couched in the very capitalist structures of the artworld itself, Frieze London included. He appealed to his curatorial work in Scotland and Northern Ireland, which prioritised discomfort and doubt for cultural, political and curatorial redress.

An assured Elif Shafak offered a metaphor on the false certainties that regarded some parts of the world as 'turbulent' and 'liquid' lands, where democracy needed to be fought for. Since 2016, and especially in these times of Brexit and Trump, Shafak stated: 'we all live in liquid times, where democracy is more fragile than assumed and can be destroyed'. Shafak forewarned that the erasure of democracy puts in greatest jeopardy the rights of women and sexual minorities and in the context of such culture wars, the arts are pivotal in preserving democratic rights and public space.

Rebouças and Dara went on to present some recent projects that unfold their curatorial positions. Rebouças referred to two exhibitions she has recently curated: the survey *'Sertão: the 36th Panorama of Brazilian Art*, currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, and the largest retrospective to date of Cildo Meireles' work titled *Cildo Meireles: An Invitation to States of Attention*, at SESC Pompeia. Similarly, Dara reflected on recent commissions and publishing projects with Eve Fowler, Margaret Salmon, Patrick Staff and Alberta Whittle at DCA, Dundee.

Between these presentations, Shafak spoke frankly about her own experiences: following the publication of her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* in 2016, she was tried (and acquitted) for 'insulting Turkishness'. Her novels continue to explore cultural taboos such as domestic abuse, child brides and gender-based violence. Most recently, two of her latest novels were seized by the Turkish authorities pending an investigation for 'crimes of obscenity'.

The means to speak across political and geographical boundaries and to address the forced compromises of capitalist production, colonial legacies and anti-democratic politics was at the heart of the discussion in search of sustainable curatorial paradigms. Rebouças offered the notion of 'sertão', a nuanced word, that is hard to translate not only in English but also in native Portuguese. It means 'wilderness,' or 'back country', but also an area of North Eastern Brazil in great contrast to the urban industrial South. The term also implies the Portuguese colonialist 'othering' of the unknown and uncultured.

Would-be 'sertão' practices are materialities and ways of living and thinking for and by marginalised people: women, the young and the unemployed or those on low income, the LGBTQ+ community, people of colour and indigenous people and all those outside capitalist production, such as collectives and public and community-based structures. They could point to a restorative national culture, not of state and government but of the people, 'a land of contradictions' and as such, a tool of experimentation and resistance against Jair Bolsonaro's homogenising ultra-nationalist regime.

Eoin Dara spoke of the political responsibilities of publicly funded art spaces to showcase artists who have been overlooked by the patriarchal and capitalist structures that, according to Dara, largely exist to protect the privileges of the white, heterosexual, wealthy, cis-gendered men. He seeks to refocus on what he claims the conservative right abhors: 'love, intimacy, sex, empathy, vulnerability, healing and rest.' Dara also highlighted current Northern Irish art activisms that respond to the legal disparities of reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights in Northern Ireland: abortion (which remains illegal), the continuing gay blood ban and the lack of same-sex marriage, perhaps now more widely understood because of the recent DUP-Tory alliance and the Brexit border.

Both Rebouças and Dara cited intergenerational methodologies both as common ground and a common goal. Dara quotes Alberta Whittle, who positions her practice as a way 'to see and hear and feel for

things we don't have and are fighting to get; a future where we can love and live without forgetting the past.' Rebouças cites her current exhibition with artist Cildo Meireles, a senior figure in Brazilian art, as an example of a political artist who emerged within the late military dictatorship and sets a paradigm on how to make art within specific limitations...and how to build a different future.'

Looking to the past and the future, Elif Shafak wondered: 'how is it possible that so many intellectuals or experts got so many things so wrong?' For Shafak, the disengagement with politics in a highly mediated and technologically advanced world of over specialization, amounts to failures in communication and misunderstandings. According to Shafak, the choice to be apolitical is unavailable to artists in places where democracy is in crisis. She concluded that in order to preserve public space, artists, writers and intellectuals have an obligation to work towards common values such as the rule of law, freedom of speech, press freedom and respect for human rights.

In the ensuing Q&A session Rebouças expressed hope that as the Bolsonaro regime seeks to solidify its power base, develop communication strategies and limit spaces of cultural and political resistance, the strength of knowledge and global networks of those opposed to the regime will consolidate support and expose and oppose censorship. Shafak spoke of the need for a new politics with democratic mandate that will truly respond to the needs of people, their common hopes and dreams and will eradicate artificial divisions. In clarifying her comments concerning the space for a new politics, Elif Shafak stated that her desire is situated in the unacknowledged dangers of people feeling disengaged from politics, the failed democratic prospects of the internet's role in the Arab Spring and the internet and technological abuses that we experience. Gillick mentioned the inadequacies of language, often binary and occasionally divisive, and how new modes of practice need to be sought for. Finally, Rebouças and Dara outlined how more collaborative and horizontal structures have responded to the economic and social pressures of recent times, by seeking new language and new alternatives to the current art infrastructures.

Dara also affirmed the need to 're-centre working class narratives to better understand the divide-and-conquer logic of Britain's role in Northern Ireland's opposed communities, all too obviously echoed in Brexit.

Towards the end of the summit, Gillick asked: 'How to exit *this*?' Or perhaps latently, how to exit the past and present without redress? The legacies of the Bauhaus, Brazil's dictatorships, the autocratic governments in Turkey and the Middle East and the rise of a new populism illustrates how the anti-democratic, right-wing politics of the past haunts our present and shapes our future. This summit confirms that in such uncertain times culture that situates the past in the present is integral in locating the tools to survive crises and 'discursive strategies' like this are a good way to begin to acknowledge our pasts and to trace our futures.