

A.I.R.

Free Expression and the Inexpressible **Curated by Aliza Shvarts**

“Freedom of expression” is a principle and right that is meant to protect the voices of the disempowered. Crucially, it promises to safeguard our capacity to speak truth, critique systems of power, and demand a better world. Yet free expression has never been a right without exception, or even a right enforced and distributed equally. At times, the freedom of expression of some comes at the silencing of others—particularly women, queer people, people of color, indigenous people, and people with disabilities. In these instances, “freedom” can be an alibi for reinforcing domination: a term invoked to defend hate speech and otherwise disavow language’s violent effects.

We are living through a dramatic repolarization of the cultural debates over the meaning of free expression. Between the alarming rise in book bans, attacks on academic freedom, and legislation such as Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law, there has been an unprecedented escalation in censorship and dismantling of First Amendment protections. At the same time, cancel culture, misinformation, and deep fakes have prompted us to reconsider the social responsibility that comes with freedom, while the advent of AI-generated text and images adds further dimension to the age-old question of what it means to “express.” How in this moment do we navigate the paradox and promise of freedom of expression as alternatively liberatory, retaliatory, and mutable ideas?

Art has long navigated the space between free expression and the inexpressible. Artistic practice deals in representation, meaning that it navigates the limits of what can be rendered in language, image, performance, and aesthetic experience more broadly. Feminist art in particular has a long history of challenging which forms of expression are valued culturally and which have been dismissed. Conceived for AIR’s eighth edition of *CURRENTS*, a biennial open call exhibition series in which artists respond to current topics, *Free Expression and the Inexpressible* brings together eighteen contemporary artists staging connections between the personal and political dimensions of expression and inexpressibility. Through strategies that range from the discursive and polemical to the affective and abstract, they interrogate the edges of this freedom, mine its history, and posit new ways of thinking about what we can and cannot express.

Whether expression can ever truly be free is as much a legal and political question as it is a creative, psychological, technological, and material one. Three video works explore these dynamics at scenes of protest, policing, and the military. ***“Make A Joyful Noise” Thank God for Abortion, Pride 2018***, presents Viva Ruiz’s ongoing artistic and activist project Thank God for Abortion (TGFA) through documentation of their participation in the 2018 NYC Pride March. The work posits celebration as a counterpoint to a climate of increasing bodily regulation and serves in the words of the artist as “a living invitation to energetically time travel and join the action.”

The exuberant movement of TGFA dancers juxtapose the stark choreography of policing in Valerie Werder and Max Bowens’s hour-long film compiled from moments in which police obstruct, silence, or otherwise obscure their bodycams. The work’s title, ***The Private Discourse of Others***, is pulled from the language of state wiretapping laws, which apply unequally to civilians and the police. The intersections of state force and media production are similarly taken up by Abigail Raphael Collins’s piece ***Out of Play***, which explores relationships between the entertainment industry and the U.S. military. Drawing on her experience growing up with a method actor with PTSD from war, and a film producer with intergenerational trauma from WWII, Collins’s work expands upon a personal and complex understanding of the unspoken in military affairs and moving images.

Together, these three video pieces outline the ways bodily and artistic freedoms are circumscribed by politics, law, trauma, and national security—and gesture to how those limits can be transgressed. While works like these frame clear antagonisms between expression and the state’s regulatory or repressive forces, some works in the exhibition explore inexpressibility and the enormity of things left unsaid.

Elaine Byrne’s enigmatic double projection ***Walking in Ice*** pairs the peaceful sounds of an arctic ice flow with the

slow, deliberate, almost meditative image of the artist walking in a circle. Byrne's seemingly simple movement is informed by her doctoral research into the geopolitical and psychic dimensions of borders and borderlessness, situated in a landscape deeply impacted by these contests of border-making as well as escalating global climate crisis. Similarly, Melissa Ling's precise, un-blended, monochromatic pencil drawing **Camp** evokes an ice desert or alien landscape, presenting an inchoate space to the viewer. Both suggest there is something vast and glacial beneath the surface of the image: the immensities of history, emotion, or extinction.

Of course, sometimes expression itself can be a trap, a semiotic exercise full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Maura Brewer's drawing **Order of the Illuminati** takes up this limitation of expression, exploring how chains of empty signifiers extend an illusory promise of revelation. Part of an ongoing series in which Brewer re-draws conspiracy diagrams found on the internet with the text eliminated, the resulting image makes visible the webs of connection that underlie a conspiratorial logic—logic that reveals its own operation rather than any larger truth. The ambivalence of the conspiracy diagrams resonates with the ambivalence of flags in Chuqiao (Chloe) Li's **Nation of Flags**, which is an archive of flags installed in public places in China that the artist documented over a one-month period. By removing the flag from each image, Li highlights their ambiguity as signifiers, as it is unclear if these flags are authentic expressions of patriotism or coercion, or something in between.

Art is not only a modality for making visible dynamics of expression and repression in the social, political, historical, and psychological sphere; it is itself a site of contestation. The “tryptic” of works by three different artists—Katrina Majkut's **Medical Abortion Pills**, Michelle Hartney's **WITH ALL MY PLEAS WITH DOCTORS THEY WON'T DO ANYTHING**, and Lydia Nobles's **Abortion Access Across Colorado, California, Michigan, and Georgia**—are united by having been censored for addressing abortion. Originally part of an exhibition curated by Majkut at Lewis-Clark University in March of 2023, the works were removed from view for allegedly violating Idaho's “No Public Funds for Abortion” Act, intended to prevent publicly funded institutions from “providing, performing, or participating in an abortion.” With this history, the works become more than three individual artworks. As a unit, they speak to how art is itself an active cultural and political battleground—their direct encounter with censorship functioning as both an aura and a scar that adds an invisible layer of meaning.

Whether art can be free and whether bodies can be free are related questions—both in the context of censored artwork as well as in relation to works by several other artists in the exhibition. The question is perhaps most apparent in Asia Stewart's **DS**. Created through a one-on-one performance where an audience member was invited to issue a verbal command to Stewart and then snap a shot with a polaroid camera, the photograph is titled with the initials of a viewer who asked Stewart to “pose in a way that makes you feel free.” Yet how can you command freedom? How does one perform freedom in the abstract? And is there a meaningful difference between feeling free and being free?

The work raises a series of contradictions that structure not only the power relations between performer and audience, but also other relational dynamics—such as the disciplinary site of the heteronormative family that is the subject of Avram Finkelstein's **Thematic Apperception Test, (something terrible has happened)**. As the artist describes:

At 15 I tried to come out. I made friends at the 1967 NYC Be-In, and occasionally stayed overnight while visiting them. Upon discovery, my parents sent the police after me, leading to a psych evaluation at Jewish Family Counseling. I was placed in therapy by court order. During the evaluation I was shown drawings and asked to describe them. This drawing is reconstructed from memory. When shown to me I responded, “something terrible has happened.” My brother later scolded me, “you should've said, ‘the loving parents are checking in on their children as they sleep.’”

Jordan Homstad similarly explores the formative force of familial bonds, and the question of how a “self” emerges. Their large-scale painting, **The Shape That Forms My Self**, uses imagery of their parents—as well as collaged elements ranging from sex toys, vintage car engine parts, and surgical photos to cybernetic implants, AI-generated imagery, and alien lifeforms—to explore the crisis of emergence. How are we different from that which made us? From the people, objects, histories, and ideas that influence us? Where does the expression of oneself begin?

Questions of making and unmaking are also the subject of Clareese Hill's interactive **Transmission: Praxis of Non-Performativity**, a Web VR experience that takes the form of a self-guided interstitial space. As viewers navigate the space and encounter knowledges from the African diaspora, they are invited to assemble what Hill describes as “their own Praxis of Non- Non-Performativity—a poesis towards the illegible.” Hill's piece is

in dialogue with another interactive work situated in the gallery. Mari Claudia García's **11J or The Revolution that Never Happened** reflects on how legacies of censorship can be sonically and affectively embedded in the material world—and sounded in unexpected ways. Her work consists of images of protest engraved on eleven vinyls that have been previously recorded with a piano version of “La Bayamesa” by exiled and censored Cuban musician Bebo Valdés, which viewers are invited to play.

Yet perhaps any exploration of free expression and the inexpressible must return to the stark interdiction of the ban. EBB / ЭББ's **EBB 2: What Have We Done? ЭББ 2: Что мы наделали?** is a bilingual, self-published and hand-bound zine about responsibility, imperialism, and fascism in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It includes work by twenty-five contributors, most of whom remained anonymous given bans on political speech in Russia and Belarus. Diana Schmertz's sculpture **LEROY PERNELL V. FLORIDA BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM & ADRIANA NOVOA V. MANNY DIAZ JR** takes up bans in the U.S. context. Watercolor paintings depict book covers that have been banned from Florida schools by the “Stop W.O.K.E.” Act and are perforated by the laser cut text of *Pernell V. Florida Board Of Governors*, a case challenging the book bans.

Because they are so overt, book bans and book burning are often taken to be some of the worst forms of freedom's repression. Yet Xandra Ibarra's **Ashes of Feminist of Color Texts** asks us to think deeper about these controversial gestures. To create this installation, Ibarra—an artist of color whose own work has been subject to censorship—burned the five most cited feminist of color texts. Her act protests what she describes as an “economy of overcitation,” wherein universities, museums, or other institutions cite these texts to facilitate performances of “consciousness” that affirm “diversity” without accounting for their own structural forms of power or enacting meaningful change.

A.I.R. Gallery's legacy of championing artists that have historically and structurally been rendered invisible offers important context for current questions of free expression and censorship. As the gallery marks its 50th anniversary this year, it is impossible to ignore how many of the social and political issues of the 1970s remain resonant today, from demands for reproductive justice to racial equity, gay rights, and civil freedoms. Situated in this enduring groundbreaking space, the artworks in *Free Expression and the Inexpressible* not only frame a deeply rooted and ongoing crisis, but also participate in an equally long legacy of resistance, imagination, and transformation. As visual, experiential, and affective provocations, they offer a vision of freedom in an unfree world, and new precedents for how we might make choices in conditions not of our choosing.

– Aliza Shvarts