

Censorship and the Arts

Speakers: **David Marr, Journalist – Sydney Morning Herald**
Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, Director – Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Stephen Sewell, Playwright

Chair: **Helen Hristofski, SAMAG Committee Member**

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By Frances Derricourt

As Australians, we are used to living in a democracy and taking civil rights and freedom of artistic expression for granted. However, we are also living under a government whose long term in power has lent its members a strong sense of comfort and self-assurance, and in a society which increasingly fears ideas of political difference. This stifling atmosphere makes it increasingly important for the arts community to monitor curbs on its freedom and to be acutely aware of when its practices are being censored.

Playwright Stephen Sewell is concerned and angry about our current government, which he believes regularly practices in acts of censorship on members of the arts community. Speaking at the August SAMAG Seminar on 'Censorship of the Arts', he speaks of a totalitarian desire to quell any ideas in opposition to the Liberal Party, and of an ever-present watchful eye of the censor, which has had a demoralising effect on the artists he knows. This is certainly apparent in the theatre world and to illustrate this, he mentions Ros Horin, whose play 'Through the Wire' told the stories of asylum seekers to Australia. All set to receive funding to perform in the Opera House and 22 regional venues, Federal funding was unceremoniously cancelled and the play's tour had to be rescued at the last minute by the NSW Ministry of the Arts. It went on to achieve commercial success and win the Rodney Seaborn Playwrights Award.

Sewell is also worried that the tentacles of censorship have spread beyond his own field of theatre: "Censorship in Australia is elaborate, entrenched and deep and extends beyond things we assume as the province of censorship". Sewell's examples range from the political and the scientific, to the research world, such as the instance when Mark McKenna was refused a grant from the conservative board of the Australian Research Council for his proposed book on Manning Clark. "The desire to shut people up is ubiquitous and when scientific work and important research becomes subject to such censorship it becomes very dangerous", says Sewell.

Liz Ann Macgregor directs the Museum of Contemporary Art, an institution which often holds provocative and politically-challenging art exhibitions. Macgregor disagrees with Sewell's view that there is a level of censorship which is crippling the creativity of the art world. Since her time as Director of the MCA she has never felt she has had to take down or change a show, and with her new exhibition of the controversial artist Juan Davila "I don't feel I have to pretend it's not happening". She does admit to considering whether a show may offend some members of the public, and she generally consults with the police before the shows open. However she has never had any artworks forcibly taken down from the gallery walls, and sometimes she is surprised at the lack of fuss or reaction over some of the artworks!

David Marr has been investigating the issue of censorship since he left the Law. He has a firm belief that censorship has always been present in society, but falls into two very different categories – Censorship of Desire and Censorship in the Pursuit of Power. "Censorship of desire has deep roots in Christianity, and is

linked to the idea that the body is the enemy of the spirit” explains David. These days the fight for desire does not centre around books or art as it may have before, but around films, video games and television shows such as Big Brother. As society’s moral focus’s change in time, this may explain why the public does not get as worked up about artworks as they may have previously.

But it is Censorship in the Pursuit of Power which is really the concern of this seminar today, and all three speakers have serious examples of how this form of control has recently affected the arts. Macgregor tells of an exhibition of David Hookey paintings shown at the Australian Museum in Sydney. Hookey is well-known for his biting satirical paintings, but Macgregor noticed that a number of his more political paintings were deliberately cut out of the Sydney exhibition, with no explanation given. She was also aware of a gallery in Wagga Wagga which received a threatening phone call from a government department during their exhibition of works by Michael Agzarian. The government were particularly ‘concerned’ about his work *No More Lies* which shows John Howard and two other ministers with their lips sewn shut.

Marr tells the audience about a painting called ‘Massecre at Mistake Creek’ which is currently sitting in the basement of the National Museum. Originally to be displayed as part of the Indigenous section, the painting has fallen victim to the major players in the ‘History Wars’ – those who believe this massacre never happened, and who also happen to sit on the Board of the Museum. Another fascinating incident occurred when recently a senior policeman in Melbourne was sent to climb through the window of a cafe and into the Trocadero Art Space next door to remove a burnt and damaged Australian flag displayed on a billboard outside the gallery. The work, titled ‘Proudly Un-Australian’, was by artist Azlan McLennan who was not charged or told what offence he committed and why his artwork had to be removed.

The focus of censorship changes with developments in technology. “In the early days of film, there was a big panic and this panic has occurred with each new media developing” says Marr. However the great challenge to censorship of these mediums is that media consumption has become domestic – you can download a film in the privacy of your own lounge-room or easily access illegal videos and games. It is therefore more important to be mindful of political censorship, because those censors who judge things to be ‘immoral’ or ‘unsavoury’ will always change their targets. Similarly Macgregor feels that Australians are “generally very liberal when it comes to sex and private issues”, and are savvy about their rights as consumers. But she is concerned that Australians do not focus on issues of civil rights, and remain unaware of acts of censorship happening around them. She is only too aware of how far these acts can go, having worked in the Arts under the Thatcher government in the UK. She tells of when Clause 28 was introduced which banned gay representation in schools. Because of this law, an exhibition she was organising on the theme of AIDs had to be cancelled all over the country.

Perhaps our government is more subtle in stifling of ideas? Sewell points out that “a government as relaxed and comfortable as this one can take chances”, which means perhaps their getting away with acts of censorship right under our noses. Just because a show goes ahead does not mean that it wasn’t the victim of censorship – as seen in the case of the Jakarta Film Festival recently held in Sydney. Alexander Downer took time out from his tour of Tsunami-affected parts of Asia, to make sure government funding was cut from the Festival, all because they were screening the film *The President Versus David Hicks*. This form of censorship is “not about silencing people but expressing disapproval in a crude and hostile way”, says Marr, and this usually involves “symbolic mean little acts of withdrawing money.” The issue of funding therefore goes hand in hand with censorship, because “this government cannot handle the concept that the arts should speak against them yet also be funded by them.” This government constantly asks “Why should we fund people who criticise us?”

For artists, the troubling aspect of this attitude is that they may begin to self-censor in order to stay out of trouble, and in line with funding requirements. Says Sewell, “what really matters is when we become complicit in our own enslavement” and he argues that many artists in Australia are beginning to silence themselves. Macgregor has not noticed any artists self-censoring, but does believe that our media is not critical enough when injustices do happen and that the public do not get fired up when issues of freedom

of speech and artistic license are raised. Marr agrees with this critique of the media and the public, saying that the media tend to see Arts stories as 'entertainment' and therefore not worthy of serious, investigative journalism. He also agrees about the Australian public: "Australia is a remarkably passive country and we do not tend to get fired up about issues of principles.

However he goes on to say that whilst it may appear that there is a general culture of apathy, artists should not make assumptions about how the public will react to new ideas or different art forms. The dominant media feed us a "cherry-picked" notion of the "mainstream", and artists should never give up on their audience. Sewell argues that the role of the artist in this society is to not only fight censorship but also fight this complacency, and "hold our belief in democracy dear", reminding the public that this should never be taken for granted.

Then again, Sewell points out that artists are not community spokespeople – they are troublemakers. As one member of the audience says, some of the best art is created under the harshest of regimes, and so the artist should always strive to be the trouble-maker, no matter what the circumstances. As David Hookey says, "Nothing is going to change the way I make art ... All I do is look at what's happening in the world and make art about it."